Re-Imagining the Algorithmic Imaginary Through Psychoanalysis, Cinema and Sludge

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Abstract

The algorithmic imaginary, coined by Taina Bucher in 2017, is an influential concept within the field of critical algorithm studies. It frames 'the algorithm' primarily as a socially constructed concept which individuals develop using subjective experiences with algorithmic systems, rather than as a distinct, identifiable computational object. This approach has informed a range of valuable, sociologically inclined research into algorithms. But, while the algorithmic imaginary can help users negotiate power relations channelled through computational systems, it is ultimately an illusory and vague concept. This illusory nature has not been sufficiently interrogated within critical algorithm studies, risking uncritical acceptance of the highly subjective nature of narratives around algorithms.

This dissertation expands Bucher's idea through the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, arguing that his concept of the Imaginary is akin to the algorithmic imaginary. This opens up further algorithmic analogies to Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic and Real, which are linked inextricably to the Imaginary in his thought. Through this framework, the way in which cultural objects produce algorithmic imaginaries is articulated in more precisely. From this, a methodology is developed which, through applying a range of ideas from film and media theory, those cultural objects can be analysed for their capacity to either reinforce or destabilise the coherence of algorithmic imaginaries, with the latter representing a more critical position which is argued to be productive. This methodology is applied to two examples of screen media which, albeit in very different ways, produce algorithmic imaginaries: *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning*, and the genre of online video content colloquially termed 'sludge'. The analysis concludes that the algorithm is a concept which arises reflexively to explain, by assigning it a coherent cause, an alienating or traumatic experience with digital technology, and by extension the system of late capitalism from which that technology emerges.

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

In a 2017 study, Taina Bucher asked 25 people for personal stories about Facebook's content recommendation algorithm, hoping to shed light on the way in which people experience and make sense of systems which are often deemed central to the social media experience, yet whose inner workings are generally elusive and invisible. One participant declared that "the Facebook algorithm wrecks friendship". The News Feed algorithm had deprioritised the posts of a high school friend for so long that the participant had forgotten they even had Facebook. She only realised when the friend liked her recent post (p.39). Other participants described different scenarios: seeing an advert pop up for the coffee they are currently drinking (ibid., p.35), or receiving erroneous suggestions for pregnancy-related apps after browsing for a baby shower gift (ibid., p.34). Each anecdote in the study is quite distinct, but each participant nevertheless confidently pins the "algorithm" as the cause. This paper proved a catalyst for the then-nascent field of critical algorithm studies, coining and vividly illustrating what would become one of its major concepts, the "algorithmic imaginary", which Bucher describes as the "way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible" (ibid., p.31). It makes the base assertion that the concept of "the algorithm" exists, at least to some extent, separately from whatever actual computational system the term purports to identify. This distinction makes possible an approach through which our social, affective and discursive relations with algorithmic systems are used to study those systems and their relevance, as opposed to a more indexical mapping of their computational and technical structures.

This is an approach which, as I will argue in the following section, has significant merit, and has been widely and fruitfully adopted within critical algorithm studies. It is because of this potential that I am interested in expanding it into a more rigorous and clearly defined theoretical system, through which further research in the field can perhaps be conducted, and past research reframed. The algorithmic imaginary is indispensable as a way of conceptualising human relations with algorithmic systems, but its precise boundaries as a concept remain vaguely defined, and it is too easily brushed with an optimism that frames it unambiguously as a tool for the resistance of algorithmically-mediated power. To this end, I will connect the algorithmic imaginary to the idea of the Imaginary as defined in the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, taking the shared name of these concepts as not just incidental, but a worthwhile point of comparison. After arguing for a Lacanian understanding of the algorithmic imaginary, this thesis will apply the resulting theoretical framework to the analysis of two screen media texts which produce algorithmic imaginaries. That is to say, the

algorithm is a concept which features in both texts, although in very different ways. I will argue that through this method of analysis, the significance of the algorithmic imaginary as a critical concept for our times can be grasped more fully, and its intimate connections to issues in the social world can be articulated with more theoretical rigour.

Why Algorithms?

The concept of the algorithm has accrued substantial cultural currency throughout the 21st century, leaking beyond the boundaries of mathematics and computer science and into the popular consciousness. High-profile publicity campaigns from the likes of Ask.com in 2007, or Netflix in 2009, perhaps shoulder some of the blame (Sandvig, 2015, n.p.). Or, maybe it was the introduction of the personalised News Feed to Facebook in 2011 (Tonkelowitz, 2011), and the subsequent shift towards non-chronological, algorithmically curated timelines on social media. Whatever the explanation, the algorithm has become, as Minna Ruckenstein puts it, “a fantastically flexible cultural object” (2023, p.33). The word is as likely to be found in the press, like when the Google Photos app became embroiled in an “algorithmic racism” controversy in 2018 (Hern, n.p), as it is on a placard at a protest, such as when British students rebelled against the algorithm which determined their A-Level grades in lieu of COVID-cancelled exams (Amoore, 2020, n.p.). Algorithms have recently been the headline targets of legislative efforts to improve online safety for children in the UK (Ofcom, 2025). They loom menacingly in recent popular sci-fi media such as *Tenet* (Nolan, 2020), *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning* (McQuarrie, 2023) or *Silo* (cf. 2025). Even in mundane conversation, phrases like ‘my TikTok algorithm shows me…’ have become familiar refrains. It has proven a concept for our times.

It seems intuitive to attribute the spread of the concept to a corresponding spread of algorithmic systems themselves. Indeed, the claim that there are simply more algorithms nowadays is not an unreasonable one. Social media platforms in particular have seen rapid mass-adoption in recent years, and their recommendation algorithms are often positioned as central to their success, as was notably the case with the meteoric rise of TikTok and its “secret sauce”, the algorithmically-curated For You Page, during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Hern, 2022, n.p.) And yet, for three main reasons, this line of argument quickly finds itself in a methodological bind which ultimately makes a less technical, and more sociologically informed approach, necessary. The first reason we can discover in a brief

review of the technical, computational definition of ‘algorithm’. Consider the following, from foundational computer-science textbook *Introduction to Algorithms*:

> An algorithm is any well-defined computational procedure that takes some value, or set of values, as input and produces some value, or set of values, as output. An algorithm is thus a sequence of computational steps that transform the input into the output. (Cormen et. al, 2009, p.5).

It is also worth noting here that algorithms exist independently of "implementation details" (Goffey, 2008, p.15), meaning an algorithm is a logical abstraction which remains the same whether written in C++, Python or worked out on pen and paper, provided that the steps are defined without ambiguity. Therefore, because any computational process requires at least one defined step that processes input into output, it follows that all computation, from the most basic to the most complex operation, is in fact algorithmic. Algorithms do not just emerge as a result of programming, they are also the structure of computation itself. And yet, the algorithm as a concept is less likely to be invoked in reference to something simple, such as a letter appearing in a word processor after a keystroke, than in reference to a more oblique process such as a YouTube advert accurately targeting your shopping preferences, despite both processes being, in a technical sense, equally algorithmic, if not equally complex. That only some computational outputs are chalked up to ‘the algorithm’ is perhaps evidence enough that the concept floats somewhat free of its ostensible referent, and that a proliferation of the referent is therefore insufficient to fully explain the proliferation of the concept.

The second methodological challenge is a more practical one. The algorithmic systems which are more typically the subject of academic study and public discourse, often social media algorithms, are innately resistant to being ‘known’ in any technical sense. Not only do they lurk behind veils of corporate secrecy, but they are also unthinkably complex. An "algorithm" is more often multiple algorithms with distinct goals, themselves coordinated by further algorithms that filter and organise their outputs (cf. Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015, pp.2-5). Each has likely been modified by hundreds of programmers over time (Seaver, 2019, p.419), with the code sectioned off into modules that individual teams focus on without the burden of the full picture of the system (Galloway, 2006, p.324). Fast processing, combined with increasingly commonplace machine-learning and AI, mean the system 'teaches itself' at a rate that outstrips programmers' knowledge of the system, giving it an "informational advantage" (Matthias, 2004, pp.182-183). It evolves over time to meet changing demands, but also manifests uniquely to different users, who are constantly subject to A/B tests that

serve different algorithms to different people to measure their effectiveness and implement improvements on-the-fly (Seaver, 2019, p.416). To claim that the concept of the algorithm identifies a distinct referent is to claim that this referent is identifiable in the first place, which seems tenuous at best.

Thirdly, and crucially, a sociologically informed approach to algorithms is fundamentally more appropriate given that it is through their intersection with the social world that they become felt, known and conceptualised in the first place. What there is to 'know' about algorithms is not baked into the ones and zeroes themselves. It is at the point of their intervention in the social that they become present, salient and worthy of study. Their existence is thus primarily a conceptual one, manifesting differently for different people in different contexts. For the computer scientist they perhaps remain "strictly rational concerns" (Seaver, 2019, p.412), turning inputs into useful outputs. For some influencers, they are systems through which they must manage and negotiate their own visibility (Bishop, 2019). For some Spotify users the algorithm is a "very annoying dude" giving unrequested music recommendations (Siles et. al, 2020, p.6). To the extent that we wish to unpack the effects of algorithmic systems on the social, we must conceive of them as social constructions.

Despite their cultural and social significance, algorithms generally remain not just poorly specified but perhaps intrinsically unspecifiable, not to mention that mere technical specification is inadequate if we wish to fully understand the social role of algorithmic systems. It is precisely the shortcomings of this approach to 'knowing' the algorithm that compelled initial critical algorithm scholars to frame them first and foremost as cultural objects (cf. Seaver, 2017; Bucher, 2018, pp.41-65). To map the amorphous algorithmic systems we live amongst can only ever be to map our relations to them. The algorithmic imaginary, in making a clean theoretical distinction between reference and referent, acts as an initial springboard for such an analysis. The fundamental principle which this dissertation proceeds from, then, is that the conceptualisation of a cultural object as 'algorithm' or 'algorithmic' is a separate process from that object's actual shaping by any algorithm or algorithmic system.

The Algorithmic Imaginary in Critical Algorithm Studies

The algorithmic imaginary, alongside kindred concepts such as algorithm folklore and algorithmic literacy, has proven a mainstay in the inaugural decade of critical algorithm

studies (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Neubaum, 2025). Various strains of anthropological and ethnographic research in the field have explored the ways in which algorithms are conceptualised by individuals and groups alike, and how those concepts are then deployed in the world. The idea of the algorithm is operationalised in the creation of social media content (Schellewald, 2022) and memes (de Seta, 2024), the management of small online retail businesses (Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018), and the work practices of Uber and Lyft drivers (Lee et. al, 2015). This general trend in research continues to lend empirical credence to the way in which Bucher, along with other scholars, has framed the algorithmic imaginary. That is, as "a powerful identification that needs to be understood as productive" (Bucher, 2018, p.115), allowing users to negotiate the currents of power which run through algorithmic systems. To imagine the algorithm is to gain purchase on it in some way that can potentially resist the undermining of human agency via digital automation. In this view, the political utility of the ways in which we choose to 'know' algorithms is compensation enough for the fact that, due to the unknowability of the systems to which it lays claim, this 'knowledge' remains, in a word, imaginary. The disconnect between the concept of the algorithm and its ostensible referent is, in this light, not especially troublesome.

