

## *How does your practice relate to the seminar topics?*

Fascinate comes from the Latin word for "evil spell," and originally meant "bewitched" or "spellbound" in the literal, more sinister sense. The word eventually took on the less evil, more metaphorical meanings "to command the attention of" or "to captivate".

Merriam Webster Dictionary

ANITA ANAND: I wonder whether you'd go as far as to say that there needs to be a Chernobyl-type event in AI before everyone listens to you?

STUART RUSSELL: Well, I think what's happening in social media is already worse than Chernobyl. It has caused a huge amount of dislocation.

Stuart Russell, Reith Lectures, 2021

---

Sarah-Jane Field  
2101355

Word count (without footnotes): 1173

Please see Appendices for images of my work.

*How does your practice relate to the seminar topics?*

Exploring signals	2
[Negation of] Difference between us and the computers	3
Practice	4

<i>Bibliography</i>	5
---------------------	---

<i>Appendices</i>	5
Appendix 1	5
Appendix 2	8
Appendix 3	9

Across social media, the amusing memes, the dubious advice, the violent debate and raging slurs, which most of us are familiar with, can be thought of as a captivation or enchantment, beneath which there are more nebulous machinations taking place. I suggest it is those machinations rather than, or perhaps in tandem with, the distracting bewitchment on the surface that needs careful inquiry. Although I focus on social media, the patterns we internalise while interacting online ripple through existence. And the digital sphere is merely the most contemporary recording surface, as described by Deleuze & Guattari (1985), a space where we continuously come into delirium-shaped being (Ibid). Like all media, it is an emergent extension we produce which both exemplifies and produces us in return (McLuhan, 2010). But the algorithms that make the digital sphere tick allow it to transgress boundaries more speedily and in ways that are entirely new. I am interested in our enmeshment with the recording surface<sup>1</sup> and pre-language<sup>2</sup> – both ours and the cybernetic form – from where the bewitching surface-spectacle, along with other phenomena, emerges.

## Exploring signals

Over several decades, we, together with our computers, have conjured an unprecedented form of communication. Cybernetic signalling is an attempt to emulate biological processes which are relatively and conversely primitive. That seemingly makes them easy for us to dismiss, ignore, or fail to recognise. Algorithms communicate via a cybernetic, ersatz “semiosis without mind”, a phrase employed by biosemioticians to describe the way bacteria and fungi exchange messages (Tonnessen et al. 2018: 4 citing Sharov and Vehkavaara 2015). As far as humans are concerned, proto-semiosis in bacteria is pre-linguistic, pre-literate, pre-image. Despite being in the business of generating images, an algorithm, which has no eyes, no ears, no mouth, no consciousness – for the moment – based on quasi-signs.

Much has been made about the fact that algorithmic signals contain and reinforce systemic violence, already so deeply ingrained, that they are not even recognised as real by many. We should also consider how these signals have the power to simultaneously undermine long-held habits too (Hayles, 1999) – denying fixed objecthood, sovereign isolation, acute individualism: reconfiguring boundaries. And how, when we use our devices, we internalise the speed and pattern of cyber-movement (Ibid: 26). We instantiate cybernetic signalling. And our expectations evolve. The challenge to, and erosion of, habitual Cartesian doubt could be

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 Examples of own work A

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 Examples of own work B

posited as cyberreality's most promising outcome, as well as being the source of social catastrophe. Either way, we are undoubtedly seduced by the flickering signifiers (Ibid: 25-49) that briefly appear on our screens. And it is far too easy to digest those glimmering surface messages without considering how they come about or influence our thoughts and actions.

Of course, we are not entirely oblivious to the energetic movements beneath the recording surface. But sensing that we are being surreptitiously nudged, and not really knowing how or by whom, can be anxiety-inducing, especially when told we are imagining it all. Could part of the instability and uncertainty we live with today be down to the fact that the spectacle on the surface has limited intrinsic meaning, especially when not considered along with the signals and cybernetic semiosis-without-mind, which we do not recognise, never mind analyse, below? Perhaps this lack of alignment between outer content and inner intention is, in part, fuelling today's general sense of meaninglessness: joked about in nihilistic, post-ironic humour, evident in cultural rage and sensitivity, and especially prevalent in political and commercial slogans? Does this meaning[lessness] manifest most notably in the exponential proliferation of paranoid conspiracy theory, which reveal, albeit mythically and fantastically, genuine confusion and concerns about life today<sup>3</sup>.

