

Investigating The Perfect Crime

by

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ABSTRACT

At first appearances, this thesis covers old ground about the impact of technology on humanity, but a closer look reveals an escalation of the stakes in contemporary society. This project hopes to raise more questions about ceding privacy, autonomy and individuality. I take my lead from Jean Baudrillard's book, *The Perfect Crime: the Murder of Reality*, which provides the conceptual model for my analysis, art installation and studio-based research. I use an experimental approach that creates associations between writings, images and visual objects in juxtaposition. Rather than trying to solve the crime, I use the crime as a lens to examine the cultural narratives generated by Baudrillard's theory while constructing a representational world of the crime in my thesis exhibition. I probe the act of changing from real to virtual with writings by Baudrillard, cultural critic Byung-Chul Han and historian Yuval Harari and I incorporate time by drawing on the writings of physicist Ilya Prigogine and philosopher Henri Bergson whose concept of "duration" defines time without space. Is the murder of reality a paradox? Or is there a complete elimination of the real to create a unipolar situation, a disembodied humanity? What does the collapse of representation leave us with?

Keywords: Crime, Time, Big Data, Paradox, Baudrillard, Virtual, Harari, Bergson, Duration, Prigogine, Becoming

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	3
Murder or Becoming?.....	5
Grand-Guignol.....	8
Time Multiplicity.....	9
Murder Weapon.....	11
CONTEXT REVIEW	14
Invented Fiction.....	14
Vital Illusion.....	15
Time and Memory.....	16
Cut-out Shadows.....	18
METHODOLOGY.....	20
STUDIO PRACTICE	23
Duality Becomes Paradox.....	23
Thesis Exhibition.....	25
CONCLUSION.....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	37

List of Figures

Figure 1. Process photos of ‘Duality’ – Free Bin.....	24
Figure 2. Duality – Two possible configurations.....	24
Figure 3. Duality – Duality becomes possibility.....	24
Figure 4. Duality – Add blood	24
Figure 5. Duality – Add blood-soaked sponge	24
Figure 6. Duality – Representation of paradox.....	24
Figure 7. Perpetrator-Victims – Graphic Rendering.....	27
Figure 8. Provocative word phrases in the three Conflicting Time Lines.....	28
Figure 9. Conflicting Time Lines – Graphic Rendering.....	29
Figure 10. Hacking Humanity –Sculpture.....	31
Figure 11. Hacking Humanity Detail.....	31
Figure 12. Hacking Humanity Detail	31
Figure 13. Hacking Humanity Detail	31
Figure 14. Life Data Recorder – Do Not Open - Sculpture.....	32
Figure 15. Life Data Recorder – Front View	32
Figure 16. Becoming Data – 42 min Video Loop.....	33
Figure 17. Murder or Becoming? – 2 min Video Loop.....	34

INTRODUCTION

During the decades before and after the turn of the millennium, a global phenomenon has rapidly overtaken our state of being. In his book *The Perfect Crime*,¹ Jean Baudrillard called it “The Murder of Reality.” He argued that Virtual Reality had murdered the real. The crime was perfect because the perpetrator has never been identified and “the corpse of the real itself has never been found.”² I took on the challenge of investigating Baudrillard’s perfect crime because I saw the murder continuing to manifest itself with stunning new methods of predation. If his “paradox of reality and illusion”³ held true, what began as optimism at what technological advancement could bring humanity became horror at the inevitability of one-dimensional human life.

“The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image”;⁴ this condition is part of what Baudrillard is railing against: the loss of the physical body in our time, or what Terrence Gordon, in his biography of Marshal McLuhan referred to as “the age of discarnate mankind.”⁵ I probe our dual lives as beings grounded in reality and as data simulations of ourselves in the expanding digital environment. My investigation cannot solve the perfect crime but it can begin to ask questions about how we can interpret our era and our place in it. Are we actors moving back and forth between the two states of being? Or, has one polarity overtaken the other? Exploring the timeline of the crime is essential to my investigation and determining its past, present and future tense will be key to that exploration. Has the murder already occurred? Is it on going? Is it another paradox or an act of becoming?

