

R U S T T A L K S P R E S E N T S

Pole Positions/ Po(RN)ETIC VIRTUALITIES

OR

Next Generation:
Growing Up Virtual

OR

from Ground Zero to High Score:
War Games and Pornographic
Virtuality

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R U S T T A L K S . 8

“We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

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some notes on porn>

a. as the ‘filling out’ of the imaginary, ‘total presence’ or Real. Pornography, as opposed to erotica, leaves no space for the imagination.

b. speech performance:

I. preceding/anticipating/preparing event: I’m going to... I want to... Will you? Are you going to? I hope you... I hope you don’t: Lick it, bite you, suck it, hit me, tie me up, tie me down, sit on me, fuck me, come on me, come in me, surround me, disappoint me, do it like that, do it like this, do it....

II. during event: You’re so... You’re getting... You feel... You are... You’re like... I am... I feel so... I feel like... I can’t... Keep on... Keep your... Put your... Put it... Put my... Touch... Touch my... Please... Yes... No...: hot, huge, wet, further, deeper, larger, enormous, inside, deep, in the..., through me, further, large, and out, to come, to explode, to burst, on my, in me....

III. after event: You were... I can’t believe you... I felt... I was... When you... When I... I hope... Next time...

c. and surface: wet, glistening, glazed, sweaty, porous, dripping. Why the liquidity? Are contemporary ads for snackfoods and colas pornographic? Is Jeff Koons a pornographer? What about Warhol who was both involved in the commercial arts and porno? The two arts seem to go hand in hand.

Recently there was an exhibit of the works of the Takashi Murakami at the MFA in Boston. I think he may have other shows coming up or current in other international cities. The most famous work I can think of by Murakami is the fiberglass(?) sculpture of a naked japanimation character ejaculating a lightning-bolt of fluid from his penis. The character is smooth and muscular and somewhat androgynous despite the penis; it might be better to say that the figure is childish despite its signifiers of adulthood.

Murakami’s process seems a 2001 version of Warhol’s. When his name is mentioned in art crit. and reviews, Warhol and Jeff Koons are also usually invoked. His recent process for painting is: make drafts, use Photoshop to determine colors (in Photoshop colors are assigned numbers based on a digital color palette). When it’s time to produce the product, Murakami is not involved in making the work (except from a distance: by phone, e-mail - virtually!). Located in different international cities - Williamsburg, Brooklyn NY for one - his assistants go about making his work based on the drafts and color codes - like paint by numbers. Critics like to make reference to Murakami’s use of “mass cultural” forms like “Japanimation.” This is obviously an important feature of his work, but what interests me is the relation between a virtual artist and his virtual subjects - animation. Cartoons are pure surface, indestructible bodies that perform impossible actions. Murakami’s painterly and sculptory translations of animation seem timely during the boom of virtual communication when we have at least two bodies: the transmigratory and the stationary / the immortal digital and mortal analog. As a New York Times article on Murakami noted, Murakami is always on the go, always arriving, eyes bleary from flight by plane and monitor: a nomad, a vampire.

d. costume, mask, props. dissimulation. mise en scene of porn.

e. reification of the body. How porn isolates parts of the body. It would not be porn if you merely saw two people or a group of people engaged in sexual intercourse; wouldn’t it then be erotica? One needs the mechanization of the body and of speech. Then again, porn may require an alternation of shot between the total scene - panoramic of the bodies engaged with each other; and isolated close ups - of a body part, of a penis entering an orifice, of the mouth on a part of the other body - of parts interacting with parts. Alternation: body and phantom objects; machine and machine parts. Typical shot of penis moving into the vagina and out, up and down; one can not help but

think of a piston, a well lubricated part. Perhaps this is a reason for liquidity: so that any division of the body can potentially become part of the sexual act - even non-genital parts remain virtual actors in sexual drama; or glistening skin and lips echo genitalia, virtual by resemblance.

f. serialization of dialogue and plot. Depthlessness of dialogue. This is why dialogue is so comic. Dialogue is less that of a 'human drama,' than of automatons speaking in predictable ways. A more zombie-like situation comedy. What makes much of its arousing potential: its automaticity - that is, those engaged in intercourse seem to be isolated from a time before or after, they could have just landed from outer space. Also arousing and typical - the situation in which there is some dilemma or chance encounter. Activating of desires that rarely become actual so immediately. Automatic for the people.

f. erotica v. porn. If porn depends on the filling out of the imaginary, erotica leaves an imaginary space - or a space in which to imagine - open. One possible differentiation of modernism and post-modernism: mod being of the later, post-mod of the former.

g. and the Edenic. Total objectification = state of the body before desire. Slavoj Žižek draws our attention to this when he considers "fisting." Eden is at the limit of porn, where sex is only machinic, repetitive, without desire, without limit. To be of drive, of machines, and not desiring.

h. Where does the viewer enter? Whose body does the viewer assume? Viewer as third party (of real life) or as body snatcher (assuming role of one of the characters.) Does the viewer get pleasure from voyeurizing or as placing their self in the role. How the voice / body / subject of the characters become agents acting for the viewer, in the place of the viewer's consciousness, body, voice.

i. Are Russ Meyer's films porn? I've heard 'soft porn', 'art-porn', other confusing descriptions. His films seem too self-reflective. Too much plot sometimes. Too much depth. Too much of 'real world' problems: racisms, volatile histories, sexism.... Too stylized through costume, camera filters, camera angles, disruptive editing.

j. porn as therapeutic. Sexual incompetence / failure - whatever one may call it- depends so much on mind and body. Where the virtuality of porn cannot physically aid the body (say as prosthetics or pharmaceuticals can) it can help the mind. How does it do this? If sexual intercourses are dependent on an imaginative faculty as well a habit of the mind (to 'psyche the body up,' to enable a process dependent on time, to secure a sensuous or erotic environment) then image and sound may inspire or act in the place of images and sounds we produce in the imagination during an act of intercourse. Combination of inspiration or arousal as well as acting in the place of the real: that is, as the imaginary, as a fantasy of sexual relation.

