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The Haunted Mirror of Contemporary Digital Culture

by

Clarissa Regan

January 2016

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD.
This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney.
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Summary

Description of creative work

The studio component comprises a series of ceramic sculptures; mostly figurative works, interacting with found objects. The ceramic works are hand-built, coiled and slabbed, bisque fired and glazed. I have used a mix of earthenware and stoneware clays, and a variety of commercial and my own glaze recipes. The found objects included items discovered at antique shops, charity stores and second hand stores. I’ve also used two-way mirrors in some of the installations. A number of my studio works touch upon narrative as an entry point to delve into the ideas discussed in the main written thesis. My ceramic sculptures reference multi-layered themes from classical myths and fairy-stories - retold in a contemporary context - as a way of ‘thinking out loud’, or exploring the concerns inherently built into the narrative. It is my belief that these fundamental questions about identity, subjectivity, reality and time have always concerned humans and although our present networked condition appears to be profoundly different from circumstances of the past, age-old stories are still capable of provoking insight and understanding.

Abstract of thesis

The written thesis examines the ramifications of new technologies upon the individual: from digitisation, the internet, mobile phones, closed circuit television cameras, electronic media, recording devices, simulacra and technological mediation. I particularly look at how these phenomena affect one’s own sense of subjectivity, of identity, time-space coordinates, the imagination and social relations. I take a sociological, cultural view of these phenomena - reaching back to the history of old media devices (such as magic lanterns), and tracing a path to the present day, in an attempt to uncover the essence of some of these drives. The growth in electronic archiving of one’s life is also considered as a form of temporal self-distance, an attempt to control time, and lend meaning and significance to life events. The replacement of the real with simulacra is also investigated. This thesis argues there is a metaphysical quest to both extend our powers and expand our consciousness. There is also a seeking of something other, that can be witnessed in the close connection with the supernatural and the uncanny of many of our communication devices, and that a key characteristic of
the nature and impact of the internet and digitisation (uncovered particularly by my studio work) is that it becomes about a state of feedback, of acoustic resonance, as a consequence of its instantaneous nature.
Introduction

Broadly speaking, I have three major aspects to my research, which are categorised as follows:

1. *phantasmagoria*, or changed notions of consciousness and the decorporealization of the self relating to the saturation of images in our digital mediascape,
2. *archive*, or the acceleration of the archive process as a proleptic mode of being,
3. *simulacra*, or the effect of the substitution of the simulacra for the real and the related concept of mediation, or conducting our every-day lives through the medium of technology.

The thesis is broken up into three sections, with particular chapters focusing on specific themes within.

Some of the research questions I have asked myself during the candidature include: How are these three phenomena (phantasmagoria, archiving and simulacra) affecting subjectivity, self-consciousness and identity? What effect does the flux of images - and our own reflected self-images in constant video surveillance, digital camera phones and social media - have on a sense of identity and self? How is the frenzied recording and archiving of our lives - through the proliferation of digital communication technologies - affecting our notions of time? Living in a proleptic state of being - an *archive fever* for the future (a variation of French philosopher Jacque Derrida’s notion in that the present moment is anticipated as a future memory) - how does this phenomenon affect one’s behaviour or outlook? And the *mediation* of everyday life, with the machine as prosthetic, the industrialisation of culture, the avoidance of the abject: what do these drives tell us about our lives today?

The methodology of this thesis has been to engage in a wide-ranging literature review, then narrow down my reading on topics I found particularly useful. As a way of finding my own framework to both define and contain my investigation, I gave a number of papers at various conferences over the duration of the candidacy. This enabled me to concentrate my thoughts on certain subjects, and thereby work to set deadlines. As regards to the studio work, I continued working and often re-working the sculptures throughout the period of study. The written research acted to prompt new ideas in my
artworks, which, in turn, then fed back into theoretical component and provided new insights. Fairy tales and myths have also been an important element to my studio work; these narratives have provided multiple layers of meaning in the works, and have prompted alternate ways of thinking about some of the issues raised.

During the course of my candidature, I used the term ‘phantasmagoria’ as an over-arching metaphor for the circulation of imagery in our world - from our electronic media, to the Internet and virtual worlds, to mobile phones, screens and surveillance cameras in our shopping centres. The saturation of images in our contemporary lives has no historical precedent. As philosopher Paul Virilio says: ‘From now on, everything passes through the image ... the image is invasive and ubiquitous. Its role is not to be in the domain of art, the military ... it is to be everywhere, to be reality’. Continually, throughout the course of our daily lives, we are bombarded with virtual, mediated reflections of ourselves, as well as mediated images of other faces and bodies. From the queue at the suburban supermarket or post office, where we can observe ourselves in real time at unexpected angles, or the toll gate plaza on the motorway, to our plethora of screen gadgets: the iPhones, videos-cams, Facebook profile pictures, internet images and digital screens, we are repeatedly confronted with another version of reality. Our daily interaction with our local environments have always used technology, but these interactions have become increasingly mediated (think satellite navigation in cars or Google maps). These temporal and altered spatial representations/presentations of ourselves essentially provoke new ways of seeing oneself, and of seeing and interacting with others. The ubiquity, instantaneity and immediacy of these new technologies can be seen to echo the traditional characteristics of the Divine, according to philosopher Paul Virilio. It is this insight that is taken up by literary critic Terry Castle, in her linking of the uncanny, or the return of the disowned supernatural, to the unprecedented drive to recreate images of ourselves. In her study tracing the evolution of the idea of ghosts in Romantic literature, she proposes the historic Enlightenment internalisation of the spectral - ‘the gradual reinterpretation of ghosts and apparitions as hallucinations, or