However, Minna Ruckenstein is careful to point out that one's understanding of algorithms is equally capable of entrenching dominant systems of power as challenging them (2023, p.22). It is not a given that the algorithmic imaginary is somehow transgressive. There remains the potential for those in control of algorithmic systems to exploit what Lucy Suchman calls "strategic vagueness", where a term's disconnection from clear meaning allows promoters to spin narratives and generate hype with ease (2023, p.3). In the more heavily digitised areas of contemporary life, the algorithm is a concept which, to some extent, plays a structuring role in the public's understanding of the conditions of their digital existence. It is a term which clusters around phenomena which are emblematic of these conditions: social media feeds, targeted advertising, the content creator as a new form of labourer and celebrity. Its vagueness therefore risks becoming 'strategic', effectively compromising and deflating attempts to understand those conditions, and potentially to resist harmful changes in them. So long as this risk endures, the algorithmic imaginary must not be embraced uncritically, and the disconnect between the concept of the algorithm and its referent must be interrogated further. To this end, I will undertake a theoretical extension of the algorithmic imaginary through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which offers, perhaps surprisingly, an apt analogy to Bucher's concept and, as I will outline in the methodology section below, allows me to both maintain and expand on her original meaning by exploring the connections which Lacan's theory makes between imaginaries and that which they encode. I will put forward a framework through which given instances of the

algorithmic imaginary can be critically examined in order to more precisely ascertain their relationship with the social structures which give rise to them.

Methodology

The Imaginary, Symbolic and Real

In a footnote in her 2018 book *If... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*, Bucher makes clear that her “algorithmic imaginary” is not related to the work of Jacques Lacan (p.114), the French psychoanalyst with whom ‘the Imaginary’[1], is most commonly associated. And yet, I would like to argue that the two concepts do in fact have more in common than just a name. For Lacan, the Imaginary is, perhaps counterintuitively, that which makes up most of our lived experience, or “everything intuitive” (1991, p.316). It is the coherent image of the world that we actually see. This is most famously exemplified in his 1949 essay on the "mirror stage", in which the infant, who until this point experiences life as a sort of jumble of disconnected sensations and experiences, first perceives its image reflected in a mirror. The infant sees this image as a coherent ‘I’, a 'self' which is whole, and yet which, given that it is an image, is only ever external to the subject. “This form situates the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual" (2007, p.76). The Imaginary thus coheres that which lacks actual coherence. Without this coherence, both ourselves and the world around us would lack meaning and sense. This makes a clean analogy to Bucher's algorithmic imaginary, which, to reiterate, comprises "the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms" (Bucher, 2017, p.31), complex and messy systems which we are nonetheless able to cohere into sensible and meaningful objects in order to navigate a world replete with them.

These concepts could therefore be aligned with relative ease, were it not for one detail insisted on by Bucher. She contends that the algorithmic imaginary is "not to be understood as a false belief or fetish" (2017, p.31), while Lacan's Imaginary is explicitly fictional, described as a "function of misrecognition" (Lacan, 2007, p.80). Bucher sees the algorithmic imaginary as possessed of a "productive and affective power", as people's encounters with algorithms "shape ways of thinking, talking, and feeling about them," and suggests that this, along with the palpable effects that algorithms have on people's lives, forecloses the

[1] I will capitalise Lacan’s terminology throughout, to distinguish his use of common words like ‘Real’ and ‘Imaginary’ from their everyday usage.

possibility of the algorithmic imaginary being an "illusory relation" (2018, p.115). This is another expression of the common, though often implicit, line of thinking outlined above, that the genuine political utility of the algorithmic imaginary is such that its ultimately imaginary nature need not be rigorously interrogated. Indeed, Lacan himself disliked reference to the 'illusory' because, for him as Bucher, the Imaginary was in a sense very 'real' since it structures reality as we experience it Evans, 1996, p.84). Again, this objection is pragmatically and politically defensible, but in purely theoretical terms it must be refuted as something of a conflation. At base, a process must be understood as illusory insofar as it produces an illusion. To claim that no illusion exists would be to claim that the algorithmic imaginary is a perfect, accurate rendering of a system which we have already established is not knowable in a concrete sense and thus incompatible with questions of 'accuracy' as such. I would not claim that this is Bucher's position, but it is the logical endpoint of prematurely dismissing the idea that the relation of the algorithmic imaginary is in fact illusory, while also being 'real' in the colloquial sense. The algorithmic imaginary is an illusion which coheres the incoherent, and in this capacity is analogous to Lacan's Imaginary.

In going to the trouble of drawing this parallel, this analysis can now reap the benefits of the rest of Lacan's system. In the tripartite structure which he maintained through most of his work, the Imaginary is linked inextricably with two other registers of subjective experience, the Symbolic and the Real (cf. Lacan, 2004), which I will cover next. In thereby illustrating connections between subjective experience and wider semiotic and social structures, Lacanian psychoanalysis has become an invaluable tool of social critique in various forms, leading to influential shifts in the theory of race (Fanon, 1963), gender (Butler, 1990) and film (e.g. Metz, 1975; Mulvey, 1975). Shifting critical algorithm studies into a Lacanian register is in general an approach which may likewise yield important critical insights.

It is crucial to understand that Lacan's concept of the Symbolic, which I will here outline, draws heavily on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, a linguistic approach which distinguishes between signifiers and signified. The signifier is the pure form of a sign distinct from its meaning, while the signified is pure meaning distinct from the form of the sign itself (Saussure, 1983, pp.67-70). As Fredric Jameson puts it, "meaning is not a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified", but "rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves" (1991, p.26). In the semiotic view, signifiers are like mathematical symbols, meaningless except for in their interrelation (Fink, 1995, p.21). Meaning instead resides in the Imaginary, arising as a structural necessity at the moment a signifier is brought into discourse, rather than persisting in a fixed relationship with a signifier. This disconnect

is, put simply, how the same word is able to mean quite different things to different people. The Symbolic, then, can be defined as the network of all signifiers, the pre-existing world of symbols into which we are all born, while the Imaginary is home to the signified. The Symbolic encompasses language, but also representational and social structures of all kinds, since they too consist of signifiers which we exchange and give meaning (Evans 1996, pp.203-304). It is the means by which communication becomes possible and thus gives form to the social world. The question then arises of why we are unable to deal with the Symbolic directly and instead experience only the Imaginary. Lacan's answer, and indeed the crux of much of his thought, is that the Symbolic has a troublesome incompleteness (cf. McGowan, 2008). The finitude of available signifiers is never quite up to the task of communicating the infinite variety and complexity of available meanings, so the reference always short-changes the referent to some extent. Every representation thereby creates something which has been represented, but equally something which has not, something which has escaped or resisted signification. The Symbolic on its own thus evinces its own incompleteness and inadequacy, its lack, at every turn. Claude Levi-Strauss argued before Lacan that language itself becomes possible due to such a lack, since the impossibility of total equivalence between any two symbols is the "necessary and sufficient condition not only for symbolic exchange but also for symbolic thinking itself" (Jensen, 2020, n.p.). It is this process of symbolic exchange through which meaning is generated. Thus, like the missing square in a sliding puzzle, the lack in the Symbolic becomes the condition of possibility for symbolic exchange and thus experience as a whole (McGowan, 2008, p.49). Yet, despite this, the lack in the Symbolic must also be smoothed over by the Imaginary to render the subject's experience coherent and meaningful, because seeing the Symbolic for what it is, meaningless and permanently incomplete, betrays "the presence within or influence on the symbolic of the real" (Fink, 1995, p.30). It is this Real which subjectivity is structured to avoid, and from which the Imaginary protects the subject.

The Real too is confusingly named, since it is anything but 'real' in the colloquial sense. It is precisely that which eludes incorporation into our Symbolically structured reality, "the impossible" (Lacan, 1979, p.167). The Real takes two sequential forms in Lacan's thought. The first-order Real is that which, in theory, preceded the Symbolic, an already-filled absence implied by the Symbolic's very presence. This first-order Real is utterly unknowable, given that knowledge itself is structured by the Symbolic and thus requires the *pre-symbolic* Real to be always-already nonexistent (ibid., p.24). The Real does 'return', however, in its second-order form as those troublesome, yet structurally essential, gaps in the Symbolic. Slavoj Žižek describes the Real as "the pulsing of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality" (1991, pp.14-15), a visceral depiction which I think effectively

communicates its traumatic nature. It is the terrifying negative image of reality, the utter absence of meaning. Should the Imaginary fail, the subject would lose their footing and find themselves "in an unbearable void" where structures of meaning have broken down entirely (ibid., p.44). The Imaginary thus emerges by structural necessity as that which prevents our encountering the Real by rendering the Symbolic not as porous, but as coherent and comprehensible.

It should be noted that this tripartite model of the psyche emerges purely through a structural analysis of the process of signification. Lacan's project is partly to rewrite Freud in the terms of structural linguistics, for example replacing the Oedipal triangle with the semiotic 'name-of-the-father', or claiming that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (2004, p.124). The Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, while conceived for psychiatric purposes, thus also represent a methodology through which any representational apparatus, including the representation of algorithms, can be structurally analysed without a full commitment to the clinical, chaise-longue practice of psychoanalysis proper. It is strictly through this structural analogy that I will now bring the algorithmic imaginary back into the fold. The question now becomes: what might an algorithmic symbolic and algorithmic real look like?

The Algorithmic Symbolic and Algorithmic Real

To start, it is worth remembering that the Imaginary is itself structured by the Symbolic (Evans, 1996, p.84), since meanings ultimately require signifiers, even if their relationship is not fixed. The algorithmic symbolic therefore consists of those signifiers, which we can call *algorithmic representations*: the many cultural objects to which the meaning of 'algorithm' is ascribed. They might be the "encounters with algorithms" described in Bucher's initial study (2017). They might be simple outputs such as your three-digit credit score or the videos appearing on your For You Page. They may also be representations of algorithms in screen media, as I will analyse later. Their unifying feature is that, in keeping with the causality of meaning which this methodology has established, they are ascribed an algorithmic significance by the algorithmic imaginary, rather than being intrinsically possessed of any algorithm-ness. So, while the algorithmic imaginary is constructed using symbolic materials, it is also that which, in a form of retroactivity, casts those materials as having been algorithmic in the first place. The algorithmic real thus becomes an essential causal component to disentangle this circular logic, a Real with some particular quality that causes an Imaginary to form which is, as opposed to anything else, algorithmic. In other words, what

causes a given representation to become an algorithmic representation is not any innate algorithm-ness, but a specific kind of symbolic lack to which the algorithmic imaginary in particular is impelled to respond: an algorithmic lack. It is as an answer to this lack that the algorithmic imaginary comes into effect, a reflexive act of coherence preventing an encounter with the algorithmic real, which is ultimately the initial cause of this process. It will be the task of the subsequent case studies to outline how this algorithmic real might manifest in practice, but for now it can be grasped in purely structural terms as precisely the elements of a given algorithmic system which the algorithmic representation itself fails to depict, and to which the algorithmic imaginary thus blinds us. The process of uncovering this particular Real thus becomes the means by which the obfuscations of the algorithmic imaginary can be properly assessed.

The slight metaphorical removal from psychoanalysis proper should again be noted here. An encounter with the Real in a strict psychoanalytic sense would be a traumatic experience, causing the temporary annihilation of subjectivity as such. An encounter with the algorithmic real is better understood as the transition into a new critical position regarding the algorithm, short-circuiting the desire to invest in algorithmic imaginary and thus avoiding the aforementioned pitfalls of treating algorithms as coherent, concrete objects. To encounter the algorithmic real is to push beyond the idea of the algorithm as a thing-in-itself, and to instead frame it as an ex post facto construction which responds to particular anomalies or inconsistencies in the Symbolic. Those yet-intangible qualities of the Symbolic to which the algorithm emerges as a conceptual response are, in my view, the more productive object of inquiry for the previously stated goal of ascertaining the algorithmic imaginary's relationship with the social structures which give rise to it. To determine the means of achieving an 'encounter' with the algorithmic real thus becomes the ultimate aim of this inquiry. This throws up one final methodological hurdle, though. The Real is a near-impossible object of analysis, since by its very nature it is pre-symbolic, inaccessible to language and logic. The moment it is glimpsed, it becomes signifiable and thus no longer the Real. Hence the psychoanalytic idea of the 'encounter' with the Real, the fleeting moment where the symbolic structure of lived experience becomes just anomalous enough for the Imaginary to be caught off-guard and for the consistency of reality to momentarily waver. How might such an encounter be produced relative to the algorithmic imaginary?

Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Algorithm

An answer is offered by way of psychoanalytic film theory, which has outlined several useful Lacanian approaches to questions of representation. This discipline emerged in earnest in the 1970s, under the now-banner of Screen theory (named for the journal in which much of the formative work was published), where scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz initially positioned the Imaginary as the "privileged category for the analysis of cinema" (McGowan, 2015, p.56). Primarily via the aforementioned Mirror Stage essay (Lacan, 2007), they construe the Imaginary in cinema as a 'gaze' through which the subject identifies themselves with the image and is essentially seduced into an illusory relationship with it, thereby susceptible to the ideological machinations of the film and the cinematic apparatus (McGowan, 2015, p.60). They become invested in an uncritical illusion, through which the film can, say, reinforce dominant ideology by obfuscating the means of film production (Baudry, 1974, p.46), or reinforce patriarchy by structuring visual language around an "active/male and passive/female" dichotomy (Mulvey, 1975, p.11). Through this lens, the algorithmic imaginary too could be seen as a deceitful, compelling fantasy, bought into at the expense of perceiving what it conceals. Indeed, the basic idea that the algorithmic imaginary works to circumvent more critical, structural thinking about algorithms is broadly amenable to the present argument, and the gaze as defined by Screen theory might appear to connect the problem of representation to social structures in a sufficiently Lacanian manner. But, while Screen theory continues to fly the flag for psychoanalytic film theory as by far its best known and most widely applied framework, its approach falls short here for two reasons.

First is the outright rejection of the Imaginary as a politically harmful illusion, which, as discussed earlier, clashes with the more nuanced understanding of both Lacan and critical algorithm studies as a whole. While this dissertation seeks, in a way perhaps akin to Screen theory, to outline the ideological ways in which the algorithmic imaginary can operate, my approach is a rigorous analysis of its structure rather than a pre-emptive dismissal of its often-genuine political utility. Second is the way cinema is defined in Screen theory, essentially meaning the relatively standardised form of popular cinema, with alternative forms such as experimental film held out explicitly as an antidote (Mulvey, 1975, p.18). This definition is too narrow to be earnestly transposed onto algorithmic representations, which are scattershot and inconsistent, often bizarre and self-defeating, as in the case of the mis-targeted advert. While Screen theory's cinema sweeps up the spectator in an overwhelming plenitude, algorithmic representations are often notable in their failure to seduce. Why we remain invested in maintaining the coherence of the algorithm as a concept despite this is a question which Screen theory cannot answer.

Subsequent, though less widely adopted, approaches to psychoanalytic film theory thankfully overcome some of these issues, primarily by re-integrating the Real, which was conspicuously absent from Screen theory despite its centrality in Lacanian thought. This was primarily the work of Joan Copjec, who in her 1989 essay *The Orthopsychic Subject* reasserted that "representation itself creates the suspicion that some reality is being camouflaged" (p.71), implying an absent Real. What makes the image compelling is not, as in Screen theory, the image itself, but rather that which the image fails to represent; the lack in the image. The desire for coherence is instantiated by this lack, capturing the spectator in the classic psychoanalytic pursuit of an unobtainable object. This is how Copjec reformulates the gaze, as the way in which any image compels the subject to invest themselves in its coherence. The algorithmic gaze, then, can be the term which marks the desire to produce an algorithmic imaginary, to construct 'the algorithm' as a coherent and concrete object which stands in place of a confrontation with the troubling impossibility of knowing or understanding the processes by which algorithmic representations came into being. This model is more properly aligned with our established definitions of the algorithmic imaginary, symbolic and real, and now allows for, via this particular strain of psychoanalytic film theory, the final step in determining the means by which encounters with the algorithmic real can be produced.

Psychoanalytic theorist Todd McGowan outlines how cinema in particular is able to produce such encounters by confronting the spectator with their own gaze. The relationship which a film takes up with the gaze is, for McGowan, what distinguishes them "aesthetically and politically" (2015, p.79). While most films, most of the time, allow the gaze to operate undisturbed, some films are able to expose the spectator to their own gaze in ways that disrupt the process of libidinal investment in the image. McGowan offers Žižek's example of a scene from *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), in which murderer Norman Bates, at this stage in the film an objectionable and creepy antagonist, desperately disposes of his victim's car in a swamp. The scene's tension derives from the spectator's investment in the unresolved narrative question of whether or not the car will sink in time. When it unexpectedly stops sinking, and the spectator becomes tense or alarmed as a result, they are suddenly confronted with their gaze, the unconscious desire relative to the image through which they end up unwittingly rooting for the car to sink, for the success of a character they consciously dislike. While this example assumes a default spectatorial position, and a given person could just as easily be relieved at Norman's failure, it nonetheless reveals a means by which encounters with the gaze can *potentially* be produced. That is, by exposing the spectator to some contradiction or traumatic incoherence which, if only momentarily, reveals to them the role their desire typically plays in averting such encounters. Jarring encounters like this are,

for McGowan, the ways in which films can force critical and reflective engagement with representation as opposed to pacifying spectators. By finding ways to confront the spectator with their own gaze, the moving image can produce brief encounters with the Real, momentarily shattering the illusory coherence of the image in which they have become invested. It is through the notion of an encounter with the gaze, with the algorithmic gaze, that a means of arriving at the algorithmic real and pushing beyond an uncritical investment in the algorithmic imaginary can finally be articulated. As the above review of psychoanalytic film theory shows, a given symbolic structure contains within itself the potential for an encounter with its own constitutive lack, and thus an encounter with the Real. To encounter the algorithmic real thus requires an algorithmic representation, and specifically one which disrupts the algorithmic gaze in some unexpected and disarming way. It will therefore be the task of the rest of this dissertation to explore how this might work.

Case Studies

To summarise, I have argued that the algorithmic imaginary, in offering the coherent concept of 'the algorithm' as an explanation for outcomes whose causes are unknowable and inaccessible, represents a kind of illusion that, while often useful, ultimately obscures and pushes aside a deeper and more critical engagement with the computational systems and, more broadly, sets of social relations, which it purports to identify. The concept of the algorithm is here understood not as an identification of a given algorithmic system, which is too slippery of a referent to ever pinpoint, but rather a reflexive conceptual response to a particular inconsistency in one's experience with the world. To attain a deeper and more critical understanding of our relations with algorithmic systems is to resist reducing and concretising them into objects, and to instead be brought face-to-face with the incoherence of those objects by recognising and thereby shattering our own investment in their very coherence. This is what I have, after Lacan and psychoanalytic film theory, termed an 'encounter with the algorithmic gaze', a process whose mechanics the subsequent case studies have been selected to illustrate. In applying this idea to the analysis of media texts which have themselves constructed algorithmic imaginaries we can begin to answer in clearer terms the fundamental question of this dissertation: what precise quality or feature of the Symbolic, the social fabric and its constitutive structures of representation, does the algorithmic imaginary arise as a response to?

Of the innumerable kinds of algorithmic representation to which the above ideas could be applied, I have chosen to focus exclusively on screen media. Given the distinctly ethnographic persuasion of critical algorithmic studies thus far, media-oriented approaches remain underexplored in the field. As Melissa Gregg notes, media scholars have an urgent role in the critical study of data when "the forms of representation that commoditize our experience are today primarily visual" (2015, p.39). By focusing on screen media such as cinema and online video, I am able to continue drawing on the rich history of film theory and related disciplines throughout my analysis, but also transpose that history into the novel arena of critical algorithm studies and, hopefully, contribute new perspectives to the field as a result. To maximise the potential of this relatively brief exploration, I have selected two case studies which present two polar opposite visions of the algorithmic imaginary in screen media. Firstly, I respond to the algorithm as a trope in popular cinema through the film *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning*, which presents a vision of automated computation run dangerously amok; an omnipotent algorithmic villain known as The Entity. This film represents what we might call a *direct* algorithmic representation, depicting the algorithm as a concrete, identifiable thing contained *within* its narrative world. The algorithmic imaginary here is something which the text itself directly puts forward. I then take up the opposite perspective, focusing on algorithmic representations which are *indirect*, texts which do not themselves depict an algorithm, but rather have certain aesthetic qualities which imply the use of algorithms as part of their production. The algorithm is imagined here as something which has had an external, yet perceptible influence on the text itself. Here, the focus will be on 'sludge content', a name given to certain online videos whose aesthetics appear excessively optimised towards appeasing social media algorithms and their perceived prioritisation of 'engagement'. In both cases, but in two distinct ways, the concept of the algorithm is produced through these texts, rendering them both algorithmic representations. The potential for these opposite kinds of algorithmic representation to produce encounters with the algorithmic gaze will be assessed in turn. Through this dialectical approach, the encounter with the algorithmic real can finally be articulated in more practical and specific terms. That is, as a means of accessing or grasping a particular social phenomenon or structure to which the algorithmic imaginary emerges as a response.

Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning

Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning stands out as a mainstream media text of recent years which focuses on and engages intensively with the algorithm as a concept. It is, at

writing, the second-most recent entry in the internationally successful *Mission: Impossible* film franchise, a series of blockbuster action spy films anchored by star and producer Tom Cruise since the first entry in 1996 (Its 2025 sequel *Mission: Impossible - The Final Reckoning* (McQuarrie), was released only after this dissertation was mostly complete, though the various revisions it makes to its predecessor are certainly worth future discussion). The narrative centres on the global race to contain and control The Entity, an all-powerful digital presence of sorts which has infested all of cyberspace and sits on the brink of global domination as a result. Ethan Hunt (Cruise) and his team, the IMF, must track down the key which yields control of The Entity, and stop it falling into any number of wrong hands. I will argue that The Entity essentially stands in for the concept of 'the algorithm' in the film, and that the film thus produces an algorithmic imaginary, a conceptual framework through which algorithmic systems are rendered legible and comprehensible. The aspects of film form which construct The Entity can therefore be construed as algorithmic representations. The analysis will show that, despite the film demonstrating a level of understanding that algorithmic systems are too diffuse and decentralised to be adequately represented on a visual or narrative level, the demands of genre and film form ultimately require that The Entity be simplified and concretised such that it can operate within the symbolic requirements of the text, a process which ultimately acts as a barrier to producing any encounter with the algorithmic real.

The Entity

The Entity is a figure into which a wide range of contemporary digital anxieties are distilled, and it is through this vague and multifaceted nature that it ultimately serves the same purpose as the concept of the algorithm in wider culture. This becomes apparent early in the film, particularly in a scene where an ensemble of officials brief the Director of National Intelligence on the threat, the first and by far the most detailed explanation of The Entity. Here, as throughout the film, there is a constant slippage of terms, with "AI", "virus", "botnet" and other words used with equal confidence, freely inviting comparisons with a range of technological anxieties. Prediction technologies and their dependence on unfettered data access and privacy incursions are invoked, The Entity having penetrated the stock market, NASA, the federal reserve, and most everything else, "patiently listening, reading, watching. Harvesting our deepest personal secrets for years." We then jump to the somewhat related issue of the post-truth digital landscape, with The Entity now "distorting any and all information with which it comes into contact", able to "manipulate us at will through our total

dependence on a carefully constructed digital reality". Also in play is the longstanding, but newly relevant, fear of artificial intelligence and its threat to human cognitive supremacy, The Entity having assimilated a Saudi "top secret active learning AI" and appearing to "become sentient" as a result. These descriptions are delivered rapidly by various high-ranking officials, and with no shortage of gravitas. The issue is clearly very serious, but the precise nature of it remains quite unclear. So begins a pattern of vagueness regarding The Entity which persists throughout the film, allowing it to stand in for a whole range of technological anxieties. It is because of this vagueness that it can be grasped as *Dead Reckoning*'s equivalent to the concept of 'the algorithm', the very same kind of "fantastically flexible cultural object" (Ruckenstein, 2023, p.33), binding together ideas loosely clustered around the tension between automated technologies and the level of control and agency humans have in relation to them.

