

## Neither the sun nor death can be gazed upon fixedly

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In this paper I will be interpreting ‘host’ in the context of the internet and, by extension, as being both a multitude and breeding ground for database enabled connectivities through which the familiar (friend) and the unknown (stranger) conjoin in a battle for social capital. By way of introduction, I quote from Georg Franck, his theory of the economy of attention:

What inspires us more than addressing ears flushed with excitement, what captivates us more than exercising our own power of fascination? What is more thrilling than an entire hall of expectant eyes, what more overwhelming than applause surging up to us? What, lastly, equals the enchantment sparked off by the delighted attention we receive from those who profoundly delight ourselves? Attention by other people is the most irresistible of drugs. To receive it outshines receiving any other kind of income. This is why glory surpasses power and why wealth is overshadowed by prominence.<sup>1</sup>

[*applause*]. The ‘sound track’ for this paper is Live by Pavel Büchler, a compilation of applause from his collection of 351 live recordings of concerts.<sup>2</sup> The applause takes on a rhythm of its own, allowing us, the secondary meta-audience, to surf on the perpetually buoyant euphoria of the crowds, forgetting to care about what might have come before. Live presents a database of applause, connected only by and through the artist who affirms his editorial control by releasing a limited edition in a fragile and moribund material format (vinyl). The title of the work enjoys a double sense as both an adjective (live) and imperative verb (live!); a tacit command from Büchler for his stitched-together creation to take on an autonomous existence, to be incarnated with life and agency in its own right, if only for a short time. [*applause*].

Home to Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, Kansas is in the middle of the United States of America.<sup>3</sup> Scientifically attested to be ‘flatter than a pancake’, Kansas is the embodiment of the average, the everyday.<sup>4</sup> On acquiring Paramount Pictures in 1966, Charles Blühdorn instructed maverick producer Robert Evans to make ‘pictures people in Kansas City want to see’.<sup>5</sup> Dennis Hopper was born in Kansas (the same name as the lead character in his 1971 film *The Last Movie*<sup>6</sup>), and despite his prolonged industry exile following its box office failure, Dennis Hopper is currently according to *The Oracle of Bacon* – the centre of the Hollywood Universe.<sup>7</sup>

*The Oracle of Bacon* is a measure of connectivity which calculates the relationships between actors according to the films in which they have participated, based on the principle of ‘six degrees of separation’. This became a game called Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, following the suggestion by actor Kevin Bacon that he has worked either with everyone in Hollywood or someone who has worked with them. *The Oracle of Bacon* now draws from *The Internet Movie Database* to calculate connections and ‘Bacon Numbers’ which demonstrate each actor’s weighting in the Hollywood Universe.<sup>8</sup> Of the 1.6 million people in the database, Dennis Hopper is currently the most connected. *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)* originated from two amateur Usenet groups run by Colin Needham – a Bristol based film-enthusiast and Hewlett-Packard engineer – hosted on a server at Cardiff University, and later sold to Amazon (with Colin remaining as CEO), and now receives 57 million visits a month. The *IMDb* retains the eclectic nature of its originary principle by allowing users to contribute a baroque level of interconnected information regarding every aspect of a film’s production. So, in relation to *The Last Movie*, we can discover two hundred and seventy-seven other films that feature ‘Film-Within-A-Film’ as a plot keyword.

By now a naturalised trope of the web terrain of expandable lists and tag clouds, the contracting and expanding nature of these plot keywords is evocative of Oulipian strategies of writing under systems of constraint, treating language as a ‘machine producing at the discretion of consumers [...] an indefinite quantity of potential meanings’<sup>9</sup>; suggesting that through such structures they could somehow democratise inspiration. Despite these altruistic claims, the complex technical and mathematical nature of some of the constraints devised by the Oulipo, instead lend them an alienatingly ‘nerdic’, elitist, and obsessive quality, redolent of today’s ‘Pancake Repairmen’, the peer-to-peer username which stands for ‘exceptionally broad yet redundant fan

knowledge'.<sup>10</sup> This becomes a form of subcultural capital and is akin to the information fetishism of the Japanese otaku, described by Karl Taro Greenfeld as a significant demographic of 'socially inept but often brilliant technological shut-ins', who trade information on anything from manga to monsters, the military or tropical fish.<sup>11</sup> However trivial or irrelevant the information, its accuracy and exclusivity to the owner is primary in terms of elevating status. The information becomes fetishistic insofar as the actual objects to which it refers are irrelevant.<sup>12</sup>

Websites such as the *IMDb* and *Rotten Tomatoes* with its 'Tomatometer' make use of 'weighted averages' and 'credibility formulas' to calculate rankings, combining elaborate standards, algorithms and gages of objectivity with elements of random subjectivity to produce categorical judgements of quality.<sup>13</sup> The database, therefore, is both blind and deterministic, as user ranking can become tautologically self-fulfilling. As Lev Manovich refers to it, the database 'complex' or 'imagination' is in full sway as we are consumed by algorithmic permutations of data, simply gripped by the logic of potential, and/or the database's horror of lack.

