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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

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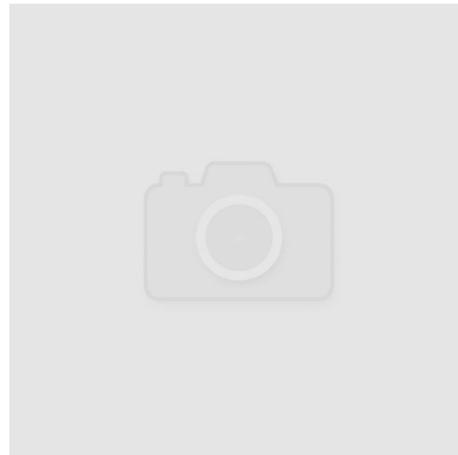
The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

## Digital Darkness

... and I went trudging on to the ceiling, the white desert;  
but the tedious whiteness changed slightly farther on,  
near the window, into a rough, darker expanse contaminated  
with dampness and covered with a complex geography of  
continents, bays, islands, peninsulas, strange concentric  
circles reminiscent of the craters of the moon, and other lines,  
slanting, slipping away—sick in places like impetigo, elsewhere  
wild and unbridled, or capricious with curlicues and turns, it  
breathed with terror of fatality, lost itself in a giddy distance.  
And dots, I don't know what from, not likely from flies, their  
origins totally inscrutable... Gazing, drowned in it and in my  
complexities, I gazed and gazed without any particular effort  
yet stubbornly, until in the end it was as if I were crossing  
some kind of a threshold—and little by little I was almost “on  
the other side” ...

Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos: A Novel*, trans. Danuta  
Borchardt

The passage onto „the other side” in *Cosmos* initially appears to signify a lapse into pareidolia, hence, perceiving figurativeness in contingent shapes, intentions in nonsensical phenomena and connections in unconnected places. It appears to be a history of an inquiry set in motion by the protagonists’ boredom and internal conflicts, pushing them towards a journey on an imaginary map with a force akin to that which induces certain faithful to pray in front of Marian stains on glasses and allows proponents of conspiracy theories to connect times, places and characters in an all-explanatory manner that seems to them irrefutable and



Zach Blas, Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))))*, video still from four channel HD video installation, 2017

self-evident. However, another interpretation of Gombrowicz's anti-mystery argues that the inquiry is not merely an attempt to find order where it actually – contrary to the rest of the largely coherent world – is absent. Instead, the uncertain archipelagos of the ceiling and the misleading itinerant trails of a Zakopane resort courtyard point to an absence of any coherence, also in the figurativeness of objects and people. The attempt at ordering and navigating according to a line on the ceiling, its continuation in the garden, and leading farther to who knows where, reaches a desperate dimension when faced with a dissolution of everything that has been presumed to maintain coherence in and of itself, since "objects were refusing to join it, they were crawling into their burrows, disappearance, disintegration, finality—even though there was still some light—but one was affected with the malicious depravity of vision itself."

The description of the "white desert" of the ceiling equally corresponds to the ostensibly insignificant background of Zach Blas' and Jemima Wyman's video-presentation, *im here to learn so :))))))* (2017), included in this issue's opening section, **viewpoint**, paired up with an essay by Aleksandra Przegalińska. In their work, roaming the ceiling acquires a temporal rather than a spatial dimension, but is governed by a similar principle. The background transforms from barely perceptible, 'rugged' elements into a weave of forms – featured on the cover of the current issue of the "View". The artists produced the work using Deep Dream, a computed vision programme created by Google, modelled on natural vision; the programme, which has in recent years been the winner of competitions in computer image 'recognition', looking for patterns, 'enhances' its input forms: not

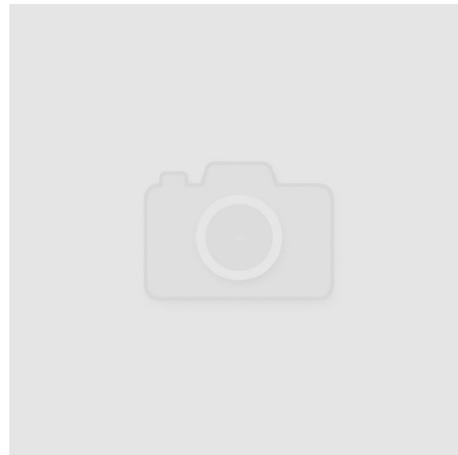


Zach Blas, Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))))*, four channel HD video installation, 2017