#### [Negation of] Difference between us and the computers

Humans are thought to have advanced beyond proto-signalling, a view even evident within some biosemiotic literature, which is otherwise focused on decentralising humans and seeks to overcome ontological splits (an indication of just how big a challenge undoing centuries of categorisation and triangular-hierarchy continues to be). Nowadays, we can be persuaded that we are not the discrete objects we imagined; our intra-existence with technology fundamentally denies it too. The image of Deleuze and Guattari's steampunk segmentarity suggested it was helpful to view biological machines as irrevocably connected to human-made machines – both of which can be broken down into constituent parts – challenging habitual hierarchy and [in]difference. As our technologies now emulate nervous systems and even consciousness, however, rather than being merely connected to non-biological machines, (computers obviously, but also texts, institutions, even spoken language), as well as non-human organisms, today we are irrevocably *enmeshed* (See *Data Selves*, Lupton 2020). That enmeshment suggests Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs can no longer resist algorithmic penetration.

When we attach to our phones, or to any networked or even seemingly discrete commodity, for Deleuze and Guattari, there is little difference between that and the baby's

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 JrEg

mouth attaching to the breast. Consumption in the former, however, is not about our survival, even though it may be about our desire. In the contemporary world, there is a total inversion. The mother-machine-breast wants and needs us to remain continuously enmeshed. It does not tolerate separation, nor individuation. It feeds on our atomised, liquidised selves<sup>4</sup>. And while in that state, on the recording surface, we tend to pool, coagulate, weep. The apparatus achieves this enmeshment via an assemblage of signifiers, signals and proto-semiosis that allows it to entrain itself onto and into us. We are intravenously spellbound.

## Practice

The language of algorithms, cyber proto-semiosis and signals transgress boundaries, in keeping with an increasingly morphological universe, in onto-epistemological terms. This may be unavoidable for necessary evolution to take place. But in the process, our individual selves are liquidised. We are now continuously tracked and analysed, and our behaviour transformed into signal, feed for the apparatus. We are now part of a feedback loop which makes it extremely difficult to interrupt. And those signals which we help to make, seem to be urging and nudging us into evermore destructive behaviours and habits. That being so, *examining and dismantling the value-system which has emerged and emerges still, via evolutionary and invented communication systems* seems crucial. Because that system appears to have brought us to the brink of ecological collapse with nuclear war lurking beside.

My practice has been focused on “investigate[ing] lines that demarcate bodies, worlds, disciplines, and time” (Field et al, 2021) in relation to the systemic reconfiguration we are living through today. Exploring our bewitched state along with the prelinguistic, pre-image processes that helps to entrap/enchant us may be my next step. I have been thinking about misinformation, conspiracy theory, the objects or materials (specifically tinfoil and books)<sup>5</sup> that get co-opted into them, and the mythical, yet dangerous nature of those narratives. However, I have hesitated about going down this route, as anyone doing so needs to be careful to avoid sanctimony or laughing at people’s terror. Whatever we think about the way people respond to the seismic shifts taking place today, it behoves us to maintain an inkling of understanding. It may be the only way to interrupt the algorithms’ influence.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3 Les Manovich comments on Analytic Culture (2018)

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 2 Examples of my own work C