*Artfacts.Net* applies the '*confused.com* approach' to its Artist Ranking system, in which the language adopted is more suggestive of selling insurance, implying a sense of anxiety (or the sublime) that *Artfacts.Net* can alleviate and sublimely conquer through its online tool, which effectively reduces global artistic production to hierarchical lists of artists, ranked according to their visibility. *Artfacts.Net* subjugates the art world through informatics, contorted from exhibition listings, produced by institutions, which are I quote from the website 'reputable market participants' who govern the art world like a football league with 'heroes' who perform at the 'world championships' which recognise the 'chosen ones as candidates for a higher level of performance'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the spirit of proto-fascism meets the logic of the price comparison market, in which a self-perpetuating hegemonic mechanism is put into play.

Douglas Rushkoff argues against 'collaborative filtering' and website recommendation engines, saying that, rather than engendering a more diverse culture, they simply make me more 'prototypically me',<sup>15</sup> just as the acquisition of rare information can make for 'more of an otaku'. If, as Boris Groys suggests, an object only becomes art when it is exhibited, could one conclude that the more an object is exhibited, the more prototypically, paradigmatically 'art' it becomes.<sup>16</sup> Rather, it would seem that systems such as *Artfacts.Net*, which privilege the apparatus over the content, in fact paradoxically render the work of art invisible.<sup>17</sup>

*Artfacts.Net* attributes the rationale for its Artist Ranking system to Georg Franck's 1998 theory of the economy of attention in which he argues that with increasing average material wealth the only distinguishing factor in society will be prominence (or fame), which, thanks to a symbiotic relationship with the media, is now in abundance. Not all attention currency is equally valued or accumulated, however: attention from those we esteem is most valuable, while counting little from those to whom we are indifferent, and even assumes negative value from those we fear or despise. Similarly, we tend to be attracted to or fascinated by those who have become rich in attention income and feel bestowed with the same richness of attention by proxy when these attention aristocrats turn their attention to us. Thus a 'stock exchange of attentive capital' is created, as Franck writes:

If the attention due to me is not only credited to me personally but is also registered by others, and if the attention I pay to others is valued in proportion to the amount of attention earned by me, then an accounting system is set in motion which quotes something like the social share prices of individual attention. What is important, then, is not only how much attention one receives from how many people, but also from whom one receives it – or, put more simply, with whom one is seen. The reflection of somebody's attentive wealth thus becomes a source of income for oneself. Simple proximity to prominence will make a little prominent.<sup>18</sup>

The mechanism of the attention economy can be seen at work in the collaborative project *No Ghost Just a Shell*, initiated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno. They bought the rights to a manga character, described by Parreno as 'without a biography and without qualities, very cheap, which had that melancholic look, as if it were conscious of the fact that its capacity to survive stories was very limited'.<sup>19</sup> Their intention was to free a character from the fiction market so that it would become an empty shell around which a community could gather. That community included

many other well-established artists, as well as contributors to the project's publication: a philosopher, an art historian, a biologist, designers, writers, critics, curators, a doctor and researcher in immunology systems, and a lawyer. The artists created twenty-eight individual works around the character (whom they named 'Ann Lee'). Within three years various forms of the project featured in fifty-seven exhibitions around the world before the entire project was acquired as a special purchase by the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, which in itself generated significant interest. Through the mechanism of 'collaborative promiscuity', as described by Hans Ulrich Obrist,<sup>20</sup> the artists augment their attention capital by continually varying the form of the exhibition, with each new artist increasing, in Franck's terms, the 'social share prices of individual attention'. In its capacity as an empty shell, Ann Lee is essentially a McGuffin<sup>21</sup> which reveals the workings of an apparatus; it is offered up as an empty sign through which to inscribe the cultural imperialism of the individual artists who, in the end, kill off Ann Lee (for whom Joe Scanlan creates an Ikea coffin), as a logical denouement to the predatory behaviour akin to a paedophile ring, sharing around a cheap, vulnerable, expendable, interchangeable, Asian 'product'.