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2 John Armitage, Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond (London, Sage, 2000), 44.
projections of the mind - introduced a new uncanniness into human consciousness itself’.³ And with this transformation of consciousness over the past two centuries, thinking itself becoming an act of ghost-seeing, with Freud’s ‘barely metaphoric conception of ghosts lurking in the unconscious’,⁴ so that within the mind exists a ‘world of phantoms’⁵ and society becomes marked by antipathy towards death and a growing reluctance to admit corporeal reality:

*Finally any study of the spectralizing habit in modern times would have to take into consideration what might be called its technological embodiment: our compulsive need, since the mid-nineteenth century, to invent machines that mimic and reinforce the image-producing powers of consciousness.*⁶

Virtual body-images certainly pre-date modern technologies and the invention of the mirror; not content with the happenstance of seeing one’s own image reflected in a pool of water, humankind actively created representations of figures - from cave paintings to Mayan pottery, and on throughout the history of Western painting and in countless other cultures world-wide. Literature also incorporates and develops the idea of the second representation of self, with a rich vein of stories and myths dealing with doubles, doppelgangers, split images, mirrors, phantoms and ghosts. Marina Warner’s study of the topic *Phantasmagoria*⁷ - which examines metaphoric vehicles for the spirit - manifest in wax, smoke and clouds, and film - articulates the logic of the imaginary all the way through to our present day, and places it within a continuous cultural phenomenon. What is different, and the subject of one section of this thesis, is the intensity, ubiquity and speed at which the replacement of the real with the mediated image occurs in our lives today. This thesis will trace these cultural trends, by reaching into the past and historically examining the history of visual media, then applying some of those insights to the present condition.

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⁴ Ibid, 175.
⁵ Ibid, 17.
⁶ Ibid, 137.
My studio work has taken the form of figurative sculptures, built from clay. These figures interact in a variety of ways with their surrounding environment - holding or listening to objects such as analogue media devices (telephones, radios, camera parts, head-phones) as well as other materials such as two-way mirrors. The creative work is an excavation of not only the history of our interaction with media technologies, but also an attempt to extract the essential nature of such interactions. By incorporating obsolete media in a number of my creative works, I’ve sought to create strong contours of visual difference - yet combining them in unusual and original ways, thus allowing a space in which to rethink the impact of contemporary digital media. Professor of Creative Arts at James Cook University, Professor Peter Murphy argues the imagination is a faculty that combines rather than separates, and that it finds resemblances between unlike objects:8 'The imagination detects unlikely resemblances and paradoxical entities.'9

My creative studio work incorporates this approach as a means of provoking new ways of thinking about our relationship with technological mediation.

I’ve explicitly chosen the human body as the subject of my investigations into the relationship between technology and the individual, as a vehicle to understanding how the senses and psyche are affected. As philosopher Elisabeth van Samsonow has noted: ‘The contemporary debate in media theory and cultural studies keeps revolving around the subject of the body’.10 Although my practice has been grounded in a traditional representational approach to the figure, I have adapted the figures to speak more directly and personally about their circumstances. The figures are not idealised; to the contrary, they interact with their surroundings in complex and ambiguous ways, and that is reflected in the various asymmetries and disturbances in the forms. In exploring synesthesia, for example, I have sometimes mixed up the senses, by smoothing over mouths, removing ears or eyes. Gaps and amputations have emerged in the development of the body of work. Some of the figures have been fragmented from the main body, such as having had the heads isolated. This is both a reflection of a state of isolation, and the nature of being cut-off from the body, or being ungrounded. The idea of the fragmented body has been a strong theme in Australian figurative ceramics since the

9 Ibid, 85.
late 20th century. In an increasingly specialised, alienated industrial Western society, the
dismembering of the body could be said to echo this condition. Psychological states are
also reflected in the use of a multitude of different glazes, colours and patinas on my
works.

Prior to starting this PhD project, I had worked mainly in non-figurative, abstract
ceramic forms. During my period studying for my Master of Visual Arts, I used print-
making techniques to transfer images onto the ceramic surface. As part of my work
looking into narrative theory and fairy tales, I was increasingly drawn to including the
human form as part of my narrative, to explore concerns about characters and issues
confronting them. But in the end, I felt this approach, of cut-outs and image transfer,
was insufficient for this particular PhD research project. I wanted to build the figure to
exist in space, and allow for it to interact more with the surrounding environment. So I
began to teach myself how to build the human form in clay and portraiture. As part of
my investigation into understanding the ramifications of technology upon the psyche
and body, I felt that constructing figures in clay gave me the best way of approaching
this. Sculptural depictions of the figure have been used to powerfully express human
emotions, idealise the body, or give abstract ideas a tangible form. Using clay to
represent the body has a powerful lineage - just think of the oldest known ceramic piece
in the world - the Paleolithic-era Venus of Dolni Vestonice - which predates any known
fired pottery used as a container. Art historian Kenneth Clark points out that the nude as
an art form remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into
form. By placing what is an intrinsically sensual and interesting subject - our own
bodies - into form, it places them out of reach of time and desire.\(^{11}\) Contemporary art
critics have developed this argument further; with US art historian and writer James
Elkins putting forward the notion that the desire to see a representation of a body is so
strong that we see an after-image or ghost of a body in every work of art we view.\(^{12}\)
Obviously, the world is full of scenes and patterns that contain no bodies, argues Elkins.
But we still seek them out. If alone in a garden, you would look around at the scene, he
suggests. If a person or animal strays into view, one will immediately fix on it as an