k. porno and video. Since when have we come to associate porn with video? Once porn was made with film, recently video; don't know developments on DV - must admit I am not the most avid porn watcher. For some reason, video seems a more appropriate medium. Something about the texture of video. More spectral. More intimate insofar as video is usually associated with the home, private viewing, a domestic space. Also, video is the medium of contemporary home recording. Its low production cost makes it a democratic medium, a medium that film (Super-8) wanted to be once but was a bit too expensive, too precious, not as immediate - there was of course the developing process. We can shoot hours of video without having to change the tape. We can play it back as soon as we've shot it by merely configuring simple technologies: camera and TV and AC wires, or VCR and TV. This cultural feedback loop interests me. The fact that video, as opposed to film, holds a mirror to us.

Some time ago, I was intrigued by video's presence in the film adaptation of the book *Communion*. In *Communion*, Christopher Walken plays a man obsessed with video taping every moment of his and his family's life. Frequently, there are scenes in which the viewer sees Walken beside a monitor, his actual image doubled by a video image. When he is eventually abducted by aliens (the book *Communion* was originally an abduction testimony), he no longer records himself. It's as if the aliens, their surveillance and abductions of

Walken, have replaced the function of video in the film, and/or as if video foreshadowed alien abduction. In the past I have imagined a scenario like Walken's character. What if we recorded every moment? When would we have time to play back the tape? This seems the central issue of 'real time' recording technologies. That 'real life' becomes a constant performance; or that it is so fastidiously documented that one never has the time to really live.

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I fear that our telegraphing might be too all-encompassing, too broad, too encyclopedic; but, I hope not. For I find the potential parameters of this discussion—or do I mean non-parameters (?), the absence of neat borders, tidy categories, reductive conclusions—to be quite cohesive, quite specific in its attempts to question how “our generation” has been shaped / formed / influenced by video spaces / virtuality in our poetics / aesthetics / politics. I feel the tingle of importance here.

pornographic, a. (pɔrne'græfɪk) [f. as prec. + -IC. So F. *pornographique*.]

Of, pertaining to, or of the nature of pornography; dealing in the obscene.

virtuality (vɜːltʃʊl'æltɪ) Also 5 vertualyte. [f. VIRTUAL *a.* + -ITY, perh. after med. L. **virtualitas*. Cf. F. *virtualité*, It. *virtualità*, Sp. *virtualidad*, Pg. *virtualidade*.]

1. **a.** The possession of force or power. **b.** Something endowed with virtue or power.
2. Essential nature or being, apart from external form or embodiment.
3. A virtual (as opposed to an actual) thing, capacity, etc.; a potentiality

One of my mentors at Temple composed a poem documenting some of the responses to his brain cancer. They ranged from obscene insensitivity and naïvely cliché aphorisms to simply perverse. He prefaced this poem as “pornographic.” I have been fascinated with that classification ever since (although, considering my work on Joyce, perhaps “pornographic texts” have always intrigued me). In the same way, much of the thinking about my *situation come dies* project, has questioned this relationship to language. You spoke to me of this once—regarding my “Blank diary”—in terms of rendering the familiar in alienating terms.

“What pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex but death.”

—Susan Sontag, “Pornographic Imagination”

I feel a certain sense of a shared poetics in terms of grief or lamentation evoked in your work. But also, as I am always intrigued by texts which strike me as instructions to the reader, I am quite interested in those poems of yours like “Compendium for a Bare Oak.” Although there is evidence of statements about how to navigate this poem in particular, I am struck by how this poem operates as metacomment of your poetics as a filmmaker (videographer?), too.

“From refuge to refuge, cell to cell, these frames that might conceive for us a more coherent menagerie, require too much footage to reconstruct the view”

But this position of the artist speaking of his art, of how to approach the art, of how to “understand” the art is more interesting because there is an implicit grief that it cannot ever be “understood” simply because it addresses / embraces / incorporates that which defies understanding. There is an overwhelming sense of estrangement—from “society” (as our students would say), from language, from machines, from humans.

“I’m an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I’m in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse’s mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. That is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations”—Vertov

“The camera that Vertov thought he was, seemed to offer a precision that humans could only envy and aspire to. The new generation of machines produces an even more ecstatic identification, for they offer a magical liberation from all kinds of rigidity, including the laws of time and space. Video games can use computer graphics to produce multi-perspectival representations, a fourth dimension, making our normal perceptions of time and space seem inadequate.”

—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

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F i r s t F i r e >

Growing up, I liked to play videos games. The first video game system I played was an Atari. My parents wouldn’t allow me to have an Atari. I’m not sure their reasons for not allowing me to have one, though those reasons may seem obvious to others.

Before moving to Massachusetts when I was eight, I lived in Menlo Park, California. Each summer, my nuclear family would visit our extended one in Massachusetts. I remember one visit to Massachusetts visiting the house of my cousins. They owned an Atari. Upon arriving at their house and discovering the machine, I played for hours. I didn’t stop playing until my mother told me I was being a “rude guest”. I could have played for hours more.

When I was eleven or twelve most of my friends had Nintendo. Though there was another system - Sega - that was 8-bit and came out before Nintendo, Nintendo overshadowed its rival and became the most popular system since Atari. 8-bit was a significant advance upon its predecessor; I’m not sure how many bits the Atari was, let alone the “Pong” system that was the first popular home video game system in the US, but Atari seemed downright primitive compared to the Nintendo. 8-bit meant more information, more pixels, thus better graphics.

I grew up with three generations of systems: Atari, Nintendo, and Super-Nintendo. I stopped playing video games when I was about fourteen. At the time, the competing systems were Super-Nintendo and Sega Genesis: both approx. 24 bits. Now there are systems that are, like, 128 bits or something. At least 64. Incredible. What will “they” think of next.

