Towards an Ethics of Distance: Representation, Free Production and Virtuality

ENDA McCAFFREY

Abstract

This article takes it inspiration from a crisis between Deleuzian free production and representation in contemporary virtual and digital culture. The aim is to sketch a different ethics to the ethics of difference between free production and representation as described by Deleuze and Guattari and invoked by Michel Foucault in his preface to *Anti-Oedipe*. This article outlines the case for an ethical relationality between these two structures which reflects the socio-political and ethical exigencies of our virtual and digital cultures: specifically, an ethics of relationality derived paradoxically from the distance inscribed in ethical philosophy. Drawing on an amalgamation of Ricoeurean ethics and social constructionism in a definition of selfhood, I argue for the need to stand back from the distanciating effects of the virtual revolution – not with a view to approximating the cultural politics of specificity in the logic of representation – but to see in the gap in "distance from" specificity, a space of ethical and philosophical agency wherein lies the value-added of otherness.

Introduction

> Je dirais que *L'Anti-Œdipe* (puissent ses auteurs me pardonner) est un livre d'éthique, le premier livre d'éthique qu'on ait écrit en France depuis assez longtemps […]. On pourrait dire que *L'Anti-Œdipe* est une *Introduction à la vie non-fasciste*.[1]

In 2012, the automobile giant Toyota made a TV commercial to promote its new car, the GT86.[2] The advertisement was called "Toyota GT86: The Real Deal". Set in a black and white futuristic city, the main character (a computer-generated humanoid) is driving aimlessly through the streets, clearly disenchanted with his inauthentic, desensitized existence in which he believes he is missing out on what is "real", but also dissatisfied with the impoverished driving experience offered by the uninspiring car he is driving. In the final sequence of the clip, he finds himself

---

[1] Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 133–136.

[2] This advertisement was recently banned in the UK because it was seen as encouraging dangerous driving.

in front of a new car draped in a sheet, which he duly unveils. The clip ends with him crashing his new GT86 through a brick wall, exiting on to an expansive road through a multi-coloured landscape to the sound of Edith Piaf's classic "Non, je ne regrette rien". The character's voice-over, critical to the clip's interpretation and my analysis, is as follows:

> – *Can you feel it?*
> – *Can you feel the thrill of being alive?*
> – *Neither can I.*
> – *There is no alive in this town, just pixels, pretence and driver assist.*
> – *Now, if it's real you're after, you gotta know where to look.*
> – *Now, **that** is real [as he views the GT86].*
> – *Just me, the car, the road and feeling alone for the first time.*
> – *Unfortunately, that's not allowed around here.*
> – *The thing with real is that once you've experienced it, there's no going back.*

I will return to the philosophical and ethical significance of this clip later, but for now I would like to highlight some of the issues the clip raises in the context of this article. The clip sets up two polar realities: a "fascistic" virtual one, devoid of feeling and experience, and where humans have all the outward appearance of humans but cannot sense anything; and a "real" one, an escape to a reality where one can be reborn and experience the thrill of living for the first time. This trajectory from virtual (back) to real bucks a common trend in which the virtual is often perceived as the place of escape – and where the potentiality of living (in its unregulated, free and often extreme dimensions) can be played out with impunity in virtual space. This virtual freedom is the fascistic experience of the posthuman[3] – a being who can become and embody different identities via the possibilities of digital living.[4] As Katherine Hayles acknowledges, we must be wary of technological advances where information (including the body) is disembodied; for Hayles, the human body is irreplaceable and technology can only be incorporated into it and human life practices. The Toyota clip however raises two related questions. If the digital/virtual age is a metaphor for what we can become in terms of offering a potential for living, we need to think about an ethics of the virtual that will articulate the properties of living in and with virtual space.[5] Also, if our posthuman racer in the

---

[3] See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[4] Katherine Hayles, *How We Become Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[5] Screen culture, in particular smartphone technology, has revolutionized human interaction, specifically with the emergence of dating apps (Tinder, 3nder, Recon, Bristler, Grinder, Plenty of Fish). In the virtual space of algorithms and swipes, sexual relations are being reconfigured: speed and quick intimacy are taking precedence over relationships and long-term commitments.

clip thinks that his digitally-enhanced environment is a "pretence" and he wants to experience what is "real", then we need to ask what type of "real" he means and how we experience it. This article opens up this debate and invites us to think about the nature of our interactions with digital culture, in particular the ethical implications of our emotional, sexual and ontological investments in an "other" refracted through the lens of digitalization.[6]

