MOVING ON FROM EYELESSNESS

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I watch a demo-video of a robotic octopus tentacle, a new offering from the company Festo, hiss and sigh as it wraps around a water bottle. The voiceover is clear and optimistic, and completely incongruous with the object: a headless torso with only one robotic arm capped by this soft tentacle, presented against a black felt background, twisting in the air. That no one thought of the object's parallels with the violently spinning headless torso in *Jacob's Ladder*, the 1990 film featuring Tim Robbins, is alarming. Perhaps no one in Festo has seen the movie. It was my first DVD. A landmark of psychological horror. I am guessing Festo employees were likely born too late to have seen it.

The tentacle grips a cup; a living hand, a living arm. Just as when watching clips of the Boston Dynamics' "dogs" galloping on their spindly metal legs over the hills of an office park last year, I feel revulsion and then, a deep wave of visceral dread. The torso has no face, just as the dogs had no faces, so I cannot even bridge an uncanny valley to feel some kind of uneasy familiarity. I feel something of the fear of the most horrifying speculative scenario I can think of, one that has been circulated quite a lot in the past two years, that of a super-intelligent spider. Its spider brain, its unknowability, brings me to tears. Its spider brain seeing me, well, this makes me want to die. Just as the spider sees me, so too can the tentacle and the robotic dog, and in their non-eyes is not a glimmer of compassion, no familiarity at all.

How to see alongside these horrific eyeless things, and how to see from within these eyeless things? Wendy Chun wrote of such alien eyelessness, the invisible seeing, as it shapes the network, in the opening to her 2006 book *Control and Freedom*: "We no longer experience the visible yet unverifiable gaze, but a network of nonvisualizable digital control."[1] The robotic dog and the tentacle puncture the two-sided mirror, or rather, emerge from behind it to give us a single, shocking glimpse, before receding back into the nonvisualizable regime, rejected.

In a hypothetical 2017 version of *The Wizard of Oz*, the man behind the curtain would more likely be a black box, or the torso above, with one tentacle arm, calmly asking you how you are doing.

There is no lack of speculative horror around us. Artists and writers who relish this mode have infinite sources for inspiration, as our present moment is surreal enough, science fictional enough. Our moment is best described as very good science fiction. Many of the visions of a society in which authoritarian capitalism has gone amok, found in Octavia Butler, William Gibson, Robert Heinlein, and Ann Leckie, to name a few authors, have essentially come to bear. Drones over Shanghai. Branded slogans imprinted on the insides of our eyelids. Elective surgery to look more like one's idols, and warehouses full of teenagers trying to hack into our versions of ICE. This is all standard fare.

Particularly salient is the world suggested by *Ghost in the Shell* (a 1989 manga series, first adapted as a film in 1995), and even more so, that of Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Pattern Recognition* (2003), fictions that portray how capitalism, exploring the edges of extreme violence and irresponsibility, is founded on making its extraction modes invisible. Networked image production is the medium through which this concealment, distraction, and narrative manipulation takes place. These ideas are not new, at all; what is perhaps *slightly* new is how inescapable and total this concealment is when brought about by machine intelligence.

Machinic vision now bypasses human interpretation altogether, as Trevor Paglen writes eloquently.[2] Machines interpret the content, relevance, and ranking of images, of faces, of bodies, and pass their interpretations along to more powerful organizing machines. Our intervention is unnecessary, leaving machinic vision to enact its own idiosyncratic violence on unfathomable scales. Carry on, no?

No, some say. How to interrupt concealment when the fabric of mediated daily life is experienced through the hyperreal? Are our neural pathways even capable of imagining outside the hyperreal?

Since information is not knowledge, and seeing alone is not understanding, can we imagine a new kind of machinic eye that *sees* and *processes* and *interprets* according to an *ethical* and universally agreed upon, non-extractive set of values? That sees not through a revolting, purely utilitarian mode but instead a humanist practice of interpretation and debate?

Learning to see alongside the machinic eye is really the domain of the artist, who has the flexibility to unmoor her eye to look alongside and with it. She can see where the human heart, where morality, should intervene. Pattern recognition is not the domain of AI alone. It is first a human act. Our interventions, our capacity to interpret, our pattern recognition, deserves elevation.

Human pattern recognition stepping into the relentless onwards movement of machinic pattern recognition may be one step towards a radical artificial or machinic intelligence. Imagine automation originally intended for techno-capitalist accumulation alone, interrupted, recalibrated, and rescaled for human need (actual needs), for care, for sustenance. Towards communities that distribute information and power.

This is where truly surrealist and speculative horror makes for a crucial intervention.

Of most images from recent "science fiction" and tech-philosophy verging on poetry, the one that stays with me as a writer is from Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* (2008). The earth splits to reveal a chthonic (subterranean) field of ancient gods who channel a divine madness. The visual of a chasmic rift opens up a new perspective. Negarestani's rift invites us to flow between geo-cosmic traumas and deep time scales. He drags the reader down into

it to consider the spectrum from star deaths to the ocean beds splitting, and challenges us to dream of the earth at microscopic scales, of the awful (then beautiful) lives of bacteria, worms, and disease.

In imagining a universe that either comes before us, after us, or outside of us, we return to our own with more energy and vitality. Horror-shock images, like that of faceless gods moving up through the earth, or headless tentacle torsos, open up space in the mind, in which one must contend with a new element of reality. I move from revulsion to fascination to contemplation of a whole grotesque plane of experience, along a different scale.

The surreal, uncanny image forces a kind of plasticity, making reason and perception themselves plastic. A necessary vertigo. I think of these images as a punishment for an idle or shallow curiosity in ethical horrors, often buried within digital smoothness and cuteness. And crucially, the response to the shocking image or idea is an *urgency* which is often political, demanding some kind of action, whether a change in thought, position, or perspective.

In the sudden visions that appear in this very room, in the face of the octopus, in hallucinated eight-foot-tall insect gods and chimpanzee priests, there is a strategic computational surrealism. Strange totems to be reintroduced into our visual fields, to intentionally interrupt our day to day.

This is optimism, too, harnessing the energy of speculative horror to suggest breaks in a reality that might be suffocating us. We can build armor, foundations, shelter, wind turbines, animals, languages, and skin, to protect us within the rift.

The amateur scientist can reengineer her reality, undo the fabric of cybernetic systems she is folded into. Technology was originally driven by basic human rights to break and tinker with machines. To unstitch and undo the design of automated machinic seeing, to demand an unseeing or, perhaps, a more ethical seeing.