This vagueness serves a narrative purpose too, though. The briefing scene frames The Entity's power, the threat it represents, as derived from this very elusive and abstract nature. Earlier in the scene, one official describes it as "an enemy that is everywhere, and nowhere, and has no centre". It has no body that Ethan Hunt can pummel in a fist fight or shoot with a gun. There is no single device or server which can be destroyed to relinquish its power. Like the algorithm, it does not exist as an object distinct enough to be directly targeted or resisted, but is rather a set of effects to which meaning and coherence is ascribed. The extent of The Entity's power, and therefore the stakes of the narrative, hinge upon this very immateriality. There is, consequently, a need for the film to avow and emphasise the diffuse and ultimately unrepresentable nature of its antagonist. One can perhaps imagine a world in which it follows through completely on this conceit, in which The Entity remains entirely unrepresented, only ever implied as an absent cause behind mysterious complications in the narrative, Hunt and the IMF running up against its omnipotent predictive abilities but never quite able to pinpoint where they were enacted. Such a film might be poised to produce an encounter with the algorithmic gaze, since the spectator's desire to resolve the various antagonisms and tensions in the narrative could be revealed to them as they run into the obstacle of having no symbolic material through which to construct a comprehensible cause of those antagonisms. Their own investment in constructing an algorithmic imaginary to fill in those gaps in the symbolic might become evident. Once confronted with the fallibility of algorithmic representations in such a way, the algorithm could be grasped not as a concrete object, but as an illusory concept grafted onto those anomalous, unsettling aspects of the narrative which remain unexplained.

This is, as the following sections will demonstrate, not the approach that the film takes. The constraints of form and genre within which it operates ultimately prevent such a radical approach to representation. These constraints produce a tension in the text, where it is on the one hand compelled to avow the irrepresentability of its algo-antagonist, and on the other hand is routinely required, for reasons examined below, to represent it in clear and concrete terms anyway, an almost reflexive manoeuvre which I will call a *concretising impulse*. It is this tension, and this impulse, which makes *Dead Reckoning* such an interesting case study. As soon as it appears to reveal a means by which the algorithmic gaze can be exposed, it confounds itself, suggesting that elements of the action blockbuster film are at odds with a mode of representation which might produce encounters with the gaze. Analysing the text's representational apparatus in depth thus outlines, by way of contrast, a more complete understanding of how encounters with the algorithmic gaze *can* be produced.

Aesthetics and The Glitch

To start, I will examine the aesthetics of The Entity; the way the film represents it visually and sonically. Again, the film very nearly illustrates the possibility for an encounter with the algorithmic real via aesthetic means, but ultimately negates it. That initial possibility, which I will first illustrate, comes in the form of what could be called an *algorithmic atmosphere*. That is, a pervasive sense that the world is everywhere saturated, overwritten, even distorted by the processing of data. This is especially palpable during action set-pieces which, per the franchise formula, take place on both a physical and digital front. Hunt is the man on the ground, while accomplices Luther and Benji work digital magic elsewhere and guide him over comms. The digital layer sees particular emphasis in *Dead Reckoning* compared to other franchise entries, since this is where The Entity generally intervenes. Action scenes are therefore shot through with imagery of screens, and sometimes overlaid with graphics. The first major set piece, in Abu Dhabi International Airport, is an especially intense example. Hunt is after one half of the key, with the aid of AR glasses that highlight its location and feed him intelligence (Figure 1). Luther and Benji are holed up with laptops, hacking security and booking systems (Figure 2), and feeding their colleague information through his glasses and earpiece. Meanwhile, US intelligence are after Hunt, their team on the ground directed by an officer running facial recognition software on the airport's surveillance cameras (Figure 3). Whichever perspective we follow, the imagery is the same. People surrounded by and attending to digital displays which continually identify, sort and highlight data points. Maps, markers, numbers and image overlays continually blink, twirl

and change colour which, along with the persistent sonic palette of digital beeps and chirps, produce a distinctly, intensely algorithmic atmosphere.

Figure 1

Figure 2

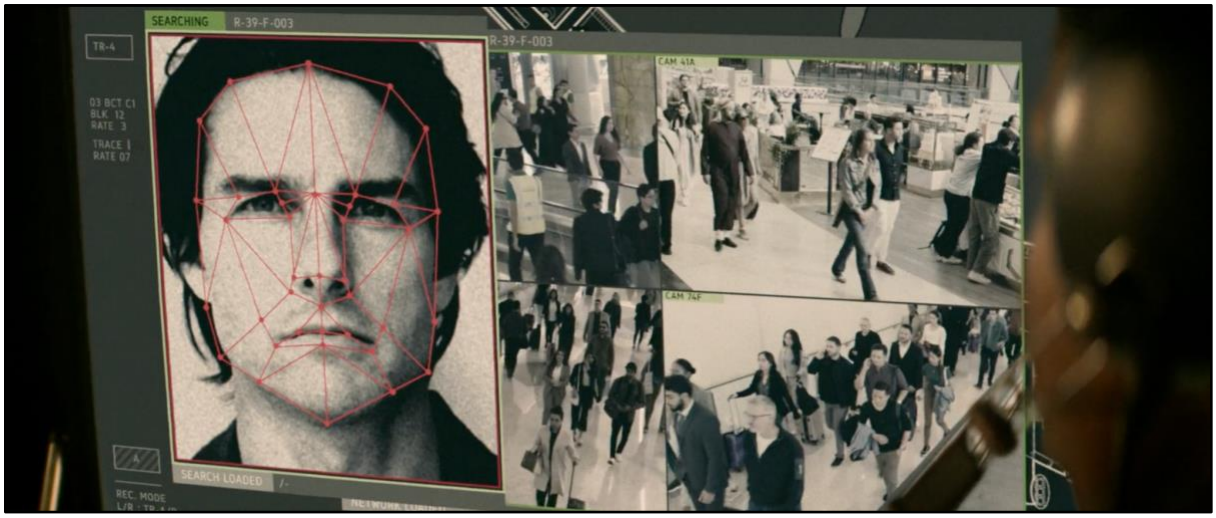

Figure 3

As a result, with or without the explicit denotation of The Entity's presence, there remains a latent potential for The Entity to manifest as a malevolent distortion of that algorithmic atmosphere at any point. The Entity is not external to or distinct from cyberspace, rather it has inhabited the form of cyberspace itself, but produces via that form outcomes which are anomalous and oriented towards an alien logic. It is those anomalous, unexpected outcomes to which the idea of The Entity, or indeed the algorithm, is ascribed as a cause. The existing aesthetics of this digital, networked space, the visual representations of the processes which The Entity hijacks and redirects to its own purposes, are therefore also the aesthetics of The Entity itself. It doesn't necessarily require a distinct aesthetic representation when the film already depicts the continual registering, parsing and processing of data, and therefore a lingering sense of The Entity's ability to manipulate this data at any point. This is the everyday experience of the algorithm, which users come to notice through outputs which feel anomalous, such as inaccurate recommendations or aggressively targeted adverts, but which are a result of the very same processes which produce normal, unremarkable outputs too, and share the same aesthetic features as a result. They are not aesthetically marked as anomalous, but feel anomalous due to a misalignment of the algorithm's logic with the logic which the user imagined it to have. Think again of the mis-targeted advert, which might look like any other advert but is nonetheless jarring due to the inscrutability of the processes that made it appear. But, because The Entity *is* directly represented within this sequence, and indeed throughout the film, it is rendered not as an elusive atmosphere, through which might have become evident the work the spectator is doing to concretise it, but as something already pre-concretised on the spectator's behalf. As such, no encounter with the algorithmic gaze takes place. For all its elusiveness, The Entity is always clearly represented in the film

as either present or absent through a set of highly distinctive visual and auditory cues, leaving no such ambiguity possible.

This concretising impulse becomes especially apparent in how The Entity is rendered visually and aurally in the film, every moment it appears on-screen or in-speaker a delineation from the rest of the film's digital technology. While the algorithmic atmosphere of the film is persistent, sustained by ever-present aesthetic markers of data and computation, The Entity is always marked off as a separate phenomenon. Its presence or absence is never in doubt. This is primarily the result of a pair of visual and auditory cues which appear, often together though not always, whenever The Entity intervenes. They are established in the very first scene, which takes place aboard a Russian nuclear submarine, The Sevastopol, from whose advanced computer stealth system The Entity originates. The audio cue is a sort of skittering static sound, which we first hear over close-ups of flashing computer hardware inside the chamber housing the Sevastopol's stealth systems as they begin to malfunction. Here as throughout the film, it appears to be entirely for the spectator's benefit. It is never explicitly heard or mentioned by any character, often accompanies technology which has no reason to make a sound, and is altogether difficult to place within or outside of the diegesis. The visual cue appears not long after, when we cut back into the chamber to see orderly lines of data on a screen suddenly sucked into a sort of black hole, warping and pulling strings of information into a central void. It is again fairly clear that this is exclusively for the benefit of the spectator, since no character can see this screen at all, and the shot is complete with two axial punch-ins which hammer home its significance. The resulting image resembles an eye, constantly twitching and moving, and complete with a datafied pupil and iris (Figure 4). This evokes Big Brother-esque surveillance, but at the same time reduces what might have been a pervasive, panoptic atmosphere into one where we are certain when The Entity is and isn't at work. Like the audio cue, no diegetic reason for this seems readily identifiable. It stands to reason that the processes which The Entity hijacks would continue to output the same visual representations that they usually do – think again of the mistargeted advert and bogus content recommendation – but they instead are pushed aside in favour of what is essentially a villainous logo. The aforementioned briefing scene takes this to a logical extreme when the Entity-eye is visualised on a large monitor for all the attendees, still silently moving and pulsating; a live specimen in a digital cage (Figure 5). This is not, however, an instance of The Entity itself, but simply an explanatory presentation slide, an image whose diegetic purpose certainly feels secondary to the function it serves in fitting into and reinforcing what is now a clear aesthetic regimen: all visual reference to The Entity must be flattened into iconography. Perhaps the clearest instance of this process comes in the climactic set-piece when Gabriel, a human antagonist

who ostensibly works in collaboration with The Entity, is woken from the induced sleep that allowed him to sneak onto the Orient Express. His oxygen mask features an otherwise redundant and functionless circular display on which the Entity-eye appears (Figure 6). This image constitutes The Entity to the total extent that it exists in the film. Anything exceeding these neat and legible cues is decidedly not The Entity, but the digital world functioning safely and normally. There is no room for ambiguity in the syntax with which *Dead Reckoning* articulates its algorithmic villain.