In his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *L'Anti-Œdipe*, Michel Foucault invites us to read this book as an "art" and as an "art de vivre" accompanied by "principes essentiels".[7] Resisting the temptation to philosophize the work's meanings, art (and specifically "art érotique") relies on the analysis of line, movement and multiplicity as an alternative discourse to "la pensée […] par subdivision et hiérarchisation pyramidale".[8] "L'Art de vivre" – tantamount to a manual guide to daily life – is founded on a number of essential principles, including: the end to the use of concepts and forms of unity and totality; the end to reality as understood in terms of law, limit and truth in favour of multiplication, flux and intensification; and the end to the ideology of the individual as a product of power. We can read the Toyota commercial in the light of Foucault's "art érotique" in the way the driver is conditioned by the subdivision and hierarchical space of the futuristic city, where his desires remain repressed, and where freedom is a way of living outside structures: "Just me, the car, the road and feeling alone for the first time." However, what remains problematic in this virtual space of free production is the law of desire. Foucault suggests in his preface that "art érotique" has nothing to do with the *why* of desire and more to do with *how* it can be deployed – specifically as a discourse to deconstruct forms of power and control. He writes: "Préférez ce qui est positif et multiple, la différence à l'uniforme, le flux aux unités, les agencements mobiles aux systèmes. Considérez que ce qui est productif n'est pas sédentaire, mais nomade."[9] As much as Foucault enables the free deployment of desire, there comes – as in this clip – a point at which the notion of agency (including the agency of desire) is called into question. Why does our driver want to experience the "real" and not the virtual? What is it that motivates this turn? "If it's real you're after,

you gotta know where to look." His search through the back streets of the city leads him to his desire, but what is the nature of this agency? I suggest that agency is not defined here in terms of individuation or rights (Foucault dismisses both as products of power in his preface). Rather, agency is informed by a knowledge of self ("*you gotta know where to look*") in relation to the practice of freedom. So agency is a philosophical and ethical construction (primarily Ricœurean[10] as I will demonstrate), but also Foucauldian in the way the latter deploys the idea of care ("souci de soi") as both action in relation to self and to others.[11] Hence, this article takes issue with one of Foucault's recommendations in his preface. Against Foucault, I turn to philosophy – not in its identarian or individualized formulations – but as a relationality of selfhood. I claim that philosophy can be brought to bear (not to regulate, re-establish or empower desire), but to serve as an ethical bridge between the agency of desire and its enactment. In addition, and taking an unlikely lead from Foucault, I will also seek to draw up some essential principles concerning the ethics of desire in representation and free production respectively.

Representation, Free Production, Singularization

In the context of recent French theory, the virtual is a debate characterized on the one hand by its valorization in theories of immanence, anti-representation, impersonal singularity (what we could term theories of proximity) in the work of Leo Bersani[12] and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[13] in particular, but also by the dangers of virtuality, espoused by Paul Virilio[14] and Bernard Stiegler[15] for example, for whom the distance inherent in virtual representation produces disorientation,

---

[10] Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990). The self in Ricœur's ethical and philosophical system is split into two components. The "idem" equates to the constancy of sameness, hence my use of the prefix "homo" to account for the self's idem-identity in the context of homosexual desire. The "ipse" of the self is that which can initiate/activate newness and change (living *in relation*). Critically, without both there is no self: both inhabit overlapping orders (one physical, the other intentional/philosophical). All authentic action is dependent on how the self relates to both these orders.

[11] For Foucault, ethics is not a universal law or code. It is "the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom […]. Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics": Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live (Interviews 1961–85)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, Lysa Hochroth, John Johnston (New York: Sémiotexte, 1996), pp. 434–445. Freedom for Foucault is a relationship that one has with oneself when one acts. It is a means of developing and transforming the self. Foucault argues that ethics is not just synonymous with care of the self but "is the conscious practice of freedom around the care of the self and others" (*Foucault Live*, p. 435).

[12] Leo Bersani and Adam Philips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[13] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

[14] Paul Virilio, *Esthétique de la disparition* (Paris: Galilée, 1989); *Le Futurisme de l'instant: Stop-Eject* (Paris: Galilée, 2009).

[15] Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le temps, I. La Faute d'Epiméthée* (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

inertia and loss of consciousness. If we expose the virtual to further scrutiny from a Deleuzian perspective, we can see how the concept of representation is critical to our understanding of its impact and production.[16] Representation for Deleuze is a belief system that organizes social history, psychoanalysis, consciousness and specifically the family structure, and is in opposition to processes of free production. Deleuze writes:

> Aussi le lien de la *représentation-croyance* avec la famille n'est-il pas accidentel, il appartient à l'essence de la représentation d'être représentation familiale. Mais la production n'est pas supprimée pour cela, elle continue à grandir, à vrombir sous l'instance représentative qui l'étouffe, et qu'elle peut faire résonner en revanche jusqu'à la limite de rupture.[17]

The polarities of representation and free production highlight the critical philosophical difference for Deleuze between a world organized and experienced according to an inheritance founded in the ideology of "lack", and the creation of a transcendental empiricism that precedes ideologies of self, sex and the individual, and facilitates the production of a "Réel" materiality of living in its pure and virtual potentiality.