unconscious reflex. Elkins then makes the proposal that, in the absence of any bodies - ‘we embark on a search for body metaphors - for bodily lengths, weights, colours, textures, shapes and movements, and in that second search we tend to be easily satisfied and content with the most obvious choices’.13 Indeed, in the field of ceramics we speak of certain parts of vases as having the same anatomy as a human body, ie the feet, the belly, the shoulder of the vessel or the neck. And why do I build the figures in ceramic? Clay has always been used to sculpt the human figure, whether it is fired or cast in another medium such as bronze, as it has been chosen by artists for its unique malleable qualities. Australian artist Arthur Boyd’s figurative works of the 1950s, a series of 16 solid figures (some more than a metre high) are an example of using clay to combine colour, surface movement and at the same time convey a strong sense of profound presence. At first the figures appear to stand together, and display solidarity, but as his biographer Darleen Bungey points out: ‘... despite the closeness, the pressing together of flesh, there is no true unity. Instead they twist, turn collide and collude, ultimately revealing disjointedness, both in form and theme. The domestic and familial are addressed under the guise of biblical themes.’14 Newspaper critics at the exhibition at the time were unkind. One reporter described this work as ‘Siamese twins with myxomatosis’, and likened the legs to those of an elephant’s hind legs. Boyd himself was moved to try to explain, stating: ‘The name implies a family or some co-operative thing ... they are far apart and broken up in some ways, which just expresses a sort of disjointedness. It could be a family or world disjointedness.’15 Fired ceramic enabled this paradoxical quality to be conveyed in a way that other art forms could not.

I chose to work with clay for several reasons. Firstly, the enduring and permanent nature of fired ceramic work is particularly appealing. The immediacy of working with clay, as a medium to model and shape my ideas directly, is useful to my method of working. The durable, fixed and grounded nature of fired ceramics is a counterpoint, I feel, to the subject matter of what I am researching - the phantasmagorical and ephemeral quality of screen culture. There is also aesthetic issues - such as glazes and other surface treatments that I can achieve in ceramic that are simply unavailable in other mediums.

13 Ibid, 6.
15 Ibid, 267.
These help lend other qualities to the final form which add to the total feeling evoked by the work. I am not after a super-realistic look to my sculptures. Instead, I tend to work in an expressionistic manner. There is also my drive to re-appropriate the industrial, to humanise and personalise our world, that is discussed in Chapter Three. The work is a counter-point to the smooth impenetrable surfaces of digital devices. Like contemporary United Kingdom artist Michael Landy (discussed further on page 9), I used broken pieces of machinery in assembling my figures. I am looking for a direct contrast to anything that may look machine-like, industrial, or manufactured. In fact, when I set out to build my work the Mechanical Nightingale (fig. 1), I deliberately aimed for a bower-bird like quality of constructed, broken down machinery, a bricolage of industrial bits and pieces. As for my practice of attaching objects to the ceramic works, it is partly my
drive to expose the workings behind our interaction with technology. I am often looking for a certain quality of physicality to the internal machine or analogue parts. United States contemporary clay artist Arthur Gonzalez\(^\text{16}\) also uses found objects with his ceramic figurative installations, but in a particularly expressive manner, as a way of creating a mood, or an emotional scene.

\(^{16}\) Suzanne Tourtillot, \textit{The Figure in Clay} (Lark Books, Sterling Publishing, 2007).
Here in Australia, figurative ceramic artist Frederic Chepeaux, working in the 1970s and 1980s, created installations with his ceramic works by combining his ceramic figures with wooden elements, either furniture or crafted boxes or shelves. He created hybrid bodies from the mingling of the ceramic and other materials. He also truncated the bodies, and worked with body parts separated from the main figure. Chepeux's surrealist inspired work deploys complex tableaux scenes and unexpected arrangements and placements.

Figure 2. Frederic Chepeaux, You Too Can, 1979, Ceramic, mixed media.

Looking back over my own body of work, patterns are evident. I can see I have an emphasis on the transition points between the figure form and the other objects within my install - and that in fact these are disjunctions - not seamless interfaces. There is often mechanical breakdowns, and uncertainties within the technology. My work did not go down the path of the humans becoming sleek cyborgs. They do not emerge with super enhanced prowess, or smooth futuristic capabilities. Instead, they are grounded in corporeal materiality - full of awkwardness, surprises and reversals. Despite their metaphysical yearnings, my figures live in a state of perplexed wonderment, existing in an uneasy crisis between worlds. As Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin notes, the material bodily principle is a transferring of the ‘high, ideal, abstract’ to the material level, ‘to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity’. In a classical sculpture, all signs of its unfinished character, of growth and proliferation had been

eliminated, according to Bakhtin. The apertures were closed and it was an isolated object, alone and fenced off. My reversal of this process attempts to expose the inner workings of the machine interacting with the body, thereby retaining an ambivalence. In Bakhtin’s discussion of the idea of carnivale, or the regenerative principle of change and renewal, he says the idea of the body in a state of becoming, in a state of transformation, reflects the notion that there is an as yet unfinished metamorphosis between death and birth. ‘The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. ...we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis.’ This unfinished body is not separate from the world around it, but is open and unfinished, and blends in with the world around it. Ceramic art is particularly well suited to explore this juncture, this liminal zone - that is, the ambiguous betwixt and between zone.