Writing poems in high school and for the first years of college, I repressed / ignored my interest in video games. I didn’t think much about the virtual worlds video games once offered me as material or impetus for writing. If anything, my adolescent interest in video games seemed a gap in my experience of growing up. My sophomore year of college I began making videos. Making videos renewed my interest in the medium. Playing again with video images and sounds, I returned to something familiar, endemic to my experience. If for no other reason, it seems we should talk about video and electronics since it is / was part of our experience. There is often the question: what makes our generation of poets / writers / thinkers / artists, etc. different. We are different because we have inherited a different set of problems about culture, technology, the environment, politics.... I remember reading a journal entry of yours from fall 2000 that you posted on Core-L as part of your amazing “blank” journal. You were wondering what the central problem was of our generation without having grown up with a war (Vietnam), and numerous social revolutions (women’s rights, post-colonial revolt, racial equality, sexual liberation). French urbanist and media theorist Paul Virilio writes that since WWII and the dropping of the bomb, the “developed” world has lived in a state of “Pure War”, a state of deterrence in which a military superstructure is powerful as ever, but is no longer distinguishable from civilian life. Video is perpetual warfare, training to destroy from a distance, virtual combat, surveillance, deterrence as disarmament or “Star Wars”: no longer do we need to disarm because another level of technological defense will keep nations and citizens safe from each other. Perhaps video was our Vietnam. Need I mention the Gulf War, a media war, a war that supposedly never happened, that was a figment of our imagination. This is not to ignore other traumas of our generation: like AIDS, acceleration of global capitalism, urban / suburbanization, popularization of the world wide web, escalation of racial and ethnic conflict, etc. These traumas seem intimately related.

The culmination of my work in video resulted in an attempt to translate video and poetry mediums. For me, both mediums presented similar challenges: how to put materials together to evoke meaning (issue of montage / collage); also, how to use image sound and word as textures; how to sculpt or carve sounds in time. That's what I was thinking about then and something I still think about today as a writer and sometimes videographer.

When I was not making videos I was writing poems; each process was being shaped by the other. In the video editing suite of the Technology In Music And Related Arts (TIMARA) program of the Oberlin conservatory, I spent late hours synthesizing and arranging footage in a computer editor called "Media 100". So much of editing for me was time: spending time, thinking about time, arranging durations. To edit video, one first has to magnetize the video tape so image and sound tracks will record. The magnetized tape is typically called "black leader" after the black tape that is laid under strips of film. One sees black leader most often at the beginning of films and videos before the FBI warnings, titles, and credits. Editing video, I imagined black leader as the virtual space of video, video's immanence from which images and sounds would appear, to which they would disappear. Black leader was space: a space for the imagination, an interruption that might give the viewer pause, a silent duration, the silence surrounding the form.

Likewise, the actual page where I would write poems and play with words began to seem a virtual space from which words could appear, emerging from silence, aether, blank. Most of the poems I wrote while I was making videos did not exceed the length of the page. The page itself seemed so important as an established space, as a space with definite boundaries. Space between words, space between pages. Such space seems necessary not only to sound out relations and correspondences between words, but also to see them.

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A four-year-old girl, my parents considered me too young for apocalyptic science fiction so, in a neat gender divide, my father chaperoned my brother to see "Star Wars" while my mother took me to Disney's "Mary Poppins." Not surprisingly, my brother became obsessed with the movie—even had StarWars wallpaper and sheets in his bedroom. Our "playroom" became engulfed in Star Wars paraphernalia. My Barbie Dream House frequently invaded for elaborate scenes of taser-battles or X-wing fighter launchings. The gender wars already sealed. Whilst I engaged in imaginative "free-play"—cooking meals, folding doll's clothes, feeding babies, playing school marm, shopping for groceries—he played out nuclear attacks and father-son oedipal dramas.

Little wonder that he suffered nightmares of global warfare and nuclear Cold War attacks into his early teens. Whereas I experienced a different pornographic nightmare: being chased and captured, pursued and devoured.

"They don't call it *Game Boy* for nothing. Now some manufacturers are trying to lure girls. In the next few months, Sega plans to introduce 'Berenstein Bears', which will offer players a choice of boy or girl characters. A second game, 'Crystal's Pony Tale', involves coloring (there's lots of pink in the background). Neither game requires players to 'die', a common videogame device that researchers say girls dislike. Girls also tend to prefer nonlinear games, where there is more than one way to proceed. 'There's a whole issue with speaking girls' language', says Michealene Cristini Risley, group director of licensing and character development for Sega. The company would like to hook girls at the age of four, before they've developed fears of technology."

—Barbara Kantrowitz, "Men, Women, and Computers"

Around the age of six, I scrawled graphic and explicit drawings of "pornographic scenes" with fairly graphic captions. Understanding the danger of these drawings, I hid them. When my mother discovered these illustrations, I escaped punishment by denial / disowning the documents. She believed that some playmate did them because I pointed to the "sloppy handwriting" as unlike me. The "bad handwriting" just as offensive as the "bad drawings." Even more than the unsettling images, it was easy to believe that a girl child could not have composed such an erotica-charged text.

My early video toys were quite different from my brother's. I had battery-operated Jacks (a traditionally girly-game) while my brother had mini-arcade Donkey Kong (these were all shaped like the original arcade games). Hand-held Pacman—the

precursor to Gameboy (of course we need to discuss the fucked-up gender here, don't we? Could we avoid it?). Of course, I had Ms. Pacman—her difference marked most obviously by the addition of a hairbow on her bald head. Were her ghosts pastel? Of course, there is also the issue of her “name”—or non-name. Her identity implicitly tied to the male referent. She is a “she” merely by the addition of “Ms.”