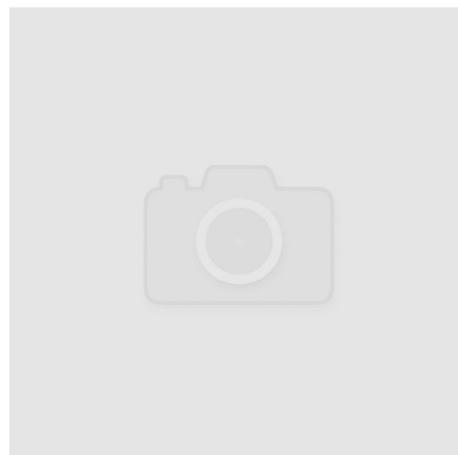
only can it revolve or change an angle of a particular shape, but is primarily based on its multiple repetition and looping.

Regardless of the mechanism's successes in 'recognition' – and regardless of the debates on the meaning of 'recognition' – the mechanism reveals its apopheniatic tendencies (tendencies to find patterns, figures and regularities in random phenomena), when fed with—as is the case with *im here to learn so :))))))*—a non-representational image—or as in its countless YouTube parodies—with an image that poses hardly any problems to human recognition. The former will in time become a weave of 'eyes' and their respective bodies; the latter will not be completely deformed, but in a process comparable to a narcotic hallucination, it will blossom forth whirls of repetitions and deformations that, on the one hand, will be somewhat recognisable, and on the other, will make identifying initial shapes much harder.

Meanwhile, the mechanism of pattern recognition, the visual parody of which is played out on the white background to Blas' and Wyman's work (as if parodying the line-on-the-ceiling-directed inquiry in *Cosmos*), has lately become a significant cosmos-ordering force, additionally attaining the status of knowledge that is certain (based on calculation), scientific (machinic, eliminating human error and limitations on the amounts of data processed), and uncovering processes akin to natural processes. For example, the



Zach Blas, Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))))*, four channel HD video installation, 2017

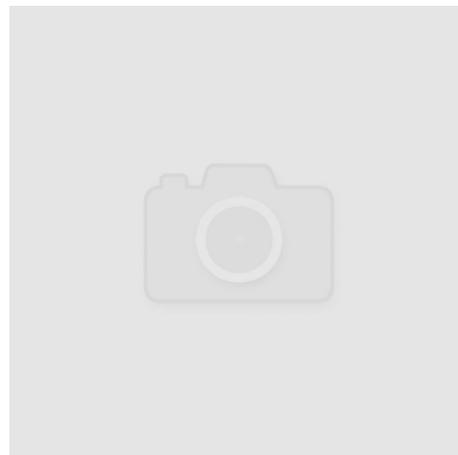


Zach Blas, Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))))*, four channel HD video installation, 2017

mechanism of pattern recognition forms the basis for Microsoft's social (rather than IT) experiment with Tay – a Twitter bot shut down in less than a day after its launch. During the period, Tay, mimicking the behaviour of its 'peers', has acquired features of an over-sexualised subordinate of chauvinist culture, preaching the superiority of the white race. But mostly the mechanism has become a function which increasingly conditions our everyday life. An algorithm targeted at finding connections and repetitions, but also sensitive to sudden, radical changes, provides tacit grounds for increasingly large amounts of acquired knowledge (search results) and taken decisions.

Among other questions, *im here to learn so :))))))* draws attention to the use of processes of pattern recognition and finding anomalies in acts of war. Here, the artists juxtapose errors in machine threat identification (when a wedding in an Afghan village gets 'recognised' as a terrorist gathering) with a limited visibility of acts of war – at night time, viewed through the eyes of a machine (night vision goggles, a thermal camera, a pixelated transmission from a deadly drone).

In the issue currently transmitted to our readers' screens, we set out to question precisely this relationship – between the visual and mechanisms which, despite frequently being defined as 'recognition', in reality elude human vision. The challenge we set ourselves is bound up with a shifting focus in media criticism, particularly in the English speaking world and in Italy, from the dazzling screen to the invisible operations of 'grey media'. Not only have images ceased to be of interest, when viewed exclusively as areas of emancipatory identity politics or ideological critique, but have come to be considered, regardless of their content, as veils, deflecting attention (including that of



Deap Dream generated meme

researchers) from the zone where data selection, exclusion and capture actually occur, and therefore a zone into which agency and responsibility are transferred. In our CFP for the issue, we suggested that despite it being pointless, in light of these changes, for visual studies to persist in their iconoclastic critique of screens as carriers of evil content and harmful ideologies – which at its best makes for a substitutive, apparent critique – it did not necessarily entail an exhaustion of critical potential of visual culture with regards to ‘new media’ so defined (i.e. algorithms, calculation procedures, data capture and processing). We interrogated the murky, the opaque, the hidden or the invisible in technologically advanced devices – or what the contemporary critical theory exposes as the grounds for functioning not only of computational machines, but also as the ground for functioning of entire socio-economic systems, of constructions of the subject with its desires and agential possibilities, of a model of communication (and a culture based on the model).