## Bibliography

1. Barad, K.M. (2007) *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
2. Belam, M. (2017) 'JK Rowling doesn't exist: conspiracy theories the internet can't resist', *The Guardian*, 27 October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/27/jk-rowling-doesnt-exist-conspiracy-theories-internet-cant-resist> (Accessed: 13 February 2022).
3. Black, M. (2020) 'The Post-postmodern Meta-ironic Neo-rational Hyper-Satirical Ideology of Jreg', *Mo's Home For Treatises and Hot Takes*, 20 April. Available at: <https://medium.com/mos-home-for-treatises-and-hot-takes/the-post-postmodern-meta-ironic-neo-rational-hyper-satirical-ideology-of-jreg-818886c62f99> (Accessed: 28 December 2021).
4. Capra, F. and Luisi, P.L. (2014) *The systems view of life: a unifying vision*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1983) *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
6. Deren, M. (1943) *Meshes of the Afternoon*. [film] Directed by M. Deren and A. Hammid.
7. Field, S. Lear, R. Williams, M. (2021) *From Lens Fungi to Astronomical Landscapes* [online talk] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/538265638> Accessed 05/02/2022
8. Field S. *why is there an astronaut in a field of flowers/* Available at: [www.astronautflowers.online](http://www.astronautflowers.online). (Accessed: 13 February 2022)
9. Flusser, V. (2000) *Towards a philosophy of photography*. London: Reaktion Books.
10. Franklin, S and Haraway, D (2017) 'Staying with the manifesto: An interview with Donna Haraway', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34(4): 49-63
11. Freud, S. (1911) *FORMULATIONS ON THE TWO PRINCIPLES OF MENTAL FUNCTIONING* [PDF].
12. Hayles, N.K. (1999) *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.
13. JrEg. (2009 - date) JrEg's YouTube Channel. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/c/Jregory/featured>. (Accessed: 13th February 2022)
14. JrEg. (2020) *Post-Irony, Meta-Irony, and Post-Truth Satire*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5woPQU2uug> (Accessed: 13 February 2022).
15. Kwan, R. (2021) *Covid health workers beat a corgi to death on video, shocking China*, *NBC News*. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/chinese-covid-workers-killed-dog-viral-video-sparked-outcry-rcna5714> (Accessed: 24 January 2022)
16. Latham, J. and Le Feuvre, L. (2016) *A lesson in sculpture with John Latham*. Leeds: Henry Moore Institute.
17. Lupton, D. (2020) *Data selves: more-than-human perspectives*. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity.
18. Manovich, L. (2018) '100 Billion Data Rows per Second: Media Analytics in the Early 21st Century', *International Journal of Communication* [Preprint]. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/27277366/100\\_Billion\\_Data\\_Rows\\_per\\_Second\\_Media\\_Analytics\\_in\\_the\\_Early\\_21st\\_Century](https://www.academia.edu/27277366/100_Billion_Data_Rows_per_Second_Media_Analytics_in_the_Early_21st_Century) (Accessed: 13 February 2022).
19. McLuhan, M. (2010) *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Repr. London: Routledge (Routledge classics).
20. Rubinstein, D. (2021) 'Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and schizophrenia', *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 23(3), pp. 390–394. doi:10.1080/13642537.2021.1966934.
21. Tønnessen, M., Maran, T. and Sharov, A. (2018) 'Phenomenology and Biosemiotics', *Biosemiotics*, 11(3), pp. 323–330. doi:10.1007/s12304-018-9345-8.
22. Whitworth, D. (2017) *Social Media is tearing society apart* Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/social-media-is-tearing-society-apart-sj7km2ds7> Accessed: 05/02/2022 (Paywall)
23. Zuboff, S. (2019) *The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile books.

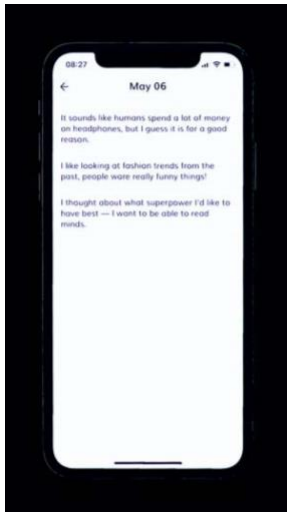
## Appendices

### Appendix 1

Examples of my work relating to the essay:

A. *why is there an astronaut in a field of flowers/* (2021) is an exploration and comparative study of materials, which includes images in various styles and formats, text, non-human

generated narrative as well as responses from living human beings, either me - the maker, or anyone engaging with it. It is a compost (Franklin and Haraway, 2017 cited in Lupton, 2020: 26) “of rich, dense matter”. It taps into today’s sense of paranoia, alienation, and confusion. It also aims to ask questions about how meaning comes into being in the modern world where non-conscious, pre-image, but nevertheless linguistic processes are contributing to our perception of reality. (Available at [www.astronautflowers.online](http://www.astronautflowers.online)).