“Many girls quickly put computers on the list of not-quite-feminine topics, like car engines and baseball batting averages....too many are doing their nails or worrying about their hair, says Marcelline Barron, an administrator at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, a publicly-funded coed boarding school for gifted students. ‘You’re not thinking about calculus or physics when you’re thinking about that,’ says Barron. ‘We have these kinds of expectations for young girls. They must be neat, they must be clean, they must be quiet.’”
—quoted in Barbara Kantrowitz, “Men, Women, and Computers”
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Virtual: games, war, dating, sex, relationships, tourism, archeology, museums, libraries, capital, countries, shopping, money, voyages, flight, journeys, travel, reality, pets, assistants, gambling, rooms, buildings, cities, navigation, interiors, exteriors, landscapes, space, visits, flowers, commerce

The virtual. The possible. What is possible? What can become actual? Surreal until. Cartoonish. That vantage. When it happens. When something happens. When anything happens. Is born into existence. I am thinking of the suddenness of a sneeze - a silly image that keeps popping up in my work. A sneeze seems to come from nowhere, from some place deep and elusive within the process of the body. Sometimes there are premonitions: a twitch of the face, a pattern of breathing: usually through the nasal passage - a sniffle; but sneezes can also occur without foreshadowing. Amazing! How the face can go from 0 to 60 in a split second, as if a lost city rose from the sea, a storm breaking on a day completely calm. The face storms too. Often it is moved to violence. I am always astounded by your sneezes in succession. They have become part of the landscape whether hanging with you and Greg at your house, or haunting Clemens.

What better place to start than the face: that blank virtual. I have thought a little about the face in making videos, in watching documentaries. Reading the face is not like reading anything else. Look at me when I talk to you. Ashamed, he turned his face away. The face says it all, gives us up, gives us away. But the way it communicates is such a complicated thing. The face cannot be contained. For Levinas, the face is the beginning of Ethics because it seems to say for the person, “don't murder me,” “you cannot murder me, so don't even dare try.” Is this because the confrontation with the face founds our humanity? Because it is one of the first things to identify (with) us, to recognize us as human beings. There is the primordial moment of someone looking down at us, observing us in our crib or cradle. There is mother - virtual, initial.

The talking head shot has been widely criticized by documentarians of the past 50 or so years. For me, it seems strange that a way of representing a person would become standardized, habitual. The talking head is not inherently uninteresting, un compelling, or untrue - only it has lost these qualities from over use and naturalization. I would be more interested in framing only the face. An important instance of such framing is in the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann. The interviews in *Shoah* draw their power not only from the incredible verbal exchanges between Lanzmann and his interviewees, but also in the way Lanzmann's camera portrays the physical expressions of the interviewed. There is power in twitches, fidgeting, convulsions, shaking, tremors: excessive bodily significations. The entire body is expressive, but bodily significations are concentrated in the face. Presented with the face, the viewer is overwhelmed by how much the face has to say, and how what is actually said is continuously under and overwritten by what the face communicates. The face and the voice run on different tracks. There is sound track and face track, I guess. These tracks are very often in conflict in *Shoah*. Where the person would like to communicate with her/his voice, the face and the body say more than he/she would like to say. The face emphasizes the message; it also can confuse a message by signifying excessively, more than what the person would like to disclose through their verbal message. It would be silly to say we capture the face, since the face before the film camera or video resists being captured,

reduced, appropriated - sometimes more than others. This is most true of extreme close-up, whereby the viewer witnesses complex movements of the face as a living, and thus perpetually becoming, surface.

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Pre-1980s families might have sung on long car-rides. We played electronic games, the backseat splayed like a traveling arcade. My parents never needed to ask that we ‘keep it down’—we sat silently engrossed, side by side, with our hand-held eye-glazing electronic obsessions beeping and blinking before us. Rather, my father occasionally would request that we move to a different game when the repetitive sound effects became too numbing in their redundancy. Sometimes he would need to ask a few times—in increasingly louder volume—before either my brother or I noticed anyone talking.

“One of the agreed criteria for evaluating a video game is its level of addictiveness.”

—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

Rules about playing videogames. Forbidden until after homework. Only a limited number of hours during summertime to ensure we saw daylight. A form of punishment—if disobedient or poor academic performance, certain games would be taken away. A form of “grounding.” (As a “good girl,” it is important to note that these punitive “rules” were needed for my brother more so than for me.) This monitoring of the endless time invested in virtual spaces. The inability to tell time while immersed in “game space.” How many of the games had “clocks,” “countdowns,” “time running out.” Even though the pause feature existed, the near impossibility of actually pausing a game or having a time out for necessities such as the bathroom or meals. The machine, the virtual space of the “game” overrides the body, demands complete submission of the will. Keeping the virtual body alive precluded sustaining the actual body.

“Everyone has felt (at least in fantasy) the erotic glamour of physical cruelty and an erotic lure in things that are vile and repulsive.”

—Susan Sontag, “Pornographic Imagination”

All of this video gaming was “educational;” but, the question remains, what were we being educated *about*?

“One small but carefully controlled study went so far as to claim that Reader Rabbit, a reading program now used in more than 100,000 schools, caused students to suffer a fifty percent drop in creativity. (Apparently, after forty-nine students used the program for seven months, they were no longer able to answer open-ended questions and showed a markedly diminished ability to brainstorm with fluency and originality).”

—Todd Oppenheimer, “The Computer Delusion”

Playing out killing fantasies in graphic detail—the more graphic, the more popular not to mention the more expensive. So power is linked with killing / violence / endless variations on domination and ownership (?). Conquering. Pillaging. Invading.

Overtaking. Rescuing the downtrodden. Colonizing. Enacting supreme empowerment. (Seeking “infinite justice?”) Consuming—ghosts, points, flowers, fruits, people. An odd form of cannibalism. Everything to be eaten or killed. Gobbled up.