As I will discuss in Chapter Three, I have deliberately chosen a more hand-built, human-scale aesthetic. This is part of my attempt to re-appropriate the industrial, to humanise and personalise our world. The exposing of wires, machinery, the use of odd joins and juxtapositions of contrasting elements in the works is a deliberate strategy to go against the smooth impenetrable surfaces of digital devices. I have scoured charity stories and council clean-ups to find objects to incorporate in the works, in an approach described as that of a *bricoleur*, as outlined by philosopher Jacques Derrida, (following on from anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’ discussion of the distinction between the engineer and the bricoleur, who puts things together in new ways):

*The bricoleur, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses ‘the means at hand’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous - and so forth.*

---

19 Ibid, 29.  
As Professor Murphy argues, the analytic mind parses, but the very point of wit and imagination is that these faculties combine rather than separate.\textsuperscript{22} Artists have sought to make use of combinations of disparate items in their quest for new ways of understanding the human condition. For example British artist Michael Landy sought out second-hand and found objects to create his hybrid figurative sculpture. His 2013 show \textit{Saints Alive},\textsuperscript{23} at the National Gallery in London, included several half-human half mechanical figures made from broken toys, mechanical odds and ends and items from flea markets. That body of work was inspired by the lives of a number of martyred saints.

In my work the ceramic element is also an important part of the whole and in particular, the weight and heft of the objects. This operates on a number of levels; as a way to lend materiality and embodiment to the forms, to create a sense of abiding over time, to refer to the density of matter, yet paradoxically its fragility in many other respects - such as cracks appearing in the forms. Building the figures in fired ceramic has been a deliberate attempt to shape permanent objects that exist both in three-dimensional, extended space as well as enduring over \textit{time}. Canadian art academic and practicing

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Michael Landy. \textit{Saints Alive}, 2013. (Installation view.)}
\end{figure}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Murphy, \textit{The Collective Imagination}, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Saints Alive}, exhibition at the National Gallery, website: http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/upload/pdf/notes_michael-landy-saints-alive.pdf accessed 1 August 2015.
\end{itemize}
ceramic artist Paul Mathieu makes a fundamental point about the archival nature of ceramic forms in his observation that we live in ‘ahistorical times’ because of an obsessive focus with the now, yet ceramics is a ‘profoundly historical practice’.24

The true nature of ceramics is time. In that sense it is in opposition to most contemporary art practices, which are a-historical and immaterial so often, possibly time-based yet intemporal, nonetheless. Ceramics contests, subverts and possibly even condemns what is fundamentally problematic with contemporary culture, its psychological severance from historical continuity.25

Human forms fashioned in clay have a lineage stretching back tens of thousands of years, from countless cultures around the globe. I’ve drawn upon this history in the forming and finishing of my works, but at the same time, I’ve also worked with contemporary digital print transfer technologies to add alternate layers of meaning to some forms. Meaning has been inscribed onto the clay in many ways in my work; from the form itself, to the surface treatment, or ‘skin’ of the figures, to the prosthetic additions or interactions. I am looking for works that allow multiple layers of meaning to emerge.

Humour is also an element in my work. I have been influenced by the Funk tradition, both abroad and here in Australia, as well as the irony and humour of UK potter Grayson Perry. As art critic John McDonald has pointed out, in an essay about the burst of figurative work that came on the scene in Australia from the 1970s onwards: ‘The humour of much of this work responds to a distrust with the expressive possibilities to language and the legitimating power of aesthetic orthodoxies. It seeks to address the viewer in a more personalised way than the figurative works of the 1960s and largely eschews the spiritual emphasis of Anglo-oriental ceramics.’26 Women particularly took up the figure as a vehicle for expression, often to discuss feminist issues. They breathed new energy into the genre. As Sandy Kirby, in her review of women’s art in Australia, comments: ‘The women’s art movement challenged the established hierarchy of the arts by demanding democratization of culture and by celebrating and reclaiming women’s

cultural traditions. In other words, the personal became political. They began using colours previously disparaged, such as pastels and pinks, and women’s biological differences were explored. Kirby argues: ‘In experiencing a real sense of freedom to explore new subject matter unencumbered by art/craft distinctions, the women’s art movement became, arguably, the most dynamic artistic force in the country.’ In Margaret Dodd’s work, the objectification of the female body was exposed with her series of Holden cars. The theme of the body part can be seen in the idea of the fragmented body, which became a strong motif in works through the 1990s and into this century. In an increasingly specialised, alienated industrial Western society, the dismembering of the body could be said to echo this condition. The fragment can also be seen in the work of Maria Kuczynska, whose work has been described as akin to ‘dimly apprehended memory traces’. More recently, contemporary Australian artist Fiona Fell, has posed the question: ‘How is the fictive body formed through fragmentation?’ as part of her research at Southern Cross University. In a discussion of her own work, she stated: ‘Meaning is conveyed when negative spaces assume the role of gesture in a revised extended function signifying ideas about the absent body. These figurines therefore are gesturing through the spaces in their bodies to speak of unconscious moments and memories of places fragmented. They embody memories of situations in which I have felt hollow and disconnected...

The issues raised in this research are the subject of much contemporary debate and a growing body of literature in a number of cross-disciplinary fields, including the expanding academic disciplines of visual studies, media archaeology, digital studies and sociology. My overview of some of the main philosophers, theorists and artists include Rene Descartes, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Paul Virilio, Neil Postman, John Durham Peters, Erik Kluijtenberg, Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, Mikhail Bakhtin, Philippe Aries, Guy Debord, Gen Doy, John David Edbert, Terry Castle, Gail Weiss, Elizabeth Grosz and Marina Warner. This thesis will argue for a recognition of the value of a multi-sensory way of being, and particularly a haptic or

28 Ibid.
tactile mode of perception. I argue we need to be grounded in a messy, corporeal world, so as to not be consumed by Guy Debord’s vision of the vicarious life watching the spectacle.