Free production (or anti-representation, as Deleuze also refers to it) in the virtual replaces personality and individuality with impersonality and singularity – that is, the singular essence of "A" body, both common and impersonal (approximate and distant) to all bodies. This is Deleuze's notion of transsexualism. In the same way that tensions between representation and free production are literally just *below the surface* (for Deleuze), thus it is with the body per se where *underneath* the individual identity of the body (its representative state) lies the singular essence of "A" body. This, for Deleuze, is the singular as "Réel" – pre-individual, pre-identification, pre-self, pre-designation, and the potential space for an ethical (non-)relationality to take shape in the anonymity of unspecificity. It is also the posthuman virtual we see in the aforementioned clip. One could,

---

[16] Whilst my focus is on Deleuze and representation, other theorists have written on this subject. Jean Baudrillard connects more directly the idea of representation to the virtual image (televisual, cinematic and photographic). For Baudrillard, the televisual image signals two significant virtual developments for our understanding of representation. The first is the onset of the era of "fascination" in which the spectator's senses – particularly powers of discernment and self-awareness – are numbed by the seductive power of the image: "Or, la fascination […] est une passion nihiliste par excellence, c'est la passion propre au mode de disparition" (J. Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* [Paris: Galilée, 1981], p. 229). The second relates to representation as a process of layering. Baudrillard describes representation as "ajoutant le réel au réel en vue d'une illusion parfaite (celle de la ressemblance, celle du stéréotype réaliste) qu'on tue l'illusion en profondeur" (J. Baudrillard, *Illusion, désillusion esthétiques* [Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997], pp. 12–13). Critically, distance and depth are sacrificed, as too is desire. The comparisons with Paul Virilio in both these instances are particularly relevant (see later).

[17] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 353.

theoretically, develop an anti-reading of the Toyota advertisement along these lines, in which the unspecificity of the humanoid population in the cityscape (of which we see a number in their sameness) attests to this universal singularity and its non-specificity. Leo Bersani concurs with this view that virtuality has the potential to de-individualize relations and this in turn opens up new modes of ethical (non-) relationality as communication outside the norms of personality and specificity. He writes: "Virtuality, even when it designates or portrays specific human figures or particular places and acts, has already removed them from the field of actual designation. Represented happening in art, however meticulously detailed, is inherently unspecifiable happening."[18] However, the logic of the clip (and the virtual in this case) does not allow us to engage with the virtual in this liberating, polymorphous and transsexual way. Instead, virtual space is depicted as fascistic, controlling desire, denying freedom and creating a universal homogeneity rather than a universal singularity. More problematically, the virtual is undermined by a "(re)turn" to the "real" (of the GT86). The dialectic at play is of critical importance; on a theoretical level, virtual space can offer a lifeline to new ethical and relational possibilities because of the anonymity and distance guaranteed by free production. The potential therein for anti-representation is hugely seductive and symptomatic of our digital age. But we must note that anonymity and distance are framed not only by their opposites but also by "experience" (and in the clip the thing about experiencing the real is the "no going back"). Not only do these two trajectories shape our digital and technological experiences in respect of human and sexual encounters online and offline, but given the complexity of their interactivity how can we make sense of this interactivity and their competing "(r)Réels"?

Deleuze defines singularities as the true transcendental events that preside over the genesis of individuals and which distribute in a potential that admits neither Self nor I. Singularities are themselves meaning (singularities-events) and process (singularities as auto-unification). What is at work in the Deleuzian theory of singularity is the process of production according to a *formless* group of pre-individual singularization. And yet, the pursuit of *form* and meaning as representation inside the virtual (whether it be the human body itself or the pursuit of new forms of visual enhancement in Computer Generated Imagery, higher degrees of pixelation and High Definition to represent the body) has intensified. The hyper-accessibility of information on the internet and smartphones, and the pervasive and unregulated power of the image/video (including sexual and pornographic) oblige us to reflect ethically and philosophically on how we connect at human and sexual levels in the cybernetic revolution, and specifically how speed, as a function of this transformation, is affecting radically human behaviour in respect of values, judgement, decision-making, conscience, well-being and professional/social life.

---

[18] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 26.