In direct antithesis to the figure of Ann Lee, we see in Roberto Rossellini's 1966 made-for-television film *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* the figure of young Louis enacting a self-transformation from an empty shell, a lame-duck symbol of monarchy, into the totalitarian 'Sun King', radiating his absolute power through the manipulation of spectacle.<sup>22</sup> Representing a short time frame in the long life and reign of Louis XIV, *The Taking of Power* encapsulates through brief but significant events, the whole political, economic, social, scientific, and cultural impact of that period of history. As the critic José Luis Guarner writes, Rossellini's genius was to 'see in every detail a reflection of the whole, to see in every gesture a sign of the times'.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of brevity, I shall remark here on just two such details or gestures.

The first occurs in the opening scene which establishes the premise of the film through a brief dialogue between a group of merchants. Louis, the Sun King, is inscribed from the first words, as is the concision of time: 'The sun's already high. You're late'. The merchants discuss the role of the king, and one of them remarks: '*Le roi, le roi... Après tout c'est un mec comme un autre*' ('The king, the king... In the end he's just a bloke like any other'). Suggesting that Louis is an interchangeable ordinary bloke points to his absolute power as a fabrication and also alludes to the fact that the character of Louis is played by an amateur actor, an office clerk, whose overtly wooden performance reflexively serves to reinforce the artifice of Louis' authoritarian kingship. The merchant's mocking refrain of '*le roi, le roi*' is in direct contrast to the later singular dramatic pronouncement '*Le Roi!*' preceding Louis' absurdly magnificent entrance to court at the height of his sartorial hegemony over the nobility. Even the phrase '*après tout*' is significant as at the end of the film we see Louis stripped of his magnificent costume, and appearing once again as an ordinary bloke trying to memorise his lines as a king.

The next detail occurs at the very point of Louis taking power, following the death of Cardinal Mazarin. Having short-circuited the official channels by commissioning his maid to bring him the news of Mazarin's death, Louis arrives on the scene with the speed and drama of the sun appearing from behind a cloud. And, as if to demonstrate that the brighter the light, the darker the shadow consolidated by Rossellini with chiaroscuro lighting effects – Louis' first action on assuming power as the sun king is to command, unusually, '*le deuil en noir*' (mourning in black) for the whole court, overriding Le Tellier's protestation by turning his back on him and eclipsing him in shadow.

Louis' turn of genius was in housing the de-territorialised and pomp-craving nobles in the luxury of his court at Versailles, demanding that they dressed in the most outlandish and expensive attire for which Louis would lend them money. With Louis as their creditor and stylist, obliged to reflect the magnificent radiance of the Sun King, the nobles became effectively trapped in the Hall of Mirrors.

In *Everything is Miscellaneous* David Weinberger describes the (third-order) digitised apparatuses that structure (second-order) metadata as the 'Trojan horse[s] of the information age' demonstrating (implicitly after Foucault) how power resides not with those who create the information, but with those who control its organisation; classification is political. Today the reconstitution of cultural hierarchies is framed around volubility with 'individuals thinking out loud' carrying more weight than authority and expertise.<sup>24</sup>

Louis XIV's strategy was to become 'the animator of all enterprise', 'unique soul of the state [...] Everyone in the kingdom must derive all things from the monarch, as nature derives all things from the sun'.<sup>25</sup> He made every aspect of his life a public, self-aggrandising spectacle. From this we can generate the apparatus of what I call *LouisQuatorzisation* as a totalising self-reflective framework or algorithm. On a simple level, we can see *LouisQuatorzisation* at play in the blogosphere, twitterdom, and in the facebookian obsession with externalising and spectacularising every function and facet of daily life to a 'court' of 'friends' and followers, held captive by the database of influence, subjectified through cultural commodities, narcissified by recommendation engines and collaborative filtering according to the topological reconfiguration of pre-established data. By extension, *LouisQuatorzisation* is figured as the cultural sleight of hand which topologically reconfigures pre-existing entities under a sphere of influence to reflect and sell a given politic, dogma, brand, genre of art, etc. Perpetual motion is crucial to this exercise to maintain the semblance of the new, the imitation of life, vitality, creativity, so as to enthrall subjects in the perpetual flowing of the fountains of glory, despite the fact that they are regurgitating the same water. Thus, the dynamic database perpetually serves up fresh views of pre-coded information, dazzling with its baroque detail, viewable from all angles by each spectator who can consume from it at will, as from a supply chain in the fabrication of a 'just-in-time' architecture of subjectivity.