¹ Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*, 1995, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso 1996), 1

² Baudrillard, *Crime*, iv

³ Baudrillard, *Crime*, 7

⁴ Judith Halberstam, Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)

⁵ Terrence Gordon. *Marshal McLuhan, Escape Into Understanding* (Toronto: Stoddard publishing, 1997), 224

I admit to my involvement in this and other crimes. During my twenty-five year career as a film director, I did a ten year stint directing TV-Crime series, including episodes of “72 Hours,”⁶ “Forensic Factor,”⁷ and “Exhibit A,”⁸ broadcast on the CBC, CTV, Discovery International and numerous broadcasters worldwide. From my experience, the often-repeated phrase, reality is stranger than fiction, aptly describes the murders featured in these series with their bizarre narratives and unlikely perpetrators and victims. The production unit included a group of researchers who dug out the stories from police files, newspapers, books and magazines. The producers would decide on the stories before handing over the case file to the director, and to one of the series screenwriters, both of us setting out to creatively fictionalize the real human drama that took place, in time for the its digital representation on air. These series afforded me insights into the human dimension of crime including the societal trauma and the far reaching psychological affects on those associated with the crime. Questions arose from this past experience and research: In what ways are we in the collective throes of radical transformation? In what way does *The Perfect Crime* speak to our contemporary society? What proof is there of the virtual overtaking the real in our current social and cultural context?

My objectives are to create resonating juxtapositions of theories and visual concepts through writing and image/object making. For the purposes of this thesis, I’m playing a virtual detective working on the puzzle of the crime without having all its pieces. Maybe through the lens of the crime, with its mystery and symbolism, I can find “my relationship to my era.”⁹

⁶ “72 Hours: True Crime,” Directed by Jonny Silver (Toronto, Kensington Communications 2006)

⁷ “Forensic Factor,” Directed by Jonny Silver (Toronto, Exploration Productions, 2003)

⁸ “Exhibit A,” Directed by Jonny Silver (Toronto, Kensington Communications, 2001)

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, Radio-Canada video interview, 1959

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I utilize my core text from Baudrillard's *The Perfect Crime* and add to it the societal effects of digital technology as found in Byung-Chul Han's *In the Swarm* and *Topology of Violence* and I introduce historian, Yuval Harari's critique of dataism through his ideas in *Homo Deus* and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. From my research period, Baudrillard's system of always-already time is juxtaposed with two other time systems developed by philosopher, Henri Bergson, and his concept of Duration and by physicist, Ilya Prigogine's notion of becoming. I situate Baudrillard's argument at the centre of the discussion then I proceed to subject it to critique and counter-hypotheses. My objectives do not exclude the role played by intuition and imagination, our understanding of exterior and interior time, and our emotional experiences within our consciousness.

How do we perceive ourselves in the world? How do we interact with others? By what means do we seek out knowledge and meaning? Taken together these questions form part of Baudrillard's "vital illusion:"¹⁰ the dreams, aspirations and realities by which we live our lives. Without the illusion, there is nothing and nothing is what the future holds for us. It sounds depressing but the act of saying it actually gives hope. "The perfect crime is the murder of the 'vital illusion' of the world: it is a crime because it is a destruction, and is perfect because it has already occurred, has no motives, no possible suspects and almost nothing by way of clues. At the same time, though, this moment of the perfect crime is when illusion comes to be."¹¹

Within the vital illusion lies the operational potential for philosophy to go beyond science, reaching beyond what we're given, to include mystery in the human experience. What

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*, 1995, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso 1996), iv

¹¹ Paul Hegarty. Jean Baudrillard, *Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004)

begins as Cartesian duality in Baudrillard's process ends up as the complexity we're faced with in our present era. Paradox, the "generative power of opposites"¹² is given special status in his narrative suggesting that meaning comes from contradictory statements and conflicting preconceived notions or absurdities. His purpose is to provoke new thought and challenge what is reasonable or possible. This wider paradoxical yet unscientific net may expose traces of dramatic, even nostalgic residue previously hidden in his text.

Baudrillard's fragmented, quasi crime novel/philosophical treatise cannot provide a solution to the crime nor can he name a perpetrator or victim; that is what makes the crime perfect. But perfection is not a good incentive to attempt understanding, and the unsatisfactory ending of Baudrillard's unsolved crime runs the risk of frustrating the course of my thesis. And yet, I pursue my course of action by treating the crime like a cold case: an unsolved crime from the past connected to the present by its potential for revelation. I deconstruct Baudrillard's perfect crime proposition as stated in his book and build a series of questions that encourage discussion around it. If solutions are absent, the process of inquiry leading to the causes and effects of the crime might lead to formerly unexplored theories and speculations. Baudrillard adopts a definition of media's mandate to include consumerism, lifestyle, pop culture and almost any form of human interaction. He originates the idea of disembodiment as one of technology's causalities. Baudrillard's crime is a prescient warning of Han's notion of the digital person: "Homo digitalis often takes the stage anonymously. He is not a nobody but a somebody – an anonymous somebody."¹³ The crime seems to travel in time to join Harari's terrifying tableau of our biochemical lives being outperformed by computer algorithms and the potential for the total commodification of life: "Dataism thereby collapses the barrier between animals and machines,

¹² Paul Hegarty. *Jean Baudrillard, Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004)

¹³ Byung-Chul Han. *In the Swarm* (Cambridge, MIT Press. 2017) 11

and expects electronic algorithms to eventually decipher and outperform biochemical algorithms... It should be emphasized however, that Dataism isn't anti-humanist. It has nothing against human experiences. It just doesn't think they are intrinsically valuable."¹⁴

Murder or Becoming?