In sketching a different ethics to the ethics of difference between free production and representation as invoked by Foucault at the outset, I want to explore an ethical relationality between these two structures as they relate to (homo)sexual desire, and as they reflect the socio-political and ethical exigencies of our virtual and digital revolution. This ethics of relationality is derived from the distance guaranteed, not by the repressive and normalizing *ideology* of representation, but by an ethical *philosophy* that inhabits a space between representation and free production, and which cultivates distance from the encroaching proximity of both. To help me, I draw on two additional thinkers and their ideas. Founded on an amalgamation of Ricœurean ethics and social constructionism that shapes the Ricœurean definition of selfhood, I bring together Ricœur's twin concepts of the "idem" (that which is constant and unchanging) and the "ipse" (the capacity of the "idem" to act in relation to change and otherness) to form a hybrid construction "homo→ipseity". For Ricœur, constancy and change underpin the concept of selfhood, and "homo→ipseity" allows us to advance the debate on (homo)sexual desire in the digital age. Firstly, "homo→ipseity" resituates sexual desire (and specifically the sameness of homosexual desire) in a universal debate about the relation between sameness and difference, and in particular the capacity and ethical necessity within same-sex desire to relate beyond itself – to relate to alterity. Gay pornography (and online addiction to the internet) frames this ethical relationality because it reflects the constancy of homosexual desire, including not only its insularity (non-relationality or "homo-ness"[19]) but critically its aversion to difference. "Homo" as "idem" preserves the spirit of French homosexual desire after 1968: a Classical spirit fuelled by the free production of Foucauldian pansexualism, Barthesian atopic pluralism, Deleuzian transsexualism and Hocquenghem's desiring relations. My claim is that it is this spirit of free production that the digital age also preserves and disseminates by virtue of its unregulation, freedom and unimagined unlimited possibilities. Secondly and critically, ipseity ("ipse") serves to modify this myopic excess: as a rudder of relationality, ipseity reinforces the ethical and philosophical impact of distance from free production for today's sexual citizen – an inflection in response to governmental attempts to police virtual space but also an ethical choice determined by the limitations of representation, by what we feel, touch and get to know. The cultural theorist and urban geographer Paul Virilio has been one of the leading thinkers in these debates in recent years, and I will turn to his theories on speed and digitalization in the technological age later in this article.

Pixels, Representation, Reality

The internet and the technological age have added a new level of thinking to our analysis of the self in its homo and ipseitic variations. And there is no lack of

---

[19] Bersani uses this term in this context in *Homos*.

statistics confirming the prevalence of internet use in France, particularly the use of dating sites and pornography.[20] Results from the most recent study on the *Contexte de la sexualité en France* (2006) attest to "un succès fulgurant" of hits on dating websites which have replaced "les anciens clubs de rencontre, et évidemment le Minitel".[21] It is estimated that 10 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men frequent these sites on a regular basis, with 36 per cent of young women (between the age of 18-19) on subscription to dating sites. Léobon's study *Net Gay Baromètre*[22] into meeting online, sexuality and risky behaviour among gay and bisexual internet users, highlights widespread usage. More than half of its respondents confirm using the internet on average twenty-two hours per week, with "la recherche d'aventure sexuelle" motivating more than three quarters of respondents. More than half of respondents also declare being addicted to online interactions and more than a third to pornography or cybersex. Research also highlights the alarming consequences of cyber-dependence, symptoms of which include: silent addiction (surfing alone or in private), inordinate amount of time spent on the web, withdrawal symptoms from being disconnected, and a widespread feeling of deterioration in social, affective, professional and sexual life.

What can we infer from this research? Firstly, it is clear that web usage for dating or pornography purposes is primarily a solitary pursuit. By and large, it does not involve speaking or (rarely) engaging with another person face to face. It is also, ironically, a written experience, albeit in a truncated "text"/"chat" format. There is also the emerging consensus that the dating site has replaced traditional social structures of interaction, with the exception of "chillouts" – or "parties" where people congregate "post-app" to have sex with persons already met online. With the introduction of selectivity, strata of excess choice in terms of desired person, profiles, photos and interests, the private user can short-circuit the social links of interaction, and target sexual stimulation immediately at the click of a mouse or swipe. Anonymity and time are the discriminating criteria of this activity; anonymity in that one is free to speak with anyone one wants, invent a

---

[20] Serge Tisseron, *Virtuel, mon amour: penser, aimer, souffrir à l'ère des nouvelles technologies* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008); Serge Tisseron, "La prise de risques sur internet: éduquer autrement", AFPSSU – Du réel au virtuel…Les prises de risque pour grandir autrement, Paris, 21 janvier 2010. See also the work of Marie Bergström, "Sites de recherches et champs des possibles", *Notes et Documents*, OSC Sciences PO/CNRS, 2010). Bergström blogs on these debates on her Sciences PO website.

[21] Nathalie Bajos and Michel Bozon, *Tranformations des comportements, immobilité des représentations. Premiers résultats de l'enquête sur Contexte de la sexualité en France*. Special issue of CNAF, 144 (2007/2008), p. 28.