## NOTES

1. Georg Franck, *Okonomie der Aufmerksamkeit* (The Economy of Attention), Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998. An English translation of an essay of the same name is available at <<http://www.t0.or.at/franck/gfeconom.htm>> and it is this version to which I refer here [accessed 12 March 2010].
2. Pavel Büchler, *Live*, 1999: vinyl single, released by FACT, Liverpool, 1999, in an edition of 351 copies and launched simultaneously at the Liverpool Biennial and Gramophon, Hanover. *Live* can be heard via the Community Audio collection at: <<http://www.archive.org/details/Wavelength2006-11-10>> [accessed 3 December 2010].
3. Frank L. Baum (1900), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, New York: Tor, 1993.
4. See Mark Fonstad, William Pugatch, Brandon Vogt, *Kansas Is Flatter Than a Pancake*, 2003, Improbable Research website <<http://improbable.com/airchives/paperair/volume9/v9i3/kansas.html>> [accessed 26 February 2010].
5. From *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, a 2002 film adaptation of Robert Evans' 1994 autobiography, directed by Nanette Burstein and Brett Morgen and released by Focus Features and USA Pictures. Evans went on to produce films including *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Godfather* (1972), *Chinatown* (1974), *Marathon Man* (1976), *Black Sunday* (1977) and more recently *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003).
6. *The Last Movie*, dir. Dennis Hopper (Universal Pictures, 1971).
7. *The Oracle of Bacon* <<http://oracleofbacon.org>> [accessed 29 March 2010].
8. *Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com>> [accessed 29 March 2010].
9. Jean Lescure, 'A Brief History of the Oulipo', in *Oulipo, A Primer of Potential Literature*, tr. and ed. by Warren F Motte, Jr., Dalkey Archive Press, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
10. Andrew Whelan, *Leeching Bataille: peer-to-peer potlatch and the acephalic response*, conference paper presented at the 4th Inclusiva-net meeting, Madrid, 10 July 2009, pp.6-7.
11. Karl Taro Greenfeld, 'The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)', in *Wired*, March/April 1993.
12. In an extended version of this paper I talk more about the origins of *otaku* culture, as derivative of the Edo period – contemporaneous with the European baroque and Louis XIV). I also discuss various analyses of the *otaku* as being 'reluctant insiders', hyper consumers, database animals, and information elites, and I connect the *otaku* symptom of 'moe' (passionate interest, desire) both to the Stendhal syndrome and Diederich Diederichsen's discourse on *Mehrwert*, or surplus value in art, which I then contrast with Boris Groys' discourse on equal aesthetic rights and multiple authorship.
13. Groy's discourse on equal aesthetic rights and multiple authorship.
14. *Rotten Tomatoes* <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>> [accessed 29 March 2010]
15. *Introduction to Value Artist Ranking Information* <[http://www.artfacts.net/marketing\\_new/?Services,Artist\\_Ranking](http://www.artfacts.net/marketing_new/?Services,Artist_Ranking)> [accessed 11 March 2010]
16. Douglas Rushkoff interviewed as part of BBC's *Virtual Revolution* series, broadcast 19 June 2010.
17. Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2008, p.98.
18. Roman Vasseur, an observation made in a private conversation.
19. Franck, *The Economy of Attention*.
20. Philippe Parreno in conversation with Pierre Huyghe, Stefan Kalmar, Beatrix Ruf and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *No Ghost Just a Shell*, 2003, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Institute of Visual Culture, Cambridge; Kunsthalle Zürich; Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, p. 15.
21. Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'How Annlee Changed Its Spots', *No Ghost Just a Shell*, op.cit., pp.255-262.
22. Alfred Hitchcock is renowned for his use of the McGuffin which he describes in an interview with Francois Truffaut as follows: 'It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?" and the other answers "Oh, that's a McGuffin." The first one asks "What's a McGuffin?" "Well," the other man says, "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands." The first man says "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers "Well, then that's no McGuffin!" So you see, a McGuffin is nothing at all'. *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.
23. *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (The Taking of Power by Louis XIV), dir. Roberto Rossellini, Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF), 1966.
24. José Luis Guarner (1973), *Roberto Rossellini*, tr. by Elisabeth Cameron, New York: Praeger, 1970, p. 116. 'The third order practices that make a company's existing assets more profitable, increase customer loyalty, and seriously reduce costs are the Trojan horse of the information age.' David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*, New York: Henry Holt, 2008, p. 22.
25. Rossellini, *La Prise de pouvoir*.