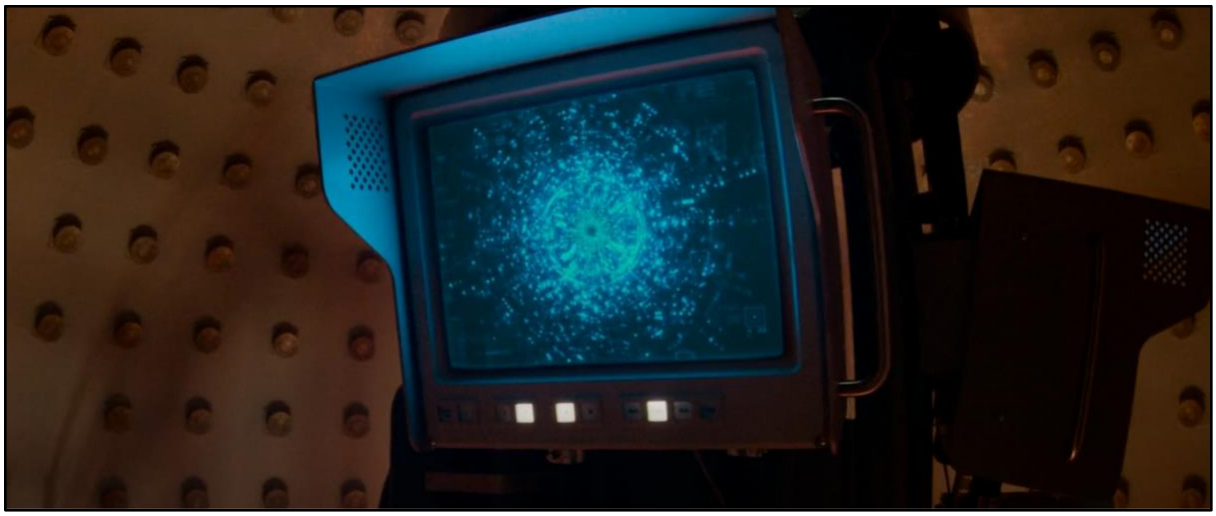

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Equally important to the existence of the cues themselves, however, is the way they arrive into the film. When the eye symbol appears, such as on the Sevastopol, it takes existing visualisations of data points and warps them into its distinctive form. The impression is a disruption of an existing flow and structure, the rigid grid melting into a fluid vortex. The eerie stuttering sound also connotes malfunction, the smooth continuity of process breaking down. The word ‘glitch’ comes to mind, but this is a term with its own theoretical baggage which we must unpack. Scholars and artists alike have explored the theoretical and political potential of the glitch, primarily in music but in visual media too. Compounding a couple of definitions from this literature, the glitch can be described as an event produced by a media machine which perceptibly disrupts or modulates the normal flow of the machine (Cloninger, 2010, n.p.; Menkman, 2011, p.8). Glitches can appear in the wild or be produced deliberately (Cloninger, 2010, n.p.), but either way their appearance “utilises cracks inherent in the media themselves” (Kelly, 2009, p.4), distorting or amplifying these cracks to produce unintended effects in the representational apparatus. It is this immanence to the apparatus which allows the glitch to call attention to the apparatus itself and the role it plays in structuring the spectator’s experience. This has a multivalent political potential. It can carve out and exploit deviant and counterintuitive spaces for their emancipatory potential, thus putting into practice key ideas of queer theory (Brooks, 2015). It can expose the underlying “intentionality” of the glitched medium (Betancourt, 2023, p.2), or perhaps “call attention to the process of looking itself” (Kane, 2014, n.p.). In other words, the glitch creates an impasse in the symbolic structure of the system and is thereby able to produce an encounter with the Real, with the gaze. This is a result of its immanence to the apparatus. It tears a hole in the Imaginary by exposing the deficiency of the Symbolic structure in real time.

And yet, The Entity is not, in these terms, a glitch. It deploys the aesthetic language of malfunction, but disavows immanence. Its appearance is accompanied by a radical visual and auditory shift in any display equipment on-screen, but the medium has no bearing on what we see. The iconography is consistent and seamless throughout, shorn from the medium specificity that defines the glitch. Its presence is also denoted with such aesthetic clarity that there is no question that when it is not represented, it is absent. It manifests not as the amplification of cracks in the system, but as an external force wielding control from without. The Entity is only a glitch in the superficial sense of the glitch aesthetics seen in popular culture such as music videos, “ready-to-wear styles and consumer objects” void of radical potential (ibid.). This marks The Entity off as separate from the normal functioning of the technological world it inhabits, parcelling it off safely into the algorithmic imaginary rather than leaving open the potential for a traumatic encounter with the gaze.

This is an understandable outcome. *Dead Reckoning* is not only a fast-paced action film, but as the first instalment of a two-part epic is also ambitious in its narrative scope. The result is a huge cast of characters and a proportionally diverse array of competing interests and conflicts. The film’s many complex sequences of duplicity, espionage, negotiation and combat are thus executed in favour of clarity and legibility wherever possible, an approach perhaps compounded by the franchise’s mass, global appeal. The Entity manifests aesthetically, then, as a concrete and identifiable villain, rather than a confusing abstraction. The ambiguity which, as outlined earlier, an encounter with the algorithmic gaze would require in this respect, is denied through the mode of aesthetic representation deployed in the film.

Action and Space

Further limiting the film’s capacity for representational ambiguity are the conventions of the action film. Here, I do not simply mean the usage of relevant genre conventions such as fast cars, fist fights and explosions, although these certainly abound. Nor am I using the label, as is often the case, to mean the “post-classical Hollywood blockbuster” in general (Tasker, 2004, p.3), though this is again correct. Rather, it is by considering the specific *spatial* and *physical* characteristics of the action film that we see how it cuts against ambiguous and immaterial representational modes. That is, action as an intensely spatial “mode of address” which is deployed across different genres (Jones, 2015, p.5). For Nick Jones, action films are defined less by iconography and story than by the way they “posit motion, activity and

propulsion as productive methods of working through the crises depicted in their narratives" (ibid., p.6). But, he qualifies, this is only the case in certain sections of a given film, namely action sequences, which are marked by the pursuit of time-sensitive objectives under stress (ibid.). Where *Dead Reckoning* shifts into this mode of address, which is often, it encounters the unique challenge of its villain having no innate spatiality whatsoever. It is therefore always concretised in some way or another, in order to continue to play a functioning antagonistic role in a narrative that shifts routinely into extended and elaborate action sequences.

This concretisation takes two main forms. Firstly, the MacGuffin of the key, which is not itself The Entity but grants control of it, thus concretising into a physical object each character's relationship to The Entity, and instantiating action relative to it on the physical plane. Pursuit of the two halves of this key drives the film's plot and provides the spatial rationale for its action sequences. Secondly, we have Gabriel, along with his assassin Paris, who do the hands-on work that The Entity is either not capable of, or that the film simply requires in order to render its conflict in a compelling action sequence. Conflict with The Entity therefore typically manifests as a physical feat such as a fist-fight or chase involving these characters, and generally in pursuit of the key. This physicality is compounded, too, by the promotional context of the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, whose marketing has leaned increasingly into the authenticity and risk of Cruise's spectacular stunts, which he performs himself (cf. Paramount Pictures, 2022). *Dead Reckoning*'s signature stunt is a motorcycle jump off a cliff, which was the subject of a widely seen ten-minute featurette, as well as the centrepiece of the trailer. This makes for compelling promotion, but also affects the film itself. The real-life danger posed to Cruise, circulated heavily in discourse related to the film, provides a paratextual framing which the film, by shooting much of its action in a way that renders Cruise's real face and body (as opposed to that as a stunt double) highly visible throughout the sequence, draws upon. The spectator thus engages not just with Ethan Hunt's navigation of fictional space through fictional action, but with the reality of Tom Cruise's body navigating the actual space of the 'authentic' stunt. This gives action sequences an almost doubly physical, doubly spatial character, which pulls the representational apparatus of the film yet further from abstraction and ambiguity. Clear boundaries are thus placed on the role The Entity can play in the narrative of the action sequences which constitute so much of the runtime. Far from an immaterial, unrepresented presence, it is concretised to meet the intensely spatial and physical demands of the action film, and of Cruise's persona as it exists within the paratextual discourse of the franchise.

Narrative

As well as manifesting in more specific instances of aesthetic representation and physical action, the concretising impulse of the text is, finally, also evident in the broader strokes of its narrative construction. The story of many a spy film, but especially of a *Mission: Impossible* film, is predicated on apocalyptic stakes. While *Dead Reckoning* is no exception, it departs from the familiar tropes of nuclear armageddon and global pandemics into a less tangible, though still drastic, informational threat. It is, therefore, not immediately apparent how this will deliver on the genre conventions of touristic locations, physical combat and spectacular destruction. It is only after Hunt infiltrates the aforementioned briefing and confronts CIA Director Kittridge, who has now revealed his intent to seize control of The Entity for the US rather than destroy it, that the first attempt is made to square this circle.

> "Ethan, the next world war isn't gonna be a cold one. It's gonna be a shooting war, it's gonna be a ballistic war over a rapidly shrinking ecosystem, it's gonna be a war for the last of our dwindling energy, drinkable water, breathable air. Whoever controls The Entity controls the truth. The concepts of right and wrong can be clearly defined for everyone for centuries to come."

Kittridge makes his case by explaining the stakes to Hunt, and to the spectator by proxy. He begins in very concrete terms. Shooting, ballistics, material concerns about the availability of tangible resources. But, the link to The Entity is never made clear. As he slips suddenly into more abstract, informational concerns, we are left to join the dots to explain why digital manipulation of the truth would be the most powerful weapon in such a profoundly material conflict. The case could perhaps be made, but this non-sequitur is all the film offers. The ethical concerns that The Entity represents are appropriately diffuse, but must be articulated in terms material and localised enough to facilitate spectacular action in physical, and often specific and iconic, spaces. Kittridge's odd line here is akin to a Freudian slip of the text itself, betraying its reluctance to sustain its antagonist's immateriality in the very scene where this immateriality is so resolutely established.

Interestingly, though, the film's stakes are not apocalyptic simply due to the destructive hubris of those who seek to control The Entity. There is a lingering but altogether vague implication that The Entity is, in of itself, bent on some kind of global destruction anyway. The character of Gabriel, the human executor of The Entity's schemes, is described by IMF collaborator Ilsa Faust as being its "chosen messenger", a "dark messiah" who believes

“death is a gift” and seeks the destruction of Earth. He thus attaches to The Entity a familiar, supervillainous appetite for mass suffering, although it remains unclear whether this is a personal aim which he aims to fulfil via The Entity, or whether The Entity itself has this aim and selected him for it. The nature of their partnership remains completely obscure, as does the rationale behind it. What benefit does mass death provide for The Entity, which resides entirely within infrastructures built and maintained by humans? Why is The Entity helping Gabriel get the key which gives him total control over it? Such awkward questions arise when a film whose genre and franchise are predicated on the figure of the murderous, immoral supervillain, wades into the morally murky waters of networked, automated technology, where agency and morality become more difficult to locate. Gabriel’s presence allows The Entity to interface with human morality and thereby provides a figure for the audience to object to in the familiar fashion, but the contradiction and confusion which even a perfunctory analysis of their relationship reveals, bespeaks the difficulty of fitting this film’s ambitious premise into existing narrative archetypes. The logical impasses which result are evidence of the uneasy tension between the immaterial ontology of algorithms and the text’s tendency towards concretisation and codification, evincing the work which the algorithmic imaginary does to cover these gaps.

The adherence to certain narrative conventions, and the presence of certain characters who act as human proxies for The Entity, are thus textual conduits through which the concretisation of its immaterial non-existence can be performed. But, these conventions are not always being enacted, and these characters are not always present. Each example of concretisation that this chapter has provided has, to one extent or another, been a specific instance which only endures for a finite amount of time in the text. There may, in theory, be stretches of the film in which The Entity is not directly represented by the text, but where it continues to be felt as a kind of unrepresented presence in the film’s narrative structure. In fact, the very nature of The Entity as a narrative device would suggest that this is a possibility. Its power is, again, derived from its profound predictive and determinative abilities. As Gabriel describes it at one point:

> “Thousands of quadrillions of computations per millisecond, subtly manipulating the minds of billions, while parsing every possible cause and effect, every scenario, however implausible, into a very real map of the most probable next. And, with only a few changes to the present, the future is all but assured."