[22] *Net Gay Baromètre* is a survey conducted every five years by the CNRS and the University of Montréal into sexual practices on the internet. Alain Léobon conducted the 2009 survey under the title "Le Net Gay Baromètre 2009. Sondage sur les usages d'internet. Les modes de vie, la sexualité et le comportement à risque des internautes fréquentant les sites de rencontres gays."

fake persona, but also abort that conversation forever at any time, without reason, excuse or apology (a more difficult operation to perform in a conventional dating setting); and time, in that people have less time to invest in the drawn-out and financially-fraught ritual of courtship. In this sense, the concept of time has shifted from representative time (as a chronological continuum) to cyber-time (free-producing time), where, paradoxically, there appears to be more time (unlimited time) available to invest in internet-related practices. In this way, the internet has promoted the anonymity, and intensified the speed, of exchange. In this cosmic anonymity of exchange, the specificity of any one (person) is collapsed into the plurality and impersonal singularity of "A" type. Notwithstanding the decline in traditional ways of meeting and the increasing alienation experienced by internet users – although dating apps also bring together the otherwise alienated in new ways – these statistics and findings also reveal an alarming *décalage* between levels of saturation to unlimited digital sexual stimuli and possibilities, and what self-knowledge can offer in terms of proportionality, discernment, judgement and the "réel".[23]

Prevalence, dependence and empowerment also reveal concerns with relationality, in particular the relation between free production in the virtual and representation. If young people are turning away from the "lien social" to the virtual interactivity of the web, then why might this be happening? Time, as evidenced, is one factor. There are other factors, including the desire among young people to escape: "C'est à cause de la recherche d'une refuge, d'une échappatoire à la réalité, que cette tendance à s'extraire du contexte réel pourrait devenir l'une des motivations intimes des cyberdépendants. Le remplacement du réel par le virtuel est leur seule manière concevable de vivre."[24] How do we interpret this? Is it the Deleuzian thesis of the rejection of the proximity of the repressive "real" as representation, and the recourse to a virtual alternative as anti-representation or free production, expressed in the form of an escape or refuge? In other words, discomfort with human/bodily proximity is displaced to the distance of the virtual, albeit not with a view to a critique of the belief-system of representation or an escape from it; more the case of virtuality as the site of free production where a "Réel" materiality questions and subverts the "real" as fascistic representation. The virtual therefore becomes an anti-representational, free-producing cyber interactivity that cuts out Oedipal discursive practice and targets the impersonality and singularity of

---

[23] See Alain Badiou's "alternative" critique of the dating website Meetic in *Éloge de l'amour* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009). Badiou argues that dating websites have removed the risk factor from sexual adventure and replaced it with what he calls "l'amour sécuritaire": "il faut ré-inventer le risque et l'aventure, contre la sécurité et le confort" (p. 17).

[24] Marc Valleur and Dan Velea, "Les Addictions sans drogue(s)", *Revue toxibase*, 6 (2002), 1–15 (p. 11).

desiring relations and desiring relationality.[25] Free production in the virtual is seen to promote an unexpected relationality between the de-individualised private user and an anonymous collective imaginary, both of whom seek to authenticate virtual values/truths which are realizable only in the anti-representational. Deleuze writes: "La produit apparaît d'autant plus spécifique, inénarrablement spécifique, qu'on le rapporte *à* des formes idéales de causation, de compréhension ou d'expression, mais non pas au procès de production du réel dont il dépend."[26] A broader question also arises: can virtuality challenge the ideology of representation? Larry Schehr explored the paradoxes of the virtual age in his later work.[27] He stressed the positive impact of the virtual for a younger generation of sexual "cyborgs" who are freed from the regulatory discourse of a queer theory that instills heteronormativity as a social norm. However, Claire Boyle highlighted Schehr's concern for the negative side of this exposure to the virtual; she writes: "[the virtual subject] not only loses the capacity to be anonymous or invisible […] but also loses the contours of individuation that mark the boundary between one human being and another, and between the human and the machine."[28] From Deleuzian and Foucauldian perspectives, this loss of individuation would be viewed as a positive feature of desiring relations within the virtual. Schehr's analysis is more nuanced and, I would suggest, balanced. For Schehr, the virtual offers freedom, a post-queer vision and a new aesthetics of queer performance. But alongside this vision is a loss of "self" and ethical distance, including the materiality of queer speech and a queer body.[29] I would argue that Schehr's virtual is characterized by an attempt to sketch a new paradigm of existence inasmuch as the virtual is seen to supplement representation as "real" life with an online "Réel" version in cyberspace. As mentioned, the implications of this *virtual life* for the end of traditional forms of human interaction are clear to see. But the loss of "individuation" in Schehr's analysis does not preclude the exploration of an alternative self – in fact he fleshes out this alternative virtual self by placing particular emphasis on the way the virtual has the potential to radicalize the concept of subjectivity by jettisoning old models of subjecthood (Lacanian and Foucauldian in particular) and exploring new ones based on the sexual subject coming into being (or not) in part through contact with machines and mobile gadgets. Schehr expands the impact of the virtual to

---

[25] See the work of Guy Hocquenghem for more on this notion of desire as a free-producing relationality, in particular *Le Désir homosexuel* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

[26] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 31.