Chapter One of this thesis starts out with an examination of the ideas around self and subjectivity. The hyper circulation of images in contemporary society is discussed, and my speculation that it forms part of a human drive to externalise ourselves. I look at film theories influenced by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage, and the idea that humans require a mirror, or camera, as a foil for consciousness to witness themselves. I also briefly touch upon theories around visuality; including Walter Benjamin’s idea of the ‘optical unconscious’ and Guy Debord’s theories of the society of the spectacle.

Chapter Two further discusses subjectivity and the growth of self-reflexiveness in the face of the growth of CCT cameras, hand-held devices and other social recording systems. Marshall McLuhan’s idea of tools as extensions of the human is explored, and his argument that the ratio of human senses needs to be in balance. I also examine early feminist objectification theory and find it useful to apply to the current self-reflexive digital landscape. The ideas of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his elaboration of the notion of the grotesque body and reversals, are also introduced in this chapter.

In Chapter Three I outline the history of the phantasmagoria ghost shows, and other historical optical and visual media such as the magic lantern and cave art. I conclude these phenomenon demonstrate the persistence of humankind’s desire to project our imagination outward. I discuss Terry Castle’s historical thesis about how the supernatural aspect of the phantasmagoria shows (following the Enlightenment period) became re-routed into the imagination. Theorists about the denial of mortality in our contemporary society are also discussed. The idea of the enduring attraction of light, from psychedelic light shows, through to stained glass windows and iPads, is also raised.

33 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*.
In Chapter Four the notion of ‘prolepsis’, as put forth by Mark Currie, is discussed in the context of digital cameras and social media. Jacques Derrida’s archive fever notion is also connected to this process. The idea of creating a future object for a late memory is expanded upon. I discuss time-space compression in relation to the nature of capitalism and globalisation, and the effects this has on our notion of time.

In Chapter Five, I examine the nature of technological mediation and simulacra. I discuss the works of Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Lewis Mumford to help understand the phenomena of replacing the real with a symbolic world. I also expand upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivale theories, as a productive framework within which to argue that the desire to replace the real with the artificial is born of a desire to retreat from the messy, the abject and a body subject to decay. Finally, in my conclusion, I argue a metaphysical urge drives many of the trends discussed throughout my thesis - this is discussed in greater depth on page 57-61.

36 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*. 

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SECTION 1: phantasmagoria, or changed notions of consciousness and the decorporealization of the self relating to the saturation of images in our digital mediascape,

‘A whirling phantasmagoria can be grasped only when arrested for contemplation’ - Marshall McLuhan, 1951.37

Chapter One: Self and Subjectivity

In order to understand the essential nature of the process of the externalisation of self, it is helpful to go back to one of the earlier philosophers on the nature of self and subjectivity. Seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes’ famous proposition *cogito ergo sum* (I am thinking, therefore I exist),38 is attributed to mark the turning point in Western society away from tradition and dogma (as understood to be the Catholic church), towards a more scientific outlook.39 Descartes’ ideas of consciousness, reason and agency gained currency during the Enlightenment period (approximately mid 17th century to 1800), gradually supplanting previous ideas of rigid social classes, the Divine Right of Kings or predestination. His articulation of the belief of a distinction between the mind and the body - and this isolation of the singularity of the fact that I am a thinking thing, has been profoundly influential. Gen Doy puts it this way: ‘This dualism, the conceptual separation of mind and body, meant that Descartes formulated a view of a disembodied self, rather than an embodied subjectivity.’40 In Descartes’ own words:

*Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am*

39 Ibid, 68.
simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.41

Descartes is saying he is a non-extended thing; he can only be truly sure of his own consciousness, his stream of thoughts. It is this very point I take up in my research. As I discuss later in this paper, the drive to extend our range - to become extended beings - (Marshall McLuhan’s ‘extensions of man’42 or Paul Virilio’s ‘will to see all’43) and to project our brain images outward (Terry Castle’s ‘compulsive spectralizing habit’44), and the consequences of this, lie at the heart of my research project. I argue this is a kind of magical thinking, an impulse towards immateriality and denial of corporeality - a quest for powers to transcend the everyday realm, but which comes at a Faustian price.

Descartes’ legacy, of a unitary Cartesian self, has been subject to attack by postmodern scholars such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, who argue for a notion of self as already fragmented, unstable and constructed by language and social practices.45 Gen Doy, a contemporary visual arts professor in the UK, has argued that two things have been misunderstood in the post-modern dismissal of the ‘Cartesian self’ and its replacement with ideas of fragmentation and a self constructed by the prevailing social practices and languages.46 By examining artists such as Tracey Emin, Marc Quinn and Alexa Wright, she puts forward the argument that it is ‘possible to argue that artists’ sense of selfhood is as strong as ever’47 and that ‘postmodern theories of hybrid or multiple selves do not seem to hold much emancipatory attraction for disabled subjects’.48 For example, Alexa Wright, who photographs disabled models and uses her own face on the resulting images, ‘with the intention of disrupting the tendency to read the personality and worth of the subject from the exterior of the body’,49 has argued that: ‘there is an interesting contradiction between the belief that the self is located in

41 Descartes, Mediations on First Philosophy, 107.
44 Castle, The Female Thermometer, 103.
45 Doy, Picturing The Self, 2.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid, 87.
49 Ibid, 85.
and expressed by, the body as much as the mind and the observation that the body is not always an adequate representation of the self’. Quinn, well known for his sculpture *Self* (a head made from his own blood) (fig.4), organised the production of a series of marble statues of disabled sportsmen and women, comparing them to classical museum figures, which often have lost their limbs over time. Quinn says: ‘Naturally the important concept is that these people have a sense of the inner self just like ours and the sculptures are a celebration of this sense of self’. Doy wrote that his artworks, while appearing in tune with current concerns in postmodern art, still present ‘supposedly outmoded, humanist, bourgeois, even Cartesian notions of the self’ with his references to the body as a machine, playing with the inside/outside of the body (particularly the blood series) and that the disabled models ‘mobilises a concept of a conscious, surveying inner self’. Doy points out that marginalised subjects still exist all around the world lacking in self-recognition and self-determination. Hence ‘that is why, although the Cartesian subject and its legacy should be critically interrogated, we should not relegate the subject/self to the dustbin of history just yet, if at all’. Another way of understanding self/subjectivity is through the work of twentieth century French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who has been influential in a number of academic fields, particularly film studies and visual culture. His theory of the ‘mirror phrase’, explaining how an individual comes to identify themselves as an ‘I’ in the social world, has been used to explain how cinema spectators identify with images on the screen.