We were soon brought down to earth in these considerations by telltale problems related to publication of translations of academic papers (not only in this issue). This issue’s **close-up** includes e.g. a text by Jodi Dean, an American philosopher and author of such suggestive titles as *The Communist Horizon* or *The Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*. However, due to resistance from the publisher, we were only able to publish a few-page-long extract from her acclaimed 2010 work, *Blog Theory*, discussing the blogosphere as a site of extinguishing social resistance (we had received the rights to translation of the extract free of charge). Such an inconsistency of the papers’ critical and progressive content with the resistance of numerous publishers towards publishing these dissertations in a magazine available on-line, to everyone and, additionally, free of charge, is therefore striking. Recent problems – including the critique of certain forms of open access and copy left from leftist standpoints – seem entirely abstract in

confrontation with the persistence of traditional concepts of 'visibility', 'property' and reading 'patterns'.

In response to finding ways of practicing visual studies in the face of new technologies, we feature a piece by Bernard Stiegler, one of the most illustrious figures in the philosophy of technology, the author of the monumental work, *La technique et le temps* (1994–2001). It is, to the best of our knowledge, the first Polish language publication of the author's work, heralding the publication of *Etats de choc. Bêtise et savoir au XXIe siècle* in Michał Krzykowski's translation, forthcoming from Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN [Polish Scientific Publishers PWN]. In *The Carnival of the New Screen*, using the example of the operation of YouTube and the digital visual entertainment industry, juxtaposed with earlier visual forms, such as television, but also with a model of communication based in writing, Stiegler reflects on the consequences of technologies of global reception and broadcasting of digital video images for the criticality and autonomy of the subject. In *Nothing ('s what) Happens on the Screen*, which is an extension to the editorial and an accompanying piece to both translations, Łukasz Zaremba lists selected areas of interlocking of the digital visual – as exemplified by YouTube – and the processes of cognitive capitalism. In turn, Adam Przywara and Krzysztof Dołęga in the essay *Form and Inform* discuss the connection between the use of computational systems in architecture with the presence of recurrent spaces subordinated to the capital. The ostensibly innocent, transparent and identical architectural compositions turn out to be a crucial element in an everyday experience and practice of the neoliberal system.

A historical dimension of the link between new technologies and the visual is prominently present in the texts by Matylda Szewczyk and Artur Szarecki. In her article, *Stories from Ultrasonographic Depths*, Matylda Szewczyk presents a section, constructed around technological images, of the cultural history of visualisation of the fetus, exploring

junctions between the female body and technology, 'life' biological and mechanical. In an excerpt from Artur Szarecki's *Somatic Capitalism: Body and Power in Corporate Culture*, recently published by Wydawnictwa Drugie, appearing in our **panorama**, the author examines forms of factory management and forms of control over workers' bodies at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century e.g. in relation to photographic visualisations of motion which exceed the capacities of the human eye.

**Snapshots** contain extended discussions of two exhibitions: the latest edition of Berlin-based *transmediale* and an exhibition interestingly touching upon the relationship between new media, the poetic and affects, *Ministry of Internal Affairs. Intimacy as Text*. Curiously, the former discussion is the only place in this issue where a possibility of thinking the visual as a tool for obfuscation, as advocated in Finn Brunton's and Helen Nissenbaum's famous manifesto of the title, a tool for hiding from, confusing and misleading algorithmic machines of subjection.

**Panorama** and **snapshot** sections also bring other articles that are not directly subordinated to the leading theme: Ewa Majewska's essay (originally written in English) on the work of Ewa Partum; a translation of Charles Harrison's text on the double meaning of effect in the context of the death of landscape in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an appendix to our landscape issue; and Anna R. Burzyńska's review of Dorota Sajewska's study, *Necroperformance. A Cultural Reconstruction of the Theatre of the Great War*.

In our encouraging your clicking on, liking and sharing our new issue, we exercise justified caution, but have no such qualms in our encouragement of your reading the "View".