[27] Lawrence Schehr, *French Postmodern Masculinities: From Neuromatrices to Seropositivity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

[28] Claire Boyle, "Post-Queer (Un)Made in France" in Oliver Davis and Hector Kollias (eds), *Queer Theory's Return to France* (Special Issue), *Paragraph*, 35: 2 (2010), 265–280 (p. 269).

[29] Marie-Hélène Bourcier, "F***' the Politics of Disempowerment in the Second Butler", *Queer Theory's Return to France* (Special Issue), 233–253 (p. 238).

acknowledge the existence of virtual *others* made available to the subject via connections mediated by machines. The significance of Schehr's contribution to my argument lies explicitly in the capacity of a self (outside its individuated form) to exist and act ethically in relation to self and others. For Schehr, distance from the mimesis of representation is not viewed as a position of isolated strength (ontological or ethical) but rather provides an opportunity to reinvent new ethical and philosophical relational structures in free production that have the capacity to reimagine the ethical lines of connection between virtually-enhanced beings.

Virilio's Virtual: Distance, Existence

At this juncture, I would like to introduce a complementary perspective to this debate. This perspective alerts us to the "dangers" of the virtual where distance is viewed as a measure of (self-)alienation. Drawing on the work of Paul Virilio in this area, I want to demonstrate how distance can be deployed positively as a measure of how we can reflect on the relationality between representation and free production and where distance, paradoxically, can be seen as a way of restoring contact via what Virilio calls the "irradiation" of the body in the virtual. For Virilio, the aesthetics of disappearance produced by the virtual in turn produces a nostalgia for a lost body, bridging the ethical gap between representation and anti-representation. In his work *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, Virilio acknowledges the disorientating effects of the addiction to the internet. He writes:

> De fait, l'addiction, la dépendance compulsive à l'internet et à ses si nombreux moteurs de recherche, est une première réponse à l'origine de cet effet de réel où l'interactivité amène déjà certains fidèles à quitter leur environnement concret, à vider les lieux d'une vitalité organique et sociale, voire à abandonner toute alimentation régulière, toute hygiène de vie, pour cette perspective virtuelle plein cadre où l'individu, littéralement possédé par ses écrans, met en péril sa santé mentale.[30]

For Virilio, all "real time" screen communication and specifically the virtual image (the subject also of his work *Esthétique de la disparition*) has exacerbated the separation of self from its natural habitus – that is, the experience of presence in its material sensation of contact or sight. In its place, the internet has accelerated the creation of the image (what he calls a "mirage"), an electronic representation of real presence, a pixelated reconstruction/deconstruction of speed and light that masquerades for the real and to which the internet spectator pays homage. Virilio breaks down this pixelated electronic image into three main categories: representation, speed and sensory deprivation. Virtuality, he claims, is simply an excess of representation. As a pixelated construction on the screen, the image's acceleration and repetition as a function of light and time represents a mirrored

---

[30] Paul Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant* (Paris: Galilée, 2009), p. 81.

but distorted illusion of the real as representation (an "effect"), with the attendant danger of anti-representation translating into the truth of what is seen. For Virilio, this moving image is plucked out of nowhere (the anonymity of a search engine for example), void of history, context or chronology and yet its power (born only of the intensity of light) is that of the force of representation in the virtual, an image that the viewer willingly and submissively gives life to by participating in its transparent drama: "une apparence corrigée par une transparence".[31] Elaborating on this transfiguration, he writes:

> la focalisation du champ visuel nous détourne de la perception latérale, du plein champ qui donnait son ampleur courante à l'espace réel des abords de nos activités et provoque, dès lors, une désorientation de l'être-là [...]. Dès lors, au relief naturel de la perspective de l'espace réel, fruit du caractère binoculaire de la vision, s'ajoutent l' "effet du réel" des écrans.[32]

It is speed, therefore, and its acceleration of representation in the virtual that not only produces this distortion of the image but also, crucially, leads to "la disparition de la conscience en tant que perception directe des phénomènes qui nous enseignent sur notre propre existence".[33] The extent to which the mirage of pixelation can influence and determine thought and behaviour gives cause for Virilio (and Baudrillard among others[34]) to characterize the virtual revolution as a decline in human existence – a decline that can be measured in the trap that speed and light effect; representation as mirage lulling the senses into automatic pilot, erasing discernment and hierarchical space (both lateral and vertical), making us do things we would not normally do. He writes:

> regarder ce qu'on ne regarderait pas, écouter ce qu'on n'entendrait pas, être attentif au banal, à l'ordinaire, à l'infra-ordinaire. Nier l'idéal hiérarchique du crucial à l'anecdotique, parce qu'il n'y a pas d'anecdotique mais des cultes dominants qui nous exilent de nous-mêmes et des autres, une perte du sens qui n'est pas seulement pour nous une sieste de la conscience, mais un déclin de l'existence.[35]