The Reagan-era, Lee Iacocca, Apple Computers 1980’s big business political approach of “eat or be eaten,” “kill or be killed” played out with perverse repetitiveness in the comfort of your own home. Instead of giving little Jeffrey or Jennifer a football or babydoll for Christmas, give them an increasingly-more-graphic rendering of warfare / massive demolition in which they are the makers and movers of their own universe.

“War is, after all, the universal perversion...war stories, the pornography of war.”

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The face fascinates as the ocean or fire or static or any other indeterminate pattern. What fascinates is the fact that something could be so many different things at once, that it communicates too much, that it may become most anything. A friend and, incidentally, native of Buffalo, Corey Archangel, had his first art show in Manhattan this past Spring. He showed a video, and sold stills he had printed. First looking at the video, which ran on a loop, it appeared a whirling dance of tiny, pixellated x's, o's, pluses and minuses swirling and breaking apart - fluctuating, forming pattern upon pattern. Looking longer, I noticed that there was a definite image being formed out of what seemed a visual chaos: hotdogs on rollers roasting beneath hot lamps, the kind you see in the food courts of malls and concession stands of sporting arenas. What Corey had done was to take an original (8 or DV) video image and convert it to an image pixellated by x's, o's, pluses and minuses. In doing so, he gave his image a texture more open, less determined - less informing - than that of the original video.

Much has been said about the ellipses, caesura, gaps, blanks, ruptures - call them what you will - of much modernist and post-modernist writing. Such gaps seem to me virtualities, possibilities: places where the new, the different, the future (the past), may be imagined by the writer. There is pleasure in being visually confused, in doubt, unsure. Other times there is terror. In making videos and writing poems, it often seems a good strategy to chose ambiguous images, words, and sounds since these images, words, and sounds usually have a greater potential to resonate, to set in motion processes of association, of near and distant correspondence. One can think about punning in these terms as well, as the most beautiful puns are those accreting the most possible meanings. Shakespeare and Zukofsky both loved the pun. So did Spicer.

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MTV fits in here too. Those first commercials of the “moonman” inserting the American flag in “unmarked territory”—the space program / NASA / Star Wars imagery linked with video representation. This too had an aura of forbidden pleasure around it. Like the Playboy channel, cable companies offered “locks” on MTV as a channel blanked out in the range of cable TV possibilities. Although my parents were opposed to certain types of conservative censoring in the name of “innocence” (hence, I saw rated R movies as early as 5 years old), I was forbidden to watch MTV. The first video I ever saw (or remember seeing) was ZZTop’s “Legs.” My suspicions that music videos must be sexually explicit were fully confirmed. The next video I remember seeing (ironically enough, at a baseball game waiting for 4th of July fireworks to start) was Tom Petty and the Heartbreaker’s “Don’t Come Around Here No More” where the Alice in Wonderland figure’s body is cut open / dissected / vivisected / disemboweled / devoured. By the summer I was 11, my parents lifted the MTV ban. I remember watching it all day, everyday, a constant backdrop to everything we did, including playing video games. We had now started playing video games on Apple floppy disks so music videos played simultaneously as we played video games.

1982 *Listener* 11 Feb. 34/3 The good news is that things in video could be worse. The bad news is that things in video will get worse.

My first experiences with pre-teen exploring of bodies / sexuality was disguised from unsuspecting parents as playing video games. One hand would blindly operate the joystick or keypad to sustain the sound of playing, while our mouths and available hands played their own games. Should a parent happen to eavesdrop, only the “innocent” sound effects of video games could be heard. Sex and video were clearly always linked for me.

“Tirelessly they repeated the details of a Spur Posse ‘game’ that had riveted the media. It was a sex-for-points intramural contest in which each time you had sex with a girl, which they called ‘hooking up’, you racked up a point. You had to achieve penetration and you could only get one point per girl...”

“The most fun they ever had, the Lost Boy told me, was when they would videotape themselves having sex with one of the girls. ‘Once, three of us were in the closet spying’, he recalled. ‘We opened the door, and we took pictures and videos. It was funny. We could sell the video, but who would buy it?’

‘Billy Shehan began a story about the time he and another Spur had a porn movie playing while they took turns having sex with a girl and he began copying the moves he saw in the movie. ‘It felt like I was *in* the movie’, he said, and that sensation was so gratifying that the next night he replayed it, this time with four Spurs in attendance. The night after that, he gathered ten Spurs—and a video camera. ‘We made a porn film of it’, he said. ‘It was great.’”

—Susan Faludi, “Girls Have All the Power: What’s Troubling Troubled Boys”

Coinciding with entering high school, I absorbed that I should grow beyond “playing games” and instead began busying myself with the “work of being a woman,” more specifically, perfecting the game of seduction, seeking to make myself the spectacle: painting my nails, applying frosted make-up, endless consuming of clothes, talking on the phone—a different version of the pornographic. I would return to video games during the Nintendo Super Mario craze, but only briefly.

“To start with, striptease is a *sport*: there is a Striptease Club, which organizes healthy contests whose winners come out crowned and rewarded with edifying prizes (a subscription to physical training lessons), a novel (which can only be Robbe-Grillet’s *Voyeur*), or useful prizes (a pair of nylons, five thousand francs). Then, striptease is identified with a *career* (beginners, semi-professionals, professionals), that is, to the honourable practice of a specialization (strippers are skilled workers).”

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

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[the one question there’s no answer to: what could have been done differently.

- Barbara Cole, *postcards*

The foot appeared there like the torso of some marble Venus of Paros that might have cropped up amidst the debris of a burned-out city.