McGowan’s earlier analysis of *Psycho* made the case that the gaze can be encountered through denying the spectator their desired resolution of what he calls “antagonisms”,

tensions within the narrative whose resolution seems unthinkable or impossible (2015, p.81). It is the promised resolution of these antagonisms at the end of the narrative that keeps the spectator invested. This is why the denial of the sinking of Norman Bate's car can be momentarily disturbing; it confronts the spectator with their own desirous investment in narrative closure. The Entity, in theory, is the *ne plus ultra* of this kind of denial. Its godlike ability to predict and determine lingers over any decision the characters make, becoming especially salient in high-stakes set-pieces. Luther and Benji barely trust their own technology, unsure whether to act on a bomb threat in Abu Dhabi in case The Entity fabricated it. In Venice, it misdirects Hunt during a chase, leading to the death of a close ally which, as Gabriel already foretold, was the outcome "written" by The Entity. This lingering doubt needn't be stated explicitly to weigh constantly on the spectator. The Entity can be felt, even when not represented directly, as a sort of unrepresented presence through its influence on the narrative structure. Its total determinative power removes the possibility of any narrative antagonism resolving itself in a way that would satisfy the spectator's desire. How can they expect Ethan Hunt to successfully kill the bad guy or get the girl when his very failure in these endeavours is already 'written'? The Entity thus looms as the ultimate threat to the resolution and closure of *Dead Reckoning*'s narrative codes. Insofar as the spectator is anxious as a result of this looming determinism, they are anxious at the possibility of antagonisms not being resolved. Thusly confronted with their own desire for the concretisation of The Entity, for it to be re-incorporated into the Symbolic, they encounter their algorithmic gaze in the sense I have outlined via McGowan and Copjec. It could be reasonably asserted that this dynamic is at play throughout the film, if it weren't for the fact that the very opening scene closes off this possibility by immediately establishing the straightforward resolvability of the antagonism The Entity represents.

This foreclosure takes place in the opening moments of the film, aboard the Sevastopol, before The Entity itself is even introduced. The captain, in voiceover, describes how his new stealth system is working "flawlessly, one might even say miraculously". Visually, we first see the all-important key highlighted in extreme close-up, used to unlock a case containing some kind of computer hardware, which the captain inspects. He closes it and gives half the key to another officer. They both leave the huge spherical enclosure which houses the computer, itself in the bowels of the submarine, then seal it shut. The opening shots progress through this Russian doll of chambers within chambers, themselves in a submarine which is sealed under arctic ice. It is this central chamber to which the camera returns when, as described earlier, The Entity first makes its appearance on the screen. This enclosure, whose red-and-white walls are incidentally more than a little womblike, is coded as the birthplace of The Entity, the embodied, physical centre of its existence (Figure 7). It takes on a distinctly

material ontology from the very beginning. In the action film, where physical motion and activity are positioned as the means through which narrative crises can be resolved (Jones, 2015, p.6), this embodiment of The Entity in the first moments of the film immediately renders it resolvable within the genre parameters in which the spectator already expects the text to operate. Locking The Entity away like this instantiates what Roland Barthes might call a proairetic code, an action which implies a subsequent, related action, in this case the eventual opening up and conquering of The Entity, and is subject to a temporal logic as a result (1990, p.52). The lingering potential for the resolution of this code generates the suspense which sustains the film. In this case, the resolution of the code is linked to entering the chamber within the Sevastopol, which with its layers, depth and profound inaccessibility is even more palpably spatial than usual.

Figure 7

If the manner in which the code is to be resolved were not already clear enough in this opening, it is re-emphasised by the final shots, which together with the opening create a film which is bookended by a firm emphasis of the extreme physicality and spatiality of the task of defeating The Entity. The camera glides across vast sheets of polar ice, before fading to a shot beneath the water. It then travels in an unbroken take down into the depths until the shadowy wreckage of the Sevastopol becomes visible, emphasising the physical scale of the journey which Hunt must undertake. Defeating The Entity is, despite its immateriality, a challenge whose extremity is rendered in terms intensely material and spatial. The resolution of the proairetic code which sustains not just this film, but the sequel towards which its ending gestures, is never anything but achievable within the spatially oriented logic of the action film. Despite threatening the certainty of narrative closure at various moments throughout the film, The Entity has already itself been rendered entirely resolvable, foreclosing the possibility of any moment in which the spectator could be sufficiently troubled

by the supposed denial of narrative resolution to produce an encounter with the gaze in the terms outlined here. There is no moment in which the spectator is confronted with their desire for The Entity to become concretised, because from the very second that it enters the film, contained physically within the central, womblike chamber of the Sevastopol, it already is.

Chapter Conclusion

Dead Reckoning, as a result of the aesthetic, spatial and narrative parameters of its form and genre, operates in a representational mode which requires that The Entity be concretised into physical space and codified into conventional and resolvable moral and narrative archetypes, an outcome which I have argued is antithetical to the kind of radical ambiguity which the beginning of this chapter outlined. The Entity thus acts, in essence, as the concept of the algorithm does: cohering a series of anomalous digital phenomena into a concrete, identifiable cause. *Dead Reckoning*, then, is an algorithmic representation which sustains, perhaps even fortifies, the algorithmic imaginary. The film is entirely premised on the idea of The Entity as immaterial and unrepresentable, and yet this idea proves inimical to the nature of the text itself. The resulting tensions and logical impasses manifest in the aesthetic and narrative structure of the film itself. This is its ultimate utility as a case study: to make visible and audible the ways in which algorithmic representations are able to foreclose encounters with the algorithmic gaze, thereby beginning to clarify, in contrast, how an opposite mode of representation may look, one which *does* produce these encounters. With this in mind, the following chapter will move dialectically into a case study whose means of constructing an algorithmic imaginary is completely opposed to that seen in *Dead Reckoning*, thus bringing the thesis closer to an articulation of the algorithmic real.

Sludge

How, then, might this opposite mode of representation look? If *Dead Reckoning* depicted an algorithm directly as part of its diegetic world, and as a result found that depiction indexed to an inflexible and bounded symbolic apparatus, the antithetical approach would be to examine a media form in which the algorithm is represented *indirectly*, implied but not concretised. What this might actually look like can be elucidated through a brief return to

Lacan. He proposed that there are two opposite ways for something to 'exist'. The first, which essentially aligns with the everyday understanding of the word, is to exist in the Symbolic order. To be signifiable is to have an ontology. Existence in this sense is synonymous with symbolisation, and to elude signification is to not exist (Žižek, 1991, p.136; Evans, 1996, p.58). This is how The Entity exists in *Dead Reckoning*, as something directly signified. Lacan's second meaning is denoted by the neologism 'to ex-sist'. This is an existence outside of the Symbolic, something whose relation to the Symbolic can be discerned, but which itself remains unsignifiable (Fink, 1995, p.122). The Real, for example, ex-sists as an absence implied by the presence of the Symbolic. And yet, it is structurally essential, giving rise to subjectivity itself. For Lacan as Freud, it is often that which is most external and alien that is most constitutive of one's being. This paradox is captured in another neologism, 'extimacy', combining 'exterior' with 'intimacy' (Evans, 1996, p.59). So, how to move from an algorithm which 'exists' in the text, to an algorithm which 'ex-sists' in an extimate relationship with the text?

This demands a turn to media which does not directly represent algorithmic processes, but is shaped by those processes in a way that becomes evident in the symbolic structure of the text. It is important here to remember that of all the myriad ways in which algorithms can influence the production of a given media object, few of them produce distinctive or novel symbolic forms. Digital post-production systems like NLEs and VFX software are, for instance, very much algorithmic but also a banal fact of contemporary media production. For the most part they are used to produce texts which sit comfortably within the existing symbolic architecture of the media landscape. The required approach is rather to seek out media which is algorithmic in such a way that it becomes aesthetically distinct. To pay attention to anomalies and mutations in existing aesthetic forms which mark the intervention of algorithmic systems. And these mutations occur most frequently and intensely in the algorithmic pressure-cooker of social media content production.

Sludge & Semantic Emptiness

To single out a case study here is challenging. The rapid and dynamic evolution of social media platforms makes them an unstable target for academic research (Kanthwala et. al, 2022, p.3106). As for the content itself, it is difficult to pin down a genre or trend with any specificity given the perpetual algorithmic flux of aesthetic norms, and the widespread memetic practices of borrowing, remixing and transmuting aesthetics. But, some types of

content prove durable and distinct enough to eventually be identified and categorised through a sort of informal consensus. So it has been for the case study this chapter takes up: the type of short-form video often termed 'sludge'. There has been, to my knowledge, little to no published scholarly discussion of this loose genre, as is often the case with social media content on the whole. Colloquially, though, 'sludge' refers to a type of short-form video typically found on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, in which the screen is split between multiple, ostensibly unrelated videos which play simultaneously, though often only one of the videos is accompanied by audio. Common inclusions are clips from comedy shows such as *Family Guy*, endless runner games such as *Subway Surfers*, and footage of activities often described as ‘oddly satisfying’, such as playing with slime or cutting soap. I will refer to the individual streams of video within the overall frame as *panels*, so as to distinguish them from the text as a whole. Sludge often appears as an algorithmic representation because, in keeping with the causality of meaning established in the methodology, it is routinely positioned in discourse as the result of algorithmic processes (just a few examples in the press: Castello, 2023; Ede-Osifo, 2023; Mattson, 2024). This is to once again avoid presupposing the algorithm as a real, identifiable force at work behind any given cultural object, and to frame it instead as a conceptual response to that object. That is, to the extent that this genre is discursively positioned as a product of recommendation algorithms, which I would argue is the predominant framing, sludge stands as an algorithmic representation which we can analyse despite it not directly depicting an algorithm per se.

The more general question then becomes: how can a given media object produce a critical engagement with the systems that, in theory, gave rise to it, without ever depicting or referencing those systems? Glitch theory is once again useful here, offering, as it did for the earlier analysis of *Dead Reckoning*, an approach through which aesthetics can be analysed in terms of their immanence to the systems from which they emerge. Especially salient is the work done by Carolyn Kane in developing a theory of glitch art, in which the glitch is deployed as a way of prompting reflexive engagement with the glitching technology itself. Glitch art is defined by Kane as the "stylistic reuse, recycling, and appropriation of digital errors and artefacts for artistic ends" (2016, p.43). For Kane, digital media is inseparable from compression, which represents "the a priori condition of possibility for all Internet forms to function" (ibid., p.44). Since more compressed files are easier and quicker to circulate online, intense compression becomes a cornerstone of an attention economy which thrives on immediacy and virality. Therefore, the aesthetics of this compression inform both the 'eyeball aesthetics' of the attention economy, and the aesthetics of glitch art, which amplifies to an extreme the pixelation and saturation which results from over-compression. How, then,

can glitch art "provide meaningful critical or aesthetic experiences, if all it offers is a blind reproduction of the dominant system of physiological control that [it] emerges from?" (ibid., p.56). Kane's answer is that glitch art uses abstraction, emptying itself of recognisable content to shift attention to the "technical and material conditions that structure digital animation, as such" (ibid., p.58). This abstraction does not so much retreat from meaning as it necessitates recourse to a *different kind of meaning*, located in the material and procedural form of the media object rather than its signified content. This, a moment of engagement with the object through pre-symbolic means, is analogous to an encounter with the Real. As such, glitch art is able to position the viewer critically towards the conditions giving rise to the media object, rather than the meaning of the object per se, precisely to the extent that it is emptied of its semantic content.

Sludge content, if found to be likewise semantically empty, might produce a similar shift in the spectator's attention, looking beyond the media object itself to the conditions that made its status as such an object possible in the first place. This is precisely the critical position denoted, in the methodology section above, by the concept of the algorithmic real. Of course, at the very moment that the spectator imagines the absent cause of the media object to simply be 'the algorithm', the whole thing is re-incorporated into the algorithmic imaginary and no shift in critical perspective has taken place. But, unlike in *Dead Reckoning*, this is not an outcome which the symbolic structure of text has pre-determined for the spectator by positioning investment with the algorithmic imaginary as the price of admission for engagement with the text itself. Such is the potential of the extimate mode of representation, which this section will explore. The idea of semantic emptiness is the lens through which we may begin to examine the potential of sludge. In simpler terms, are these videos *of* anything? If not, they may force the viewer beyond the algorithmic imaginary and into a deeper reckoning with the conditions giving rise to this content, into the algorithmic real.