Virilio's suspicion of digital technology is also framed within the parameters of proximity and distance.[36] In his article "The Illusion of Time", he highlights how

---

[31] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, p. 81.
[32] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, pp. 78–79.
[33] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, p. 119.
[34] See Baudrillard's discussion of this in his collection *L'Écran total* (Paris: Gallimard 1997).
[35] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, p. 44.
[36] The squared horizon is a metaphor used by Virilio to convey the collapse of distance and time. See my guest-edited special issue: "The Squared Horizon: Frames and Trajectories of Paul Virilio", *Cultural Politics*, 11: 2 (2015), 201–300.

an overexposed focus on the proximity of the moment runs the risk of erasing the necessity of distance as an ethical barometer:

> Should we not intuitively realise that these new electromagnetic technologies, in lending greater "depth" to the proximity of the moment, are ruining us and literally killing us? – the so-called "real" moment of television only ever being the instant of the sudden disappearance of our immediate consciousness, and the ceaseless deepening of the intensity of the present moment only ever being carried out to the detriment of that "intuition" of the instant.[37]

Virilio's response to the disappearance of consciousness and the decline of existence is not to return to Deleuzian representation. There is no invocation of personality, identity or Oedipal triangle here; no attempt to appeal to the ideology of lack that we see in Deleuze's critique of representation as belief system. If there is a nostalgia for an anteriority in Virilio, it is for the loss of the body and its senses as registers of physical and spatial contact. The production of the senses (or in this case their disorientation) is Virilio's anti-representative impersonal singularity – a gesture to the materialism of a "body without organs". Within this nostalgia for the body, Virilio draws a distinction between two types of being: the homogeneous ("parasensible") and the heterogeneous ("sensible"). He writes: "l'hétérogène succède à l'homogène […]. On n'a pas assez médité sur les causes profondes de l'évolution de la technologie – c'est créer à l'intérieur de l'individu une concurrence parasensible, un dédoublement de l'être au monde."[38] In this splitting of the self (similar to Barthes's material splitting of the self between pleasure and bliss[39]), Virilio explores the possibility of a relationality that chimes with my Ricœurean hybrid construction of "homo→ipseity". The homogeneous "parasensible" is being in thrall to the virtual image. It is being as homogeneity in need of a virtual prosthetic extension to supplement the lack that is generated in the "sensible".[40] The "parasensible" approximates the Ricœurean "idem" (including our "homo-" prefix and Bersani's notion of "homo-ness") where both, embedded in the virtual image as simulacra of representation, are constant in their repetition. Here, the virtual image sustains the mimesis of sameness and the illusion of non-relationality in "homo-ness". Critically, there is no other option for "homo-ness" not to adhere

---

[37] Paul Virilio, "The Illusion of Time" in John Armitage and Ryan Bishop (eds), *Virilio and Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 33. This chapter was published in English.

[38] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, pp. 60–77.

[39] Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953) and *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[40] Stiegler deals a lot with the idea of prosthesis and the effect it has on memory in the first volume of *La Technique et le temps*. See also Cassandra S. Crawford, *Phantom Limb: Amputation, Embodiment, and Prosthetic Technology* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

to the virtual image as a mirror of existence; to question this equation would be to invalidate the equivalence between "homo-ness" and sameness, and also expose a critical distance that might endanger the metaphoric foundation of this equivalence and its self-sustaining *mode d'emploi*. Bersani's "homo-ness" is therefore at home in cyber-dependence; it satiates desire for the same as continuity. Where Virilio and Bersani coincide in their thinking is in respect of the capacity of virtuality to hollow out all trace of humanity from the human figure, and for both this absence of a human and ethical distance is what, paradoxically, sustains the repetition and addictive function of desire.

However, Virilio privileges the heterogeneity of the "sensible" over the homogeneity of the "parasensible". The materialism of the heterogeneous "sensible" avails of discernment produced by the senses as an alternative, ethical bridge between the "idem" and the "ipse" – between self and other. The status of the Ricœurean self as a free-thinking, independent self, capable of enacting change (including mediation between free production and representation) is critical to our understanding of the self as an ethical, social and sexual "ipse" (including a "homo→ipse"). At the same time, the survival of this "ipse" is related to the temporality and spatiality of an "idem" (homo) whose desirous pursuit of sameness needs modification by the distancing effect of the "ipse", otherwise it becomes subject to the desensitizing effects of anti-representation in search of self-affirmation in the mimetic truth of the virtual image. It is the distance afforded by ipseity (ethically and as a philosophical appendix to self) that ensures that the virtual image/mirage remains an imposter in free production, a mere flux of light that carries no depth or knowledge of self.[41] Virilio sums up this mirage in the graphic representation of making love to technology: "Le plaisir solitaire procuré au spectateur de films pornos par le moteur cinématographique amorce déjà le raccourci qui s'amorce […]. C'est la disparition des intermédiaires humains et l'émergence d'une sexualité qui aurait directement affaire à l'objet technique pourvu que celui-ci soit moteur, vecteur du mouvement."[42]