-Michel Serres, *Genesis*

There is a philosopher who I particularly adore, though haven’t read much of since coming to Buffalo: Michel Serres. In his book, *Genesis*, he writes about the concept of “belle noiseuse” or beautiful noise, relating such noise to the immanence of thought. For Serres, ideas emerge from virtualities not unlike noise, the sea, and abyss, or Plato’s “Chora”. From such an emptiness, thoughts find form and play upon other ideas. At one point in his book he says of philosophers that they should be “shepherds of multiplicities” - multiplicities being packs and potential groupings of thoughts. By this wonderful phrase, I take Serres to mean that the philosopher must tend flocks of ideas in order that they may mix in interesting and productive (new) ways.

In illustrating what he means by beautiful noise, Serres conjures the image of a woman’s footprint. This footprint is initial, the first mark made in the noise. Reading your *postcards*, this image seems relevant to me as the book is so concerned with emergency - especially the emergency of women and women’s writing from a history we both find haunted. The word “real” turns up a number of times in your book: for example, “end it on the real question” and “clinging to something and pretending I’m close to the real thing”. Even if this closeness is pretended, staying adjacent to the real seems crucial, as if it keeps open a portal from which writers and subjects may emerge, changed, transformed, permuted, different: no longer complicit or submitted to history’s habits and entrenchments. The speaker(s) of *postcards* would like to become something or someone different. Making such shifts and adjustments is absolutely dependent on how the writer writes. After Serres, I could see *postcards* as numerous footprints made in the noise - the post-philosopher

“the games represent very powerfully the breakdown of boundaries characteristic of postmodern culture: boundaries between fantasy and science, between high-tech and primitivism, and between play and real life. But the boundary that I think best explains the games’ attraction at this time, and particularly for boys and men, is that between anxiety and pleasure.”

—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

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Virtuality is the thrill and anxiety of everything becoming possible, or at least of possibilities opening up. Angel or devil, what something this way comes? What enters NOW is the question. What rears its ugly head? Perhaps permanent revolution is the continual allowance of virtual space: for new social problems and structures to enter; for old ones to disappear. But there is never utopia. Ideals are never reached. What comes can only be closer to an ideal. Better?

It seems, after the event of September 11th, that we are positioned at such a point. A continuum of myth and fact have been blown wide open, as if the lack left by the destruction of the trade center were the very manifestation of the virtual: a forming blank, a straight gate - but to where? (more poignantly) to when? It is perverse, that change comes at such a price; that so much life must be lost in order for estranging shock to be achieved, that it takes such an impossible / uncanny / surreal event to challenge the US citizen’s sense of reality, of global relationships and history.

On the one hand, the United States might be headed towards greater responsibility, reparation for its mistakes / sins, rethinking of ill foreign policies; on the other, it may be veering towards increased fascism: police state authority, violations of civil liberties and human rights, tightening of borders, investment in a war machine, disregard for other (inter)national and tribal autonomies. Nevertheless, the opportunity stands. Most of us have one foot in the wound of the devastation and one foot in an ominous futurity. Something must happen, something must come from this change. Something, everything will change.

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I want to somehow address your film shorts without disclosing my at-best laughable knowledge of film theory. “Epistemology of a TV” is simply haunting (I mean that as a compliment) and, in relation to September 11, amazingly relevant as the images of that day are now forever seared into our collective memory. In fact, your video proves oddly prophetic. The marriage of airplane footage, fires, pulsing images, and corporate advertising. Already, the most poignant of documentary photos of Ground Zero are co-opted into everything from “station identification” to NFL commercials. Even more, your video short points to *why* the events of this date—and the inherent terror of the images surrounding it—seem insistently part of our continual present.

Unfolded in a series of stills, these unrelenting horrors fold in on themselves only to unfold repeatedly before our eyes.

September 11, we are told again and again by the media, forever changed Americans. And though I am inclined to dismiss such blanket statements, somehow, this event does seem to call forth a spectrum of responses, varying in degrees of emotional outrage, grief-stricken sorrow, and justified rage. But there is something else emerging these past few days which strikes me as far less palpable—there is no definitive moment in time, no point on the timeline to mark—but which nonetheless seems increasingly to pervade the air around us. I mean that the underlying racism / hatred / xenophobia “kept in check” and reserved for private domains suddenly, all at once, this festering hatred, has at last boiled to the surface. I am fearful of the ecstatic patriotism which seems to be just a yankee-doodle-dandy-cloaked self-righteous assertion of white supremacy. There is the terror of hegemony wrapped in red, white and blue. Star Wars indeed.

“In computer circles, however, it is widely believed that the origin of video games lies in the war games which have been a popular form of entertainment since the seventeenth century.”

—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

There is a connection here too, in some way I cannot definitively pinpoint, to the ever-growing “Religious Right” of the past decade. The religious fervor which sought political and national dissolution over a dick-licking has found a different reason to rise up and seize power. Again, back to the pornographic. Millions of tax dollars invested investigating a blow job, a potential pickle-tickle, a cigar probing naughty parts. The collective wringing of hands over such petty “pornographic acts” defiling the “sanctity” of the Oval Office has (d)evolved into an even more fanatical thirst for blood, violence, killing, raping and pillaging.

Perhaps it is this blatantly skewed prioritizing, this altered sense of “reality” which I find truly terrorizing or pornographic.

This pervasive discomfort with the body, with one body in relation to another body—regardless of the added anxieties of whether these bodies are gendered same or different. If we define “pornography” as that which deals with the obscene, that which seeks to pervert, what could be more pornographic than George Bush’s depraved Cowboys-and-Indians John Wayne bravado against an “enemy” identified explicitly as “evil” but implicitly “Other?”