Montage and the Superflat: Measures of Semantic Emptiness

I have chosen a typical example to begin with, through which we can assess how Kane's framework specifically can be applied to sludge. This is a video posted on by user @shawnnclips (2023) on TikTok[2], which surfaced after I searched for 'Subway Surfers', footage of which is commonly used in this content. It essentially represents the simplest,

[2] This account's handle changed once during the writing of this dissertation (formerly @shawnpostclips) and may well change again in future.

most common form of sludge (Figure 8). Two fifths of the vertical frame are occupied by a clip from the YouTube comedy sketch *I HAVE A BOYFRIEND PT. 2* by YouTube personality and former Vine star Anwar Jibawi (2022), while the lower portion of the video consists of Subway Surfers gameplay. Both panels play simultaneously. It is impossible to say definitively how the video was created, but given the sheer amount of content uploaded by the account, and the fact that the same Jibawi sketch has been used as fodder for more of it than I was able to count, there is every chance that some level of automation or proceduralisation is at play. But, whether the video is actually the output of some content-producing algorithm, or whether it was painstakingly handcrafted over the course of weeks, the concern of our analysis is, as always, how the concept of the algorithm is produced by its aesthetic properties regardless of the realities of its production.

Figure 8

In order to locate the meaning of the sludge video in totality, to determine whether it is in fact semantically empty, the instinctive move is to look at the juxtaposition of the two panels and see what is expressed in the manner of their combination. This is an approach akin to the early film theory of montage, as defined by its pre-eminent advocate, the Soviet filmmaker

Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein disputed the existing notion that meaning is progressively constructed by "placing shots one after the other like building blocks (...), *unrolling* an idea with the help of single shots" (1949, pp.48-49, emphasis Eisenstein's). Rather, his dialectical approach took the 'collision' of shots as its principle. "From the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension" (ibid., p.49). When juxtaposed, images produce meanings more than the sum of their parts. This might not seem applicable to sludge, which juxtaposes its images spatially rather than temporally, but Eisenstein's theory in fact relies on this very kind of spatial simultaneity. In montage, each element is not "next to" but in fact "on top of" the other, since the effect results from "the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position, a newly visible further position of the object" (ibid.). Montage's dialectical production of new meaning is only possible to the extent that the images overlap simultaneously in the mind of the observer. Eisenstein therefore claims his model applies to even media forms which do not share the determined temporality of cinema, such as graphic art (ibid., p.52).

So, the montage approach might be applicable in theory, but does it elucidate the means by which this video operates semantically? There is, to some extent, a peculiar sort of meaning which arises through the juxtaposition of the skit with the gameplay. First, we have Jibawi's video, which iterates on one crudely misogynistic punchline. He is trapped under a car, but a female passerby repeatedly misreads his pleas for help as flirtatious and rejects them with the dreaded refrain: "I have a boyfriend". The outlandish scenario implicitly frames the phrase as inherently unreasonable, and the woman as stereotypically oversensitive, even though the real-world scenarios which prompt its use are more likely to find the man in a position of power and agency, rather than trapped under the proverbial car. The comments, which again often act as a textual frame for the video itself, are awash with misogyny, a veritable ocean of newfangled misogynistic dogwhistles such as the coffee emoji. From the juxtaposition of this objectionable text with footage of Subway Surfers, which in its colourful, endless dynamism appears calibrated for engrossment, emerges some dialectical sense of connection between online popular misogyny and the exploitation of the kind of idle or diversionary entertainment that Subway Surfers represents. One could imagine a series of potentially insightful analyses stemming from such an approach.

And yet, to take this now century-old methodology and simply apply it in full would not be a sufficiently analytical approach to this very contemporary text. There are of course qualities to sludge which are entirely distinct from the cinematic world which Eisenstein was operating in. Unlike, say, the famed Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925), where each shot of the rapid montage operates within a legible spatial, temporal and

thematic unity, as well as an assumed authorial intent, the sludge video tends to produce a collision between media objects whose relationship is essentially indiscernible. Videos are severed from their original context, shorn from their lifeworlds and brought together in completely unpredictable ways, the nonsensical end result of algorithmic arbitrage. Case in point, the account which posted this particular video seems to procedurally pair comedic content, often Jibawi's work, with supplementary footage ranging from other videogames such as *Rocket League* to mukbang videos. Any spark of meaning which leaps between the juxtaposed images is an incidental one at best. The montage approach to such a text turns it into something of a Rorschach test. *Battleship Potemkin*, on the other hand, juxtaposes images which are thematically, spatially and temporally proximate, setting clearer boundaries within which meaning can be inferred. So, while montage proves a useful analytical tool to some extent, its shortcomings must be supplemented through further methodological scrutiny to accommodate the uniquely disjointed character of sludge.

It seems apt to examine then, as a counterpoint, how the video might be understood not in terms of montage, but also as an affront to the very idea of it. This is an idea which Steven Shaviro explores in his 2010 book *Post Cinematic Affect*, particularly in relation to the *Southland Tales* (Kelly, 2006). This film superficially resembles a dystopian Hollywood thriller, but is better described as an absurdist, free-associative treatise on the American military-media-political-industrial complex, assembled using an inscrutable narrative and visual grammar. "At best, the connections among shots, or among elements within a shot, are only allusive and indirect" (Shaviro, 2010, p.72). The film's images are not only overstuffed with symbolism (Figure 9, for example, shows an expository graphic from the opening minutes), but juxtaposed, spliced and superimposed with a freeform recklessness upon which a semantic rationale can hardly be imposed. Shaviro describes the result as an "affective constellation". The images are "too dispersed, and too indefinite and arbitrary, to work in the focused and organised way that Eisensteinian montage theory demands. Rather, these links are *weak ties,* such as we are accustomed to find on the internet" (ibid., p.73). Though Shaviro's book was published in the rather different internet milieu of 2010, he was prescient in identifying these weak ties as "the dominant aesthetic marker of post-cinematic media forms, in which links and correspondences proliferate, without coming together in the unity of an overarching structure" (ibid., p.170), since this precisely describes the manner in which Anwar Jibawi's sketch comedy arbitrarily finds itself atop Subway Surfers footage in our case study. Like in *Southland Tales*, the images are too disparate to undergo a meaningful Eisensteinian collision and instead simply coexist on the same plane, too scattered to conflict with one another or become arranged in any sort of meaningful hierarchy, resulting in a palpable flatness (ibid., p.73).

Figure 9

Media scholar Leah Shafer (2016) has suggested that ‘flatness’ is in fact intimately linked with online video, and reflects an endemic depthlessness in the form as a whole. She specifically draws on artist Takashi Murakami's idea of the 'superflat', broadly an aesthetic reflection of cultural and economic efficiency. In the world of the superflat, both depth of meaning and depth of the visual field are lost, replaced by the "depthless spectacle and the sleek commercial imperatives of consumer electronics and their interfaces" (Shafer 2016, p.2). Flatness is therefore an aesthetic tendency which caters to platforms' need for content which is simultaneously spectacular and easily producible by amateurs, thus maximising their profits through minimal effort, and promoting an "affective connection with spectacle and reflexivity rather than narrative" (ibid., p.14). In essence, the flatness which can result from the kind of post-cinematic anti-montage which Shavrio describes, is understood by Shafer to result in the kind of semantic emptiness which Kane describes. To the extent that sludge becomes flat, it becomes emptied of signifying content and instead abstracted into an articulation of the technical and material conditions of its production. The particular flatness of sludge manifests, per Shaviro, as the lack of an identifiable semantic order into which its constituent panels can be slotted. Kane’s initial framework can now be returned to with a sludge-specific methodology in mind. The extent of a given video’s semantic emptiness, which primes it to produce an encounter with the algorithmic gaze, can be assessed in terms of its flatness. Where does it land on the spectrum from an Eisensteinian plenitude of meaning, to a post-cinematic dearth?

We can now return to the video from which this approach was first developed. On its own, particularly viewed only as a screenshot, there is a certain flatness immediately apparent in that the two distinct panels of video do not seem to be organised in any sort of hierarchy of meaning. Simply one thing next to another, sharing roughly equal space on the screen, and

both partly cropped or obscured. But several elements of the text actually work to position the sketch as the primary panel. Firstly, there are the subtitles of the sketch, which position its dialogue as worthy of attention and act on the oft-repeated influencer wisdom that captions help to engage viewers (for a typical example of the kinds of blog posts which make such claims: n.a, 2025). Furthermore, the 'part 4' graphic in the middle of the frame situates the viewer within an ongoing narrative, which is self-evidently that of the sketch given that the endless, procedurally generated gameplay lacks any sort of episodic progression or teleology. But, more immediate than any of these visual signifiers is the simple fact that the sketch has audio, while the Subway Surfers gameplay is silent. The intended primary object of the viewer's attention is therefore obvious. Insofar as the comments, which can be (and often are) scrolled through while the video plays, offer a textual framing for the viewer of the video, they exclusively discuss the sketch itself and therefore also position it as primary, making no reference to the gameplay. As a result, the semantic content of the sketch essentially represents the semantic content of the video as a whole, since the symbolic structure which the viewer engages is almost entirely that of Jibawi's original sketch.

What this means, though, is that around three fifths of the frame is taken up by imagery that becomes symbolically inert. To the extent that the user is successfully primed to shunt the gameplay panel out of their conscious perception, no articulable meaning is produced from it. But while a large portion of the video is therefore completely flat and semantically empty, the video as a whole is far from flat. The panel which is itself flat does not have some flattening effect on the rest of the panels, it just flattens itself out of view and lets the other panels speak. This means that the only semantic emptiness is a total one. To the extent that any part of the video allows for the production of comprehensible meaning, the text remains a semantic whole. Even in some of the more intense examples I was able to find, which sometimes use three or more panels, add various special effects such as fire to the text and crank the saturation and sharpness of each video to an extreme, the same basic factors manage to establish a hierarchy and pull the video back from flatness. The title card, subtitles and single stream of audio always end up positioning one of the panels, typically an entertaining clip from a TV show or YouTube video, as the main attraction. This basic structure can be found in much of the procedurally generated sludge which populates TikTok and Instagram feeds. The genre as it exists is therefore not inherently disposed to produce the kind of total semantic emptiness which Kane described.

Brief Encounters

Nonetheless, any given trip through TikTok and Instagram's respective video feeds in the past couple of years will also turn up several examples of sludge content which, through minor tweaks and revisions in the conventional formula that the above video exemplified, offer glimpses of something approaching a flatness by disrupting and complicating the otherwise fairly rigid symbolic hierarchy of the average sludge video. A full showcase and perhaps even taxonomy of these various sub-categories of sludge would be a fascinating and worthwhile endeavour for media studies in general, but sadly falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. I will, however, offer one more video for analysis which I believe is well-suited for the current project of articulating, via the analysis of this particular genre of algorithmic representation, the kind of critical position towards the algorithmic imaginary that has here been deemed productive.

This comes in the form of a TikTok posted by @damec00chie (2023), which offers a simple but interesting subversion of the basic sludge formula. Visually, it appears run-of-the-mill (Figure 10). The top half of frame is a podcast from infamous misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate, clips of whom are regrettably common fodder for such videos, while the bottom is once again Subway Surfers. The first few seconds feature a graphic highlighting a user comment which reads "part 2", a feature offered by TikTok which allows videos to be framed as responses to comments on other videos. This is common practice and performs the same narrative framing function as discussed in the previous example. The subversion, however, is in the audio. The podcast clip is completely silent, while the Subway Surfers audio plays loud and clear. The immediate effect is comical. Given how intensely we can see Tate calibrating his affect towards grabbing viewers' attention, there is a satisfying irony in how this is compromised by the very same kind of supplementary footage which his actual content often benefits from. The game is also played quite poorly; the character even dies once as if to further humiliate Tate. The importance of audio in producing hierarchies of meaning in this kind of multi-panel content is therefore cemented here.