As discussed, it is the distance in ipseity that signals to the "idem" ("homo-ness") a critical realignment between representation and free production. Distance grounds ipseity. It is in distance from self to and back from the other (virtual and

---

[41] Compare Baudrillard in this respect (see footnote 16). Roland Barthes has also commented on this. The concern with the image, and even more so the virtual image, in Barthes is twofold. Both concerns are ethical. In the first case, desire passes through the image ("la jouissance passe par l'image") and this has the effect of deactivating desire: "[l'image] déréalise complètement le monde humain des conflits et des désirs, sous couvert de l'illustrer" (Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* [Paris: Seuil, 1980], p. 182). Secondly, the "consommation" of images in late modernity has produced greater liberalism but also less authenticity in respect of values and beliefs. For Barthes, writing in the 1970s, this tyranny of the image merely served to reinforce symbolic French universalism at the expense of (sexual) difference.

[42] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, p. 90.

human) that the "ipse" intuits the innate human sociality of the self. It is also in distance where the need for and relation to the other is experienced as physical sensation and proximity. It is in distance that the reflective and ethical capacity of the "ipse" discerns the relevance of difference as relationality and is capable of finding a *juste milieu* between the pursuit of desire in virtuality and the heterogeneous human relationalities of a "sensible" "homo→ipseity". Distance does not disconnect but facilitates access between the present livingness of the "ipse" and impersonal situatedness in the "Réel" of anti-representation. It is no surprise that distance (temporal and spatial) is championed as a philosophical pre-requisite by Virilio:

> Quelle est la nature de l'excès de réel dont nous sommes si souvent les victimes consentantes ? De quel HYPER-RÉALISME s'agit-il là, sinon d'un éternel retour de l'interruption philosophique sur les perspectives à la fois temporelles et spatiales et donc, une remise en cause de l'importance vitale de *la profondeur de champ* comme de *la profondeur de temps* du présent et de toute représentation ?[43]

Conclusion

Foucault's endorsement of Deleuze's theory of free production (against its opposite of representation) sets the tone for my appropriation of this dialectic in the debate on virtuality. Drawing on Ricœur's "idem/ipse" as a philosophical response to the ethics of difference espoused by Foucault, I have outlined an alternative ethical "tactic"[44] based on relationality. The work of Larry Schehr and Paul Virilio helps to map ways forward in their respective theories of radical subjectivity, and of the image/mirage and contact. I want to return in conclusion to our Toyota commercial. The premise (and representational logic) of the clip is that the forward trajectory towards the "real" of the senses – with its coloured car and landscape, embodied and historicized in the voice of Piaf, emotionalized in the conscience of nostalgia and regret – is preferable to the dark, dematerialized metropolis of the virtual, where senses are numbed, where the body is impersonalized and singular in a way that all bodies are the same; indistinguishable and unspecifiable, where the skin,

---

[43] Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, p. 73.

[44] My use of the word "tactic" is informed directly by Michel de Certeau's definition in *L'Invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). I use the word as a form of resistance *in time* founded in the idea of relationality that challenges the hegemonic hierarchies of free production and representation: "La tactique est déterminée par *l'absence de pouvoir* comme la stratégie est organisée par le postulat d'un pouvoir […]. Les tactiques sont des procédures qui *valent par la pertinence qu'elles donnent au temps* – aux circonstances que l'instant précis d'une intervention transforme en situation favorable, à la rapidité de mouvements qui changent l'organisation de l'espace, aux relations entre moments successifs d'un "coup", aux croisements possibles de durées et de rythmes hétérogènes" (p. 63, my italics).

faces and genders of the commercial's characters are strangely interchangeable (a Deleuzian transsexualism). Deleuzian free production and Foucauldian de-individualization would challenge this trajectory (indeed subvert it), while Virilio's aesthetics would alert us to the mythic and tragic disappearance of the materiality of the body as representation and ethical register. This article demonstrates that it should not be a simple question of one or the other (the specificity of representation or the anonymity of free production in the virtual). The point, rather, is to look to an ethical realignment/another relationality between these two logics. The concept of "homo→ipseity" can help us conceptualize this realignment and negotiate a freer representation. The virtual has the potential, in its distance from representation, to preserve the historical legacy of 1968 desire as free production, untouched by the identity constructions of a future and politically hyperbolized ego.[45] It does this this by ensuring the desiring relationality of desire in its unspecific and transsexual iterations. Ipseity allows us (and I would argue requires us) to apply distance as a tactical adjustment to the virtual and digital revolution – not with a view to re-appropriating the cultural politics of specificity and representation – but to highlight the idea that in *distance from* specificity lies a space of ethical and philosophical agency where the value-added of otherness as social consciousness is measured.

Nottingham Trent University