“Since there can be no adequate reward for success the game has to be about lack itself—the desire to continue to play—rather than about a
final satisfying resolution”
—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

“eight times as many ‘adult’ films are rented or sold per year as there are votes cast in a presidential election”
—William E. Brigman, “Politics and the Pornography Wars”

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For those of us who have grown up with video, how could we not see a Hollywood special effect or an animation model when the plane collided with the tower. Our sense of reality - that this was a “real” event and that “real life” was lost - is obscured by the imagination of the impossible. This may seem slightly inappropriate, but I am reminded of a scene from the *Austin Powers* sequel where Dr. Evil plays a scene from the alien invasion film, *Independence Day*, to terrorize Washington leaders. The footage he plays is of the White House being destroyed by an alien laser-blast. The leaders duck under the table where they sit and hide. The scene is comic since, as we know, in the sequel Austin Powers and Dr. Evil do battle in the past of the Mod English 60’s. The Washington leaders, being of a time before such special effects, do not perceive the difference between the illusion and their reality - that the White House may be being obliterated in real time.

The event’s power is in its impossibility. Reality is suspended, reorganized, questioned when the tallest human-made structure in the world is hit by an air plane. Who didn’t also think of King Kong, or Star Wars X-Wings exploding in some Death Star passage. It could have been a toy plane of old, or a pixellated one of late. Video creates a-thousand-and-one illusions for us everyday. Why should we believe this image more than any other. Of course we have not been in NYC this past week.

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This is what I mean by pornographic: there is something about the superficiality, the openly banal, insistently overblown, over-engorged, super-erected, silicon-inflated, pump pump pump of pornographic video which seems merely symptomatic of the language surrounding us—in everything from Walmart ads to presidential addresses. Actually, I remain utterly unruffled by the artificiality of porn. Plot, camera angles, character development—these are not the reasons people rent “Edward Penishands” or tune-in to “G-String Divas.” What I do find obscene is the sense that there is no escape from artificiality; that the plastic environment of noise and visual pollution ridden with cliché, overused phrases, overblown metaphors, overly sentimental and aphoristic fervor should not only be unquestioned but fully embraced. I can appreciate the boob job bobbing perkily and the “actress” unabashedly revealing her scars more so than I can stomach any of the “boobs” I encounter each day in news reports, editorials, press conferences, daily “small talk.” [And, no, there is not enough room to deal with the gendering of idiots as female at this moment.]

How do I turn off a language entrenched in reinforcing capitalistic consumer mentality in which artificial man-made “boobs” are not merely available for purchasing but increasingly marketed as professional assets? In which the body is just another appendage for potential profit. in which there is no need to question.

Times Lit. Suppl. 7 Jan. 12/2 Of course pornography should never be treated as if only its sexual aspects mattered—that is, as if no kind of stimulus offered by the written word could be as socially or ethically significant

Though it is no doubt already clear, I must emphasize that my view of the “pornographic” actually has little to do with adult XXX videos. My understanding is more in keeping with D. H. Lawrence's assertion that “pornography is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it” (“Pornography and Obscenity”). I would expand this definition and question if perhaps *anything* we perceive as lessened / perverted / insulted / reductive is pornographic?

Regina v. Hicklin (1868) “As Justice Frankfurter noted, the intent of this standard ‘is to reduce the adult population of [the country] to reading only what is fit for children”
—William E. Brigman, “Politics and the Pornography Wars”

“*Tribble Trouble, Dinky Doo, Boog-a-Boo* and *Super-Glooper* show that as far as marketing is concerned a playful, infantile, use of language is the name of the game. But although many names rely for their effort on the sound of words, there is no spoken language within the games.”
—Gillian Skirrow “Hellivision”

On September 11, there was much censoring during the TV coverage of “obscene” quotes. One such quote came from a man calling NBC from one of the twin towers minutes before it collapsed. He screamed live over the airwaves of early AM viewing hours, “We’re fucking dying here.” It was quoted after that as “we’re bleeping dying here.” Or, yet more ridiculous, a man from the street at the moment the second plane struck the tower, screamed “Holy shit” which was later quoted as “holy cow!”

Though the use of bleeping is not quite as bad—on par with how a preadolescent might paraphrase—the rendering of “holy cow” in response to that incident is simply obscene. The event itself is pornographic—it violates our every sense of what is “acceptable,” “appropriate” or “real.” To say “holy cow” in response to such massive death and destruction renders the event comical at best. Isn’t the language crucial here? How Puritanical can Americans be? Are we still operating according to 19th century rulings that all material should be fit for a juvenile audience? The key word in that ruling for me is “reduce.” Though I am not advocating censorship here, is it not less offensive / obscene to cry “holy shit” in response to unfathomable violence than, say, Britney Spears at the MTV Video Awards, entangled in probing cobra, crooning “I want to be your slave” whilst surrounded by dark-skinned males intended to evoke “savages” in their scantily-clad bodies and facial war paint?
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Stammering, stuttering, repeating, choking, crying, convulsing, but mainly repeating repeating repeating. During the first hours of the coverage there was only one camera angle of the trade towers. The anchor-people apologized for this, also that smoke was blocking the view. By the next morning, news stations had collected / purchased all of the footage they could get their hands on. This proliferation of perspectives says something about how we visualize wounds, the trauma of seeing.

We proliferate angles so we may get at the thing, so we may see it completely. We repeat the event of seeing so we can know what happened, so we can record it on our minds, assimilate it: this is the most common pattern of recognition in the wake of trauma. But something eludes us. I felt terrorized by the repetition of the footage. A fugue of images of death; a death fugue. Such collages lead us nowhere, only spin perennially in the wound.

The repetition should have a distancing function. Through repetition we should be able to understand that something has happened, changed. It is one thing to say the fact, "The tallest skyscraper in a city of skyscrapers" has burned to the ground; another to realize it, to accept it - for the fact to take its place among reality. In retrospect, I realize we were doubly terrorized by the event: there is the first terrorization of the actual planes taking down the towers; there is the second enacted by a media that would wallow in disaster: that would be fascinated by wounds. There is nausea of watching the building collapse again and again; but also the inexplicable footage of people throwing themselves from the building. Though the events are qualitatively and quantitatively incomparable, we are reminded of the terror of concentration camps and Hiroshima / Nagasaki footage. Piles of corpses, skin peeling, landscape in photo negative: there is perverse pleasure in repetition of an impossible seeing. I liken this to the way you are relating the visual pleasure of pornography to death's fascinating power.