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50 Ibid.
51 Marc Quinn, *Marc Quinn* (Milano, Prada, 2002), 61.
52 Doy, *Picturing the Self*, 83.
53 Ibid, 188.
This mechanism is also helpful to my thesis, to understand the processes at work in the projection of self-images in our digital, screen-based culture. The mirror phase occurs approximately between the ages of six and 18 months, when the infant begins to recognise her or his image in the mirror (or another reflective surface, or the mother). The toddler is fascinated with this appearance and sees it as a ‘totality’, then learns to control it, eventually recognising it as a reflection of themselves. But the process creates a ‘fundamental alienation’, according to Lacan, as the infant’s mastery is in the mirror image - ‘outside himself, while he is not really master of his movements’.

The toddler still has not achieved full motor control of her/his body. As Lacan puts it: ‘He only sees his form as more or less total and unified in an external image, in a virtual, alienated, ideal unity that cannot actually be touched.’ Or as media studies scholar Sean Homer argues: ‘The image actually comes to take the place of self. Therefore, the sense of a unified self is acquired at the price of this self being an-other, that is, our mirror image.’ This mastery of self is illusory, Lacanian scholar Bice Benevenuto explains, prompting the individual to look throughout their life for an imaginary ‘wholeness’ and ‘unity’. ‘He will want to master his environment and feel a unified and total person.’

I argue a continued desire for an imaginary wholeness can be used to partly understand today’s relentless process of externalisation of self through images and text, exemplified in social media such as Facebook. In Lacan’s ‘I see myself seeing myself’, consciousness seeks to understand itself. Loy describes it thus:

Lacan compares the Cartesian notion of thinking about oneself thinking (thought) which for Descartes resulted in certainty, with the idea of ‘seeing oneself see oneself’ (sight), which is an illusion of consciousness.

Film theorists have used Lacan’s mirror phrase, as well as his concept of ‘the Gaze’ to explain the powerful attraction of cinema. Much is made of the split between seeing the image as oneself and also as an ideal - at the same time. ‘This can also be understood as the split that results from being simultaneously the surveyor and the surveyed, in looking at oneself through the implied gaze of others’.

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56 Ibid.
59 Doy, *Picturing the Self*, 44.
Figure 5. Clarissa Regan, *Lost in Facebook 2* (side-view), 2010. 90 x 60 x 70cm.
the subject, Baudry’s *The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus*\(^6^1\) and other contributions such as Jean-Pierre Oudart’s term ‘idealogical suture’\(^6^2\) formed the basis of a new way of examining movies; not just in semiotically deconstructing the texts, but in understanding the psychology of the spectator and the process involved. The result was a state of a consciousness simulating a dream, they argued, where the conditions of the darkened theatre enabled a release of the mirror stage.\(^6^3\) The term suture refers to the signified that seemed to ‘sew up’ the gaps and absences of language. As Martin Jay describes the movie process:

*They stitch together the dispersed and contradictory subjectivities of the actual spectator into a falsely harmonious whole by encouraging him or her to identify seriatim with the gazes of the characters in the film, gazes which seem to come from centered and unified subjects.*\(^6^4\)

Add to that the fact that - like a toddler - the spectator is hampered by their relative immobility in the movie theatre, and becomes dependent on a ‘hypertrophied visual experience’, then, the overall effect is of a ‘superreal sense of reality that cannot be tested’.\(^6^5\) The cinema is an apparatus, Baudry argues, that is:

*... destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmatization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism.*\(^6^6\)

I shall pay close attention to this idea of ‘fantasmatization’, or phantasmagoria, in Chapter Three.

My studio works *Lost in Facebook 1 & 2*, (fig 5 & 6) were part of a series of figurative sculptures I built early in the PhD candidature as a means of exploring social media on the internet. I began by thinking about the process of uploading images of oneself as a way of externalising oneself. Working with clay led me to explore ways of re-enacting this process. I modelled the figures, then ended up cutting off their face and placing it in a book in their hands - and by literally cutting the face it became a mask.

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63 Ibid, 475.
64 Ibid, 474.
65 Ibid, 476.
66 Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus, 46."
By physically manifesting the practice of Facebook into a sculptural medium, I came to a new perspective - to see it literally as a kind of masking. When a mask is worn, it hides or alters the appearance of the face and allows the individual to transform into another being. In many ways Facebook, and the Photoshopped models that adorn contemporary society’s billboards and magazines, manifest another version of this age-old process. According to scholar Henry Pernet, masks have traditionally given us the ability to repudiate our usual personality to become beings ‘from a zone verging on the supernatural’.  