The motive of the crime is unclear. Some argue that holdouts from the Enlightenment are to blame due to their rationalism, techno centrism and universality, fuelling the full functioning machine of political, corporate and financial progress. They point to the soaring bank towers in the city landscape with their drawers of greed as proof of absolute domination. But even capitalism and its security wing cannot be assumed to be the murderer of the real because the capitalists themselves would be, like all other humans, the eventual victims of their own crime (assuming they would not undertake a suicide pact.) But they are suspect. When corporatists introduced Artificial Intelligence to the world, it was through seductive images of mini robots programmed to do the caretaking jobs of humanity, and cute robot cartoon characters that could receive and emit emotions through their antenna. We continue to be seduced by the evolution of robots to larger than life humanoids with the ability to conduct symphony orchestras.¹⁵ Are we aware though that the corporatist contraptions will eventually “decide for us who we are and what we should know about ourselves?”¹⁶ Is this evidence of malicious aforethought? The suggestion of criminal intent contradicts Baudrillard's claims that “the crime has no motivation and perpetrator, and therefore remains perfectly inexplicable.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Yuval Harari. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 2015. Trans. Harari (Toronto, Signal Books, 2017) 428

¹⁵ Maeve Campbell. “Android Opera, Scary Beauty, by Keiichiro Shibuya at the New National Theatre” (Tokyo March 2019) Euronews. 07/02/2020.

¹⁶ Yuval Harari. *21 Lessons For The 21st Century* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2018) 326

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*, 1995, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso 1996), v

Clues are surfacing implicating AI as the entity that has indeed taken over the discourse: in *This Is The Future*¹⁸ a 2019 exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario, one of the videos by German artist Hito Steyerl featured footage of war-torn Syria circa 2016 and the chaos on its local streets. Over these images of destruction and human suffering, on-screen subtitles indicated an off-camera conversation in progress between an interrogator and Siri (the intelligent interface by Apple; an acronym for Speech Interpretation and Recognition Interface.) The interrogator asked Siri about the reality portrayed in the video images: Who destroyed this city? When were the houses appropriated? To which Siri replied, “I’m not sure if I understand your question.” Siri’s artful answer effectively reflected responsibility back to the interrogator and won control of the agenda for discussion. Does pure data Siri have anything to gain by controlling the discussion?

Since the writing of the original French version of Baudrillard’s book in 1995, the proliferation of the Internet in 1999 and the release of the iPhone in 2010, we have increasingly become walking dualities of information and flesh like David Cronenberg’s visualizations of biomorphic objects inside living organisms created for his sci-fi film, *Videodrome*.¹⁹ We are not in control of our personal information. We feed Big Data, a system without governance or ethics. “I’m jealous of me”²⁰ is an indication we are being convinced that our digital identity is more desirable than our real one. In China, the largest selfie app, Meitu, a photo enhancement app with four hundred and fifty-five million active monthly users is turning itself into a photo-social platform²¹ to extend its influence. The inventor of the app becomes an immediate millionaire glad to expand his brand by harvesting more data while becoming part of the global collector elite:

¹⁸ Hito Steyerl: “Hell Yeah We Fuck Die” (2016) Art Gallery of Ontario “This is the Future.” 2019

¹⁹ “Videodrome” Directed by David Cronenberg, (1983, Canadian Film Development)

²⁰ Séverine Pierron. “The Selfie Harm Project” *Le Monde* (English) January 2020

²¹ Celia Chen. “China’s biggest selfie app Meitu turns its eye to social networking” *South China Morning Post*. April 2018

one of the ways the system perpetuates itself. Five of the six largest companies in the world are data technology businesses leveraging their data with advanced analytics technologies to continue growth and influence.²² “It’s not data that’s being exploited, it’s the people that are being exploited”²³ says Edward Snowden, insisting that browsers and service providers are institutions of power that people should not trust. This is the oppressive corporate environment in which we find mistrust, fear and desperation due to extreme political, military, financial, social and environmental imbalances. Add to this, confusion from the manipulation of information, the loss of identity, loss of the sense of belonging, disconnection from others and fragmentation of the self. Yet we believe more and more that human reality needs to be augmented and enhanced in order to fulfil itself. “Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing.”²⁴ Thus Yuval Harari converts Baudrillard’s virtual backroom into the spacious permanent residence of humanity.