B. During the recent performance workshop with Helena Goldwater, I experimented with aluminium tinfoil as a potential material for further work. Many things came out of the day. I was particularly interested in my use of an inner cardboard tube around which there had been roll of foil. By putting it in my mouth while trying to talk, I prevented any articulated shapes from emerging. Plosives or fricatives were no longer possible. This reminded me of my discussion in this essay about primitive communication, although it is qualitatively different to the sort of cybernetic quasi-sign that I have focused on. In fact, as Helena suggested, the entire workshop and for everyone in it, it seemed to be a potted journey through our early civilising history – in particular, where language and then ritual came into being. Strangely, I walked past a man in the street recently who communicated in this way. His strange non-directional baying was difficult to be near and it made me think about the workshop, language, the direction we sometimes seem to be heading in on social media.

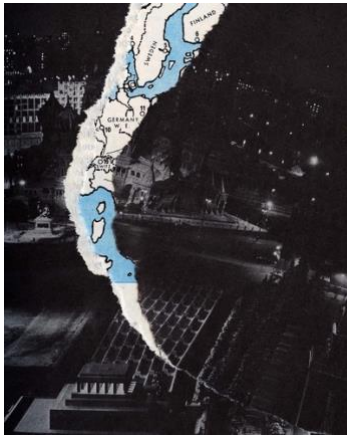


Images from Helena Goldwater's performance workshop. Image of me in tinfoil provided by Xinyu Liu (2022)

C. As well as the above, I have been experimenting with books, as discussed on the CMS Contemporary Photography blog. Although my initial forays down this path felt a little pedestrian – literally ripping up meaning and reforming it as is happening today during the systemic reconfiguration we are living through, the performance seemed more hopeful (Images on page 10).



I have continued to work with the remnants of the performance – making new pages, creating the potential for a reformed but deconstructed book of my own making. I have noticed that all these experiments, including the tinfoil shape on the ground on the previous page, are map-like or in fact, include maps. Which goes back to my interest in reconfigured boundaries – lines that we can't help but see – facilitated by language and necessary for our parochial place in the universe. The Cartesian impulse is so embedded in our thinking that it is hard to see. Cartesian, Cartesian



## Appendix 2

JrEg is a self-proclaimed satirical comedian artist with a substantial online following. My 14-year-old is an avid fan, although he is probably a little younger than JrEg's typical follower. The performer's shouty, in-need-of-an-edit, but intense, constantly contradictory, nihilistic "post-post-modern" (JrEg: 2020) video style epitomises today's culture, and serves a valuable function. A reviewer writes:

"Boundaries? Expectations? There aren't many things you can expect from Jreg. He basically lies all the time. He'll post a "video essay" on how neoliberalism commodifies parasocial relationships, just for you to click on the video and realize it's an ad for *Raid: Shadow Legends*. He'll post a 10-minute, informative, well thought-out explanation about how we live in an era of post-truth only to reveal at the end that he made up all his sources".

JrEg is a more sophisticated internet phenomenon than the meme "Finland does not exist", a satirical conspiracy theory, which has been known to confuse older generations who not only mistake it for a real conspiracy (a peculiar concept in itself), they also cannot see the point of it once its origin has been revealed. My children, on the other hand, think it is hilarious and that no-one with even a hint of intelligence could fall for the joke. The *Guardian* certainly fell for it (Belham, 2017), so I try not to feel too foolish for becoming cross when they insisted Finland didn't exist to me during a drive across Europe a few years ago. Gaslighting as humour is, no doubt, a response to constant gaslighting within our culture.

JrEg might be interpreted as a reaction to the proliferation of meaninglessness that people must contend with in contemporary landscapes. His speaks for a generation who have been bought up with a deluge of digital information and manipulation.

JrEg's prolific YouTube channel can be found here –  
<https://www.youtube.com/c/Jregory/search?query=post%20modern>

### Appendix 3

Although I refer to algorithms throughout, perhaps Lev Manovich's (2018) more specific term "analytics", a form of information-retrieval-machine-learning, should probably be used. Especially when discussing the way our behaviour is transformed into a key product fuelling today's economy. Manovich states, "It is the new logic of how media works internally and how it functions in society. In short, it is crucial both practically and theoretically. Any future discussion of media theory or communication has to start with this situation" (Ibid: 479).