He quotes the French scholar George Buraud, that the instinct that drives us to mask ourselves responds to man’s aspiration to ‘escape from himself’, to ‘enrich himself in new types of existences, to incarnate himself in multiple personalities and in order to feel its fullness and powers multiply’. The assumption of Facebook, according to media scholar John David Ebert, is that we are relating to a specific and unique individual ‘whose faciality is embodied by and sufficient to the visage he presents in his photo’. Yet this is not the case. Ebert makes his case by arguing firstly, celebrity images are flattened, two-dimensional and simplified stereotypes - a fantasy usually with no ‘real independent existence outside of electronic circuitry’. He goes on to argue: 

*It is the same way with Facebook: real people with complex personalities have been flattened out, crushed and simplified to a stereotype: it is impossible to have any sort of real relationship with a stereotype, for people always amount to far more than what their profile describes...So the point I am making here is that Facebook, by its very nature as a medium, excludes the possibility of depth and complexity from all human relationships.*

Reflecting on my practice, I would argue working in ceramic is a way of providing a contrast to the ephemeral nature of digital culture; that is, by grounding the characters in such a physical, fixed medium, I can create the contours of difference and perhaps disrupt cultural perspectives. To incarnate the discarnate. It is a counter-point to the extreme ephemerality of our digital culture. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that art is

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68 Ibid.
70 Ibid, 56.
71 Ibid.
the prime method of critical consciousness. It does this by creating what he termed a ‘counter-environment’, a way of making the invisible, visible. To McLuhan, new media create new environments. And these environments saturate perceptions so much so that their own character is invisible. He states: ‘The artist as a maker of anti-environments permits us to perceive that much is newly environmental and therefore most active in transforming situations.’ By definition, the normal person, who is well-adjusted, has been brainwashed by his or her environment. McLuhan hastens to add this does not mean that the prevailing environment is bad, just that its effect upon us is total and ruthless. It is the artist who refuses the brainwashing. Without the intervention of the artist, society merely adapts to the technology. McLuhan uses the analogy of the Emperor’s New Clothes; as he says: ‘We see the Emperor’s old clothes. Only children and artists are antisocial enough to see the new ones.’ McLuhan points to this quote from Picasso: “When I paint, I always try to give an image people are not expecting and beyond that, one they reject. That’s what interests me. It is in this sense that I mean I always try to be subversive.” Picasso then goes on to say he reassembles things in an unexpected way that is disturbing enough for a viewer to be unable to escape the questions raised. McLuhan cites this as an example of how the artist cannot but help correct the unconscious bias of perception in a culture. Jokes also work in this manner.

In the early decades of the 20th century German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin thought deeply about the attraction of images, movies and the processes involved. He argued that the representation of human beings ‘by means of an apparatus’ had made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s ‘self-alienation’. He argued:

\[\text{The nature of this use can be grasped through the fact that the film actor’s estrangement in the face of the apparatus ... is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s appearance (Erscheinung) in a mirror - a}\]

75 Ibid.
76 *Counter Blast* (1969), 33.
77 *McLuhan, Through the Vanishing Point*, 241-42.
favourite theme of the Romantics. But now the mirror image (Bild) has become detachable from the person mirrored and is transportable.\textsuperscript{78}

He also proposed that the very nature of a movie, with its close-ups (which expand space) and slow-motions (which extend movement), disclosed an ‘optical unconscious’ - allowing us to see the diverse aspects of reality that we are normally blind to.\textsuperscript{79} And in fact, because of the pressures of modernity (a bombardment of stimuli for the new urban dweller at the turn of the previous century), film provided a ‘therapeutic release of unconscious energies’.\textsuperscript{80} Film’s role was to ‘train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily’\textsuperscript{81}- ie, live with the technologies of the machine age, or of ‘phantasmagoria’, as Benjamin scholar Michael Jennings described it.\textsuperscript{82}

Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, in his outline of the history of visual culture, that the basis of industrial society is the ‘remarkable ability’ of humans to absorb and interpret visual information. Visual culture does not depend on pictures on their own, but on the modern tendency to picture or visualise experience. This radically marks us from previous eras, Mirzoeff proposes.\textsuperscript{83} In the 19th century, he says, photography transformed human memory into a visual archive. ‘The newness and importance of photography stem from its most obvious capability: its rendering of a precise moment in time.’\textsuperscript{84} This last idea is explored by French structuralist Roland Barthes, in his seminal text on the nature of photography, \textit{Camera Lucida}. He notes the ‘disturbance’ photography has caused civilisation, creating the advent of ‘myself as other’ and a dissociation from identity.\textsuperscript{85} But it is his observation that a photograph transforms subject into object and the viewer then experiences a ‘micro-version of death’ - ‘I am truly becoming a specter’ that I particularly want to pay attention to.\textsuperscript{86} He reminds us that the original forms of theatre were a cult of the dead, actors designating the body as simultaneously living and dead. The Japanese Noh mask, the painted face of Chinese theatre, the rice paint makeup of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Benjamin, \textit{The Work of Art}, 32.
\item Ibid, 37.
\item Ibid, 38.
\item Ibid, 26.
\item Ibid, 14.
\item Nicholas Mirzoeff, \textit{An Introduction to Visual Culture} (London, Routledge, 1999), 5-6.
\item Ibid, 69.
\item Ibid, 13-14.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Figure 6. Clarissa Regan, *Lost in Facebook 2*, 2010. Ceramic. 90 x 60 x 70cm.
the Indian Katha Kali, can all be connected to this, he argues:

*Now it is the same relation which I find in the Photograph, however ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.*

Death is denied in our culture with the ‘distractedly alive’, Barthes argues. If we no longer adhere to religion, then it may surface somewhere ‘...perhaps in this image, which produces Death while trying to preserve life’. He describes his reaction to looking through old photographs of his mother, who had recently passed away. The knowledge that she would die informs his viewing: ‘I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.’ Earlier, he had proposed the notion of a ‘punctum’, a detail in the photograph which ‘pricks, stings or cuts me’ - thereby attracting or repelling the viewer. ‘This punctum, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always the death of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die.’