Here, computer science algorithms outperform biochemical algorithms causing the distance between animals and machines to disappear. “The work of processing data should therefore be entrusted to electronic algorithms, whose capacity far exceeds that of the human brain.” Harari’s description of the man-machine duality seems to favour one polarity over the other, bringing into question the unity of Baudrillard’s paradox. Are we ready to cede the responsibility for our thoughts and actions to machines? Or are we in the midst of a natural transformation that affords us new powers and capabilities with a minimum of effort? What does radical change look like?

²² Asha Saxena. “What is Data Value and should it be viewed as a corporate Asset?” Dataversity. March 2019

²³ Chris Harris, Lauren Chadwick. “Whistleblower Edward Snowden talks data exploitation at Lisbon Web Summit” Euronews. 5 November 2019

²⁴ Yuval Harari. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 2015. Trans. Harari (Toronto, Signal Books, 2017) 428


Grand-Guignol

In Belle Époque Paris, 1897, in the backstreets of the Pigalle district, a new genre of theatre was born on the stage of Le Théâtre Du Grand-Guignol, after the popular puppet character, Guignol, a vitriolic social critic and malcontent. Taking a small former chapel on a cul-de-sac for its home, its founder, Oscar Méténier, a theatrical provocateur, set into motion a theatrical phenomenon that would hold Parisians in thrall for six decades. The wider cultural influence of the Guignol aesthetic would be manifest in crime fiction, graphic novels, radio and television drama and film noir. The naturalist melodramas portrayed life in the streets, tenements and cabarets with a cast of cops, flappers, criminals, prostitutes and profiteers. The nascent science of psychoanalysis also found its way into the playwrights' dramas. On stage, human excess played out in a series of erotic, violent, subversive and psychological one-act plays. Guignol earned its reputation as Paris's Theatre Of Horror as witnessed by Anaïs Nin: "all our nightmares of sadism and perversion were played out on that stage."²⁵ The spectacle on stage radiated to the audience, causing arguments and outbursts. Management welcomed the interaction, so much so that they employed an in-house doctor to attend to audience members who fainted during performances. Adding to the Guignol cult was the fact that two actors were accidentally killed by an apparatus in their recreation of a murder scene. Grand-Guignol had its apogee in the 1930's but began its natural decline after WWII when it had lost its shock factor, replaced now by mass loss of life and devastation in Europe. Its last director, Charles Nonon, explained how reality had caught up with the spectacle and had surpassed it: "We could never compete with Buchenwald. Before the war, everyone believed that what happened on stage was

²⁵ Mel Gordon. *Theatre of Fear and Horror- The Grisly Spectacle of the Grand Guignol of Paris, 1897-1962* (Port Townsend: Feral House 1997) 3

impossible; now we know that these things--and worse--are possible in reality."²⁶ Could this example of societal change be applied to the perfect crime? Does it illustrate that the perfect crime is not a crime but an act of becoming?

Time Multiplicity

To investigate a murder, one must calibrate the multiplicity of time frames involved: the timeline of the crime, the time of death, the time of discovery of the body, the age of the victim, the time to complete the investigation, to name a few. During my career in crime, I interviewed a forensic entomologist who was in demand across Canada for her ability to determine time of death. Known as the Bug Lady, she arrived with a kit of display cases showing row upon row of different insect species known to migrate to dead hosts. She declared at the outset that insects are the first witnesses to violent crime. Within minutes they inhabit the body, lay eggs and proliferate in a behavioral process that can be measured and studied. The time of the discovery of the body could be back-timed to the precise time of death according to the development of the insect colony. Later I came across a newspaper article mentioning the Bug Lady in a US court case that led to the exoneration of a woman who had spent seventeen years in prison for a murder she did not commit. In the original trial, no forensic entomology was employed and no insects were found on the body, which resulted in the medical examiner's testimony giving only a rough estimate of the victim's time of death. In the retrial, it was determined in the  Lady, Gail Anderson's affidavit that, given the geography, the blowfly would be the first to inhabit the corpse, but the blowfly does not fly after dark. In her opinion, the time of death occurred after

²⁶ Mel Gordon. *Theatre of Fear and Horror- The Grisly Spectacle of the Grand Guignol of Paris, 1897-1962* (Port Townsend: Feral House 1997) 40

sunset, which revised the complete timeline of the murder and confirmed a long-held alibi proving the accused was not near the crime scene. The case was dismissed and the woman was set free.²⁷ Consequently though the case remained unsolved and the real murderer was still at large. In the end it was not concrete entomological evidence but the knowledge of a time interval that cleared the accused of wrongdoing.