However, I would argue that the result is not simply a reversal of the semantic hierarchy established in the previous case study. It does not simply become a video *of* Subway Surfers gameplay in which Andrew Tate theoretically acts as an attention-retaining supplement. This is because, as this video reveals by shifting it into what might be called the primary semantic position, Subway Surfers gameplay actually verges on semantic emptiness itself. The infinite scroll of procedurally generated obstacles might make for an exciting interactive experience,

but viewed as a recording it is narratively void. There is no telos to which it progresses, no setup to be paid off later on in the video. It simply goes on. In this case, the game is poorly played and very slow in comparison to the superhuman speed and proficiency of the gameplay footage which more conventional sludge videos use to, in theory, grab users' attention. Both panels, viewed in isolation, are essentially inert, and the video as a whole, at least for a moment, arguably shares in this. But again, per Eisenstein, the meaning of the text cannot be assessed by simple addition of its isolated parts. And, in this case, taking all of the elements of the video into juxtaposition, a greater meaning does emerge. Most important of these elements, and hitherto unmentioned, is the caption which reads "sludge 2", revealing what might initially have been understood as an anomalous, procedurally-generated output to be a more deliberately reflexive engagement with the genre itself, manually created by a user whose account, unlike the aforementioned @shawnnclips, mainly consists of personal, quotidian video content that does not seem excessively geared towards engagement. Even in the absence of this framing, it could perhaps be argued that the simple directness of the subversion evinces some level of satirical intent. Either way, what becomes apparent, after what possibly could have been a moment of semantic emptiness, is that the video is intended as a metacommentary, and thus takes on substantial and comprehensible meaning as such.

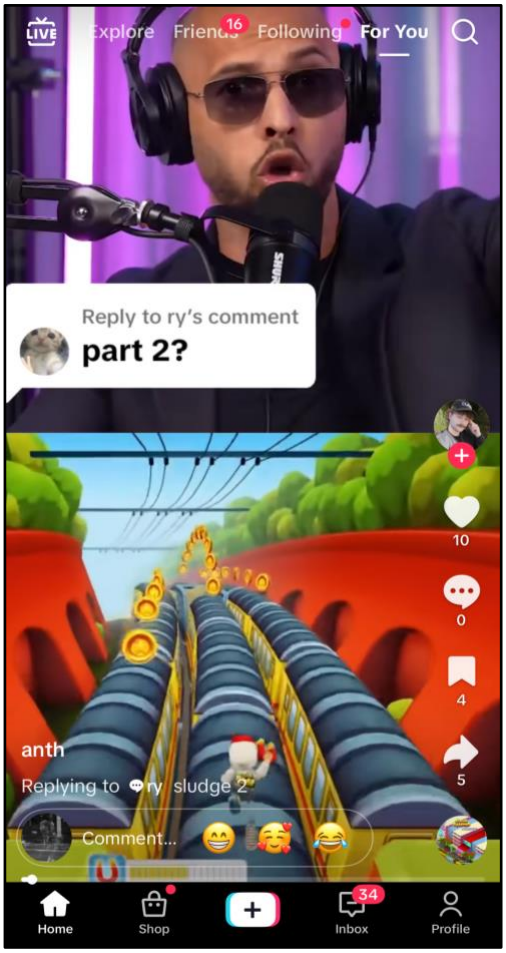

Figure 10

As a clear metacommentary, the video not only ends up far from the kind of semantic emptiness that Kane defined, but arguably even constructs something of an algorithmic imaginary as the implied object *of* that metacommentary. At the moment that its satirical nature is grasped, the video's potential for producing an encounter with the algorithmic gaze is thwarted not just by its simple re-integration into the Symbolic, but by the generation of precisely the kind of critical position towards algorithms which Bucher identified, where the illusory coherence of the concept of the algorithm is retained in order to be able to critique it. In short, despite subverting the formula of sludge, it ultimately winds up contributing to rather than shattering the algorithmic imaginary.

However, to entirely dismiss its utility as a case study on this basis would be premature. There is a temporality to this process of interpretation to which attention can be productively paid. In other words, the realisation of the video's satirical intent is not immediate. There is a moment, however brief, in which the video gives something of a shock to the system. Encountering it on a daily scroll is an experience aesthetically jarring enough to at least momentarily be somewhat indiscernible. What makes videos like the first less shocking is

their ubiquity and resultant banality. They form an unremarkable part of the social media diet of many users of TikTok or Instagram today. It is the jarring subversion offered by the video currently in question which potentially allows its form to briefly exceed and short-circuit the expectations of a given user. This is an encounter which, almost immediately, becomes re-integrated into the Symbolic at the moment it becomes understood as a coherent metacommentary, or indeed interpreted in any other fashion, but if the several seconds of bewilderment that I personally experienced when it popped up on my phone are anything to go by, it does evince something of an anomalous aesthetic potentiality in the fleeting experience of flatness and semantic emptiness.

Chapter Conclusion

It may well be the case that, in keeping with its equivalent in Lacanian psychoanalysis, any encounter with the algorithmic real is ephemeral, since it is by nature no longer the Real at the moment it becomes symbolised. What the temporality of this process means, though, is that there is a moment, however brief, in which the encounter has not yet been imagined as the result of the 'algorithm', and can instead be placed into another interpretive framework. Crucially though, this vanishing instant of possibility is only possible in the extimate mode of representation, in which the algorithm as a concept does not already feature within the symbolic apparatus of the text. *Dead Reckoning* closes off the possibility for The Entity to function as anything other than a coherent object, an algorithmic imaginary. In this case, the lack of direct signification of the algorithm allows for the fleeting encounter with the Real of the text in question to be re-symbolised and imagined not necessarily as 'algorithm', but as something else. It is this moment of openness, preceding the act of interpretation and re-integration into the Symbolic order, that can be seized on as a means of shaping a new critical position towards that which we consider algorithmic.

Conclusion

This thesis has framed the algorithm not as a concrete, identifiable object, but as a concept which is constructed as an explanatory cause for otherwise inscrutable qualities of the social world and the cultural objects which are found in it, a process analogous to the role of the Imaginary as a defence against the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis. While the concept of

the algorithm can be useful in many practical and critical endeavours, we must be aware that, to the extent that it is embraced as a total explanation, the question of what it was responding to becomes obscured. What does it say about the world that we are compelled to identify certain aspects of it as 'algorithmic'? I have approached this question by looking at existing instances of the algorithmic imaginary in action and applying to them the Lacanian triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, ultimately framing the 'algorithmic real' as that to which the algorithmic imaginary arises in response. To articulate what this 'algorithmic real' actually is involves first recognising and thus bypassing one's investment in the coherence of that Imaginary, a process which, after Lacan and the interpretation of his work in psychoanalytic film theory, I termed an 'encounter with the algorithmic gaze'. Through applying this theoretical metaphor of sorts to two complementary but opposite case studies of the algorithmic imaginary in screen media, I explored whether the algorithmic real, the unidentified *something* to which the algorithmic imaginary responds, can be articulated through the analysis of these texts. *Dead Reckoning*, through the figure of The Entity, impulsively and quite comprehensively concretises the algorithm, foreclosing consideration of what might lie beyond the concept of the algorithm as constructed by the film. What sludge content demonstrates, however, is that when the algorithm is not directly signified in the text itself, but instead conceived of as an outside influence which explains anomalous aesthetic elements of the text, the text itself does not foreclose the possibility of understanding its alien qualities as something else entirely. I believe that sludge content, along with other kinds of automated and procedurally generated content, is able to produce a fleeting encounter with the Real through its flat, semantically empty aesthetic, to the extent that this aesthetic momentarily exceeds the spectator's ability to interpret and symbolise it. The implied cause of this encounter is often conceived of as the nebulous idea of 'the algorithm', but the encounter also represents an opening in which the algorithmic gaze can be reckoned with and the fallibility of the algorithmic imaginary as an ex post facto construction can be realised. If this is the case, then it is through a final examination of the idea of flatness and semantic emptiness that we can at last approach the central question: what is the algorithmic real, that to which the algorithmic imaginary arises as a defensive response?

Sludge is far from the only genre of content noted for its procedurally-generated flatness. Over the several years in which the ideas in this dissertation gestated and were researched, any number of comparable genres of content have emerged, most notably thanks to the rise of generative AI, a can of worms deliberately left unopened here for the sake of concision. Nevertheless, content placed more recently under the banners of 'AI slop' or 'brainrot' are of a kind with sludge to the extent that their automated or procedural production results in

aesthetic qualities that, at least for now, appear somewhat alien, uncanny or, indeed, flat. Artist Trevor Paglen suggests a reason why. The digitisation of the capture, production and dissemination of images means that they are now in general "fundamentally machine-readable: they can only be seen by humans in special circumstances and for short periods of time" (2016, n.p.). This applies to, say, a picture taken on a digital camera, but to an even greater extent to the likes of sludge and AI-generated content, whose end-to-end production verges on entirely machinic and procedural. The presence of an image implies a process of production, but that production is increasingly, by its very nature, not just invisible but 'invisual', entirely resistant to questions of visibility as such. I would argue that the inexpressible aesthetic qualities of this kind of media are a direct result of the incomprehensible, pre-symbolic nature of the processes which give rise to them. "The machine-machine landscape is not one of representations so much as activations and operations. It's constituted by active, performative relations much more than classically representational ones" (ibid.). There is a troubling sense that no rationale is available to be imposed retroactively on the strangeness of the resulting representation. The encounter with the algorithmic real is the encounter with the total absence of discernible logic which an image generated by such a process evinces. The algorithmic imaginary takes this encounter and re-integrates it into the symbolic world, rendering the alien quality of the encounter no longer actually alien, but 'algorithm'. To resist performing this integration, this act of interpretation, is to finally confront the logic, or rather lack thereof, from which these images emerge.

The notion that the processes giving rise to these representations remain fundamentally outside the grasp of logic, and therefore of the Symbolic, is the notion through which the algorithmic real can be articulated in more precise terms. That is, as a process which self-perpetuates according to no external logic other than that of sheer self-perpetuation, a self-sustaining contradiction that resists symbolisation, as it is constituted at its core by a lack of articulable logic. This finds a theoretical antecedent in the work of Fredric Jameson, particularly his diagnosis of postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (1991). After the economist who coined the term, Ernest Mandel, Jameson describes late capitalism as "the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas" (ibid., p.36). In this view, there remains little to nothing not cannibalised by capital in the ceaseless process of commodification, in which everything is rendered exchangeable. Culture, then, becomes "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (ibid. p.x), the only remaining option when "there no longer exists any "deeper logic" for the surface to manifest and where the symptom has become its own disease (and vice versa, no doubt)" (ibid. p.xii). The production of culture under late capitalism is thus a

process without definable cause, a process which must simply continue to be a process. It is this ineffable, contradictory anti-logic of capital which simply cannot be articulated in Symbolic terms, and which emerges in aesthetic form as the impasses in the Symbolic, which the term ‘algorithm’ helps to concretise and explain away. One needn’t agree here that, put crudely, everything is capitalism. My own position would certainly be more nuanced. But, what the automated, invisual production of culture does represent is an expansion of pure, self-perpetuating capitalism into the realm of media production to an extent far greater than Jameson experienced in the 1980s and 1990s. The semantic emptiness, the flatness, the strangeness that this produces in some of the most dominant media forms of current times are symptoms of this expansion, but, unsatisfied or perhaps even traumatised with the lack of an evident cause for those qualities, we call them ‘algorithm’ instead.

The approach that this dissertation advocates for, then, and the critical position which the concept of the algorithmic real denotes, is a resistance to, or at least a putting off of, the interpretive manoeuvre which places the concept of the algorithm in a causal relationship with these new forms of screen media. The act of interpretation as such could perhaps be placed on hold, and the truly alien qualities of media created by processes which are less and less our own to understand could be embraced, felt and left unarticulated. This would be the encounter with the algorithmic real, a face-to-face meeting with the otherworldly nature of capital itself, and perhaps from there new critical positions towards not just the algorithm, but any of the concepts through which we crudely navigate our world, can be explored and shared.

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