One of the earliest French theorists to write about the proliferation of images in our society was Guy Debord, a member of the Situationist art group during the 1960s and the author of *The Society of The Spectacle.* Debord further developed Karl Marx’s concepts of the *fetishism of the commodity* and Georg Lukac’s *reification* (making something into an object which appears to have a fixed life of its own), where the nature of social relations is expressed by relationships between objects. The world of the commodity dominates one’s own lived experience. In his view the ‘spectacle’ of society was not just simply the collection of images that circulate in Western societies, but a ‘social relationship between people that is mediated by images’. The domination of the capitalist economy on social life had downgraded *being* into *having* and this had

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87 Ibid, 31.
88 Ibid, 92.
89 Ibid, 96.
90 Ibid, 27.
91 Ibid, 96.
92 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle.*
94 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* 12.
now shifted further from having to appearing. Debord described the spectacle as a ‘technological version of the exiling of human powers’ into a world beyond. It not only blurred borders between self and world, but in fact overwhelmed the individual under a falsehood of an organisation of appearances:

*The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate. The recognition and consumption of commodities is at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible.*

The spectacular abundance of objects offers a false choice between illusory qualities. Fallacious oppositions are created between groups of objects or events - ‘pseudoplayful entusiasms are aroused by an endless succession of ludicrous competitions, from sports to elections’. Ultimately, he described our need for representation as ‘abnormal and a ‘pathology’ which compensated for a tortured feeling of being at the margins of existence. In my work *Oscillation* (fig. 7 & 8) this theme of a detachment from traditional space-time co-ordinates, and the isolation it may provoke, are explored. These disembodied and altered spatial representations/presentations of ourselves and others via mediation essentially provoke new ways of seeing oneself, and of seeing and interacting with others. In this work an FM transmitter was placed beneath the ceramic head - resulting in the figure both receiving and broadcasting, creating a perpetual state of oscillation/isolation. I materialised radio waves as copper wire, creating a symbolic resonant magnetic field. A microphone was placed next to the head, and the sounds contained within the vitrine (mostly background sounds echoing the movements of passing audience members) were transmitted to a nearby radio. The radio also broadcast a steady hum of static and the occasional pulse of feedback. When the lights were dimmed in the gallery space, the blue light of the radio transmitter created an unearthly glow, while the copper reflected flashes of light and gave a hint of waves of movement inside. I used fragments of mirrors for the eyes of the head, to add to the idea I was

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95 Ibid, 16.
96 Ibid, 17-18.
97 Ibid, 56.
98 Ibid, 16-17.
99 Ibid, 56.
Figure 7. Clarissa Regan, *Oscillation*, (detail), 2012. Ceramic, mirror, copper wire, FM transmitter, ex-Army headphones, brass lock, glass and wood vitrine, radio. 100 x 100 x 60cm.
exploring a state of eternal feedback - eyes that do not see, only reflect. Although I am referencing radio, (and the early days of radio being akin to tapping into an ocean of ether, which is discussed further in Chapter Three), I was also thinking about the act of sitting in front of a computer screen and broadcasting one’s own blog on the internet. How like-minded people become self-selecting on certain social media sites. How that act has also become a feedback loop - both transmission and reception; a projection of ideas and thoughts, and a receiving, instantaneously. A frequency that becomes isolating. I also placed a lock on the glass door of the vitrine, but it has been reversed. The lock is accessible from the inside. The person inside the box has the capacity to unlock their own situation. Interestingly, writer and popular culture critic John David Edbert has identified ‘resonance’ as one of the key characteristics of the internet and digitisation generally:

*If industrialisation was all about mass production, then electronic technology is based on feedback and resonance: the instantaneous proliferation of series is part of its very nature as a medium.*

I was also aiming to capture a certain other-worldliness associated with early radio - ‘the wireless’, with its connection to the ether, a vast ocean of radio signals creating a world supernaturally blanketed by ‘human consciousness afloat on the air’, as media scholar Jeffery Sconce described it. Sconce, who has documented the impact of the 19th and early 20th century electronic media on the popular imagination, says the new electronic wireless telegraph and radio provided the unsettling paradox of presence within absence. The life-force of electricity seemed to allow for mechanical dissociation of consciousness. As Sconce says:

*The early fantasy of contacting ghostly consciousness via wireless had played on the initial fascination with radio as a form of electronically disembodied consciousness calling to earth across the void of space through the void of eternity.*

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102 Ibid, 81.
103 Ibid, 93.
For Sconce, the sentient qualities that have been associated with television and later the computer - their qualities of liveliness, intimacy and presence - result from the continuous flux of moving images, sound and information that comes out of these media. Both Scone and Peters led me to the conclusion that in examining the cultural history of electronic communications (and the link with the supernatural) that we invest metaphysical powers onto our communication devices, whatever form those devices may take down the ages. And that our electronic communication devices form part of a desire to extend our range. Summarising other theorists I have discussed in this chapter, and reflecting on my own works, Barthes’s insight that death returns in the form of photography (despite contemporary society’s earnest attempts to banish it) alongside film theory about the gaze, (and particularly Lacan’s mirror phase), raise ideas about the nature of self and self-consciousness seeking itself out through the use of a projected form of the imaginary. In the next chapter I shall discuss some of the technological advances that have taken place over the past decade that also affect notions of subjectivity. I shall discuss the impact on society and individuals, and some of my artworks relating to these ideas.