—T

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I am (perhaps) waxing too melodramatic here. But what I mean to say is that there is an underlying grief in my relationship to a language that is rendered so trite, so mundane, so thoughtlessly constructed. To be a writer, to be a reader and lover of words and feel this alienation, this grief, this constant perversion is what I mean by a pervading pornographics in culture.

"Most pornography...points to something more general than even sexual damage. I mean the traumatic failure of modern capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness. The need of human beings to transcend 'the personal' is no less profound than the need to be a person, an individual. But this society serves that need poorly. It provides mainly demonic vocabularies in which to situate that need and from which to initiate action and construct rites of behavior. One is offered a choice among vocabularies of thought and action which are not merely self-transcending but self-destructive."

—Susan Sontag, "Pornographic Imagination"

This insistence that we should not question, not reject, not react, not pull away limp and deflated, not seek out stimulation—intellectual or otherwise—seems perverted. That, being a "lady," I should bat my eyes, turn away, pretend outrage, upset, disgust, by the image of a man and a woman engaged in a sex act. That I should listen to Oprah wring her hands over financial woes. That I should tune-in to Regis's command of the most trivial trivia—alas, not even command, his basic ability to read and even then not so well. That I should buy 2 Big Macs and save. That I should know implicitly what "God Bless America" means as a coherent statement. That I should feel encouraged that the Cabinet began the day with a prayer. That I should focus my attention on subject-verb agreement or subordinating clauses and not bother to notice the extremity of my students's xenophobia. That I should take a husband's name. That I should give part of my paycheck to the corporation exploiting my labor in the name of "charity." That I should feel apologetic for the quality of my education. That I should have to explain with such frequency—and to no effect—why I don't just "get a job." That I should be less emotional. less boisterous. less insistent. That I should smile and say 'thank you' when a man sizes me up like a young heifer and compliments my udders, calves, or ass. That I should seek out clothes with corporate logos. That I should accept size zero as the pervasive goal. That I should swallow all of this and more, much more. That I should not view this as perverse. That I should not see this as pornographic.

—B

B—

We would like words to move, meanings to be shifty, not to be pinned down. In my mind this is what "literature" is. We try to avoid essentialization. Maybe I'm risking essentialization, but - perhaps after Blanchot - literature might be, first and foremost - unto itself, pre-social, presymbolic. What we write as critics - as Marxists and post-colonialists and psychoanalysts and what have you - comes after the fact of how limitless the work is in its existence. How could one ever say they "know" Shakespeare, or Dickinson, or Zukofsky, or Spicer, or

Howe (some of my favorites) when "to get it" is to reduce what literature is: a realm of multiple, if not infinite meanings: possibilities, virtualities. Meaning comes later; it is necessary but secondary. Meaning is of the social, where literature - its being - may not be entirely, total, whole.

Meaning production is inherently reductive. This is not a "good" or a "bad" thing; just necessary. Who cannot admire a book like Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* or Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* for their incredible openness, that shiftiness which most often will not take sides or establish systems and oppositions detrimental to interpretive democracy.

What I love about the late Zukofsky in particular, and what has drawn me back to his work ever since I first read it in college, is its extreme openness. Some critics would like to call what I am calling "open" a "closed hermeticism." We could oppose such a term with "open hermeneutics." Talking on the phone today with Greg about this, he mentioned Saussure's stand-still at the end of his career. In writing a book on anagrams, Saussure succumbed to the radical openness of the anagram, and began to perceive that every word contained every other. The poetry I most like tends towards this prolific and productive babble. This is also the babble of history as historical matter collides resembling, connecting, constellating. Fission. Origin. All. Zukofsky's "A" moves from an historical poetics of more apparent reference towards - particularly in "A" 22 and 23 - an historical poetics that has reached critical mass, perhaps critical weave. References are so imbedded, interwoven, intertextual - hyperintertextual, hyper-citational. But this is not hermeticism. Quite the opposite. It is probably the most connected a poet and a poem can be to the world. Eerily connected, related, associational, paranoiac.

We would like to use Flash to such an end. And Brian's [Kim Stefans's] piece is beautiful as a dance of his ear's intelligence - what I mean is that one is struck by the musicality and choreography of the "dream life." Yet, there is the feeling that such displays approach "eye candy," a spectacle of poetry, MTV. Advertising is also engaged in such an anagrammatics, throwing letters every which way, providing the viewer only parts of words. I do not want to sound reactionary, and do celebrate the experiments of electronic poetry. I merely share your skepticism of the usages of the medium and beg that technology not supercede the process, craft, and thought of composition.

The issue of agency is also important. For some time software has existed that will do a scripter's dirty-work. Many are grateful for this since it can be time saving. The problem myself and others detect in this is that the scripter forsakes a lack of control. The software we use to write poetry, to make animation and video - to create - is ultimately limited and determining - not to mention disciplining. One can only hope for software that negotiates agency and convenience. I am skeptical of all this, and wish I could do something about it. My thought in the wake of the media coverage of the Trade Center destruction is that I wish I had learned computer programming. Information and guerilla media activity are in high demand now. The future of activism lies in the virtual.

"Embracing" or engaging? I think I remain too pessimistic of the place of technology to be embracing. It seems essential that we confront the way we use technologies, what place technology has in our lives. The destruction of the Trade Center has been an incredible exaggeration of the state of terrorism that has existed since WWII (long before that?). The destruction is an important relay in a trajectory which continues. When will there be a stop-brake, the re-shifting, re-directing. Can we have the courage to make the future the future, and not this continual present: terrorism, "infinite justice", "total war", spectacle, pornography, ecstatic inertia.

R U S T T A L K S . 8

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