Are there parallels between the blowfly case and the perfect crime? Is the notion of a “time interval” worth exploring? Should the lack of evidence of the time of death deter me from continuing the investigation? Certainly Baudrillard doesn’t help by stating that the corpse of the real has never been found.

“The difference between human and stone is time”²⁸ The timeline of the crime is problematic. Determining the timeline of the crime depends on which time system to use. Baudrillard adds to this confusion by stating, “the perfection of the crime lies in the fact that it has always-already been accomplished – *perfectum*.”²⁹ He’s talking about his virtual time system that goes backward and forward simultaneously *ad infinitum*. It is the time of data in motion (data is never static.) Ilya Prigogine brings physics to the perfect crime by refuting Baudrillard’s eternal-now time theory. He uses symbolism to demonstrate how physics has perceived time through the ages starting with reversible time then correcting itself and leading to the arrow of time, representing human development as “time becoming.”³⁰ Prigogine describes time as changing like nature, going forward: its trajectory being affected by a multitude of forces and

²⁷ Diane Luckow. “SFU forensic entomologist uses blowfly evidence to exonerate American woman imprisoned for 17 years”. SFU Centre for Forensic Research’s Annual Symposium. November 2018

²⁸ Ondrej Adamek, “7 Stones” Opera Libretto (Aix-en-Provence 2018)

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*, 1995, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso 1996), 1

³⁰ Ilya Prigogine with Isabelle Stengers. *The End of Certainty- Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1997)

energies. According to Prigogine, science itself has evolved alongside the belief in the primacy of human fulfilment. Prigogine may agree with Baudrillard after all about the ability of time to contract and expand -- but go both ways simultaneously? Could I learn anything by applying Prigogine's natural progression of the "Arrow of Time" to the perfect crime? Is his progression model similar to that of Bergson? "French Philosopher, Henri Bergson, was the first to elaborate what came to be called process philosophy, which rejected static values in favour of values of motion, change, and evolution."³¹ Bergson held that the human experience is made up of mental and spiritual aspects and not just physical and material ones. His concept of "duration,"³² greatly influenced the work of Prigogine, due to its definition of time. Bergson wanted to connect imagination, human intelligence and intuition to the process of time. He defines duration as "consciousness independent of space"³³ which "can only be lived, not thought out; it runs on intuition only."³⁴ Could I occupy the non-time imagination space of Bergsonian duration to gain perspective on the crime? If I could do that without the restriction of time, could I see into Baudrillard's paradox?

Murder Weapon

The murder weapon is ironical if we accept Baudrillard's own admission: "the idea which underlies the book has never been pinned down either. That idea was the murder weapon."³⁵ It is the only mention of the murder weapon in his book and he doesn't seem convinced of his own words. In fact, there is no precise murder weapon in the perfect crime but Byung-Chul Han,

³¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "Henri Bergson" (2019)

³² Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will, An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness 1889*. trans. F.L. Pogson. Digireads.com Publishing, 2014. 3

³³ Bergson. *Time & Free Will*. 60

³⁴ Bergson. *Time & Free Will*. 60

³⁵ Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime, 1995*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso 1996), iv

speaking for the social media generation, sees violence. He agrees with Baudrillard that digitization is causing transparency and the automatic removal of human traits like arbitrariness and ambivalence in favour of functionality. Digitization continues to cause one-dimensionality where all dualities continue to collapse into each other including, subject-object, interior-exterior, male-female and positive-negative. “The violence of transparency ultimately expresses itself as the reduction of the other to the same, as the elimination of otherness”³⁶ which he warns can lead to “the positivity of its own cells ... and the prospect of being devoured by its own.”³⁷ Baudrillard’s paradox finds its expression in Han’s collapsing of polarities although Han wants to address the insidiousness of the collapse: the crime. This is welcome because it furthers the discussion about human awareness and the nature of the crime. Han speaks about the crime’s mundaneness as being hidden in its appearance and occurring continuously as a strategy for control. “Banality is the affirmation of the established power relations. Symbolic violence ensures that the order of rule is maintained without requiring the expenditure of physical violence... It stabilizes power relations very effectively because it makes them seem natural, like the fact that is questioned by no one, something that is-the-way-it-is.”³⁸

The way it is now is that many people are aware of their carbon footprint and its accumulative affect on global health and wellbeing, but they are unaware that their cyber footprint is being weaponized against them. Many are losing faith in human wisdom and are putting their trust in computer algorithms to make the decisions for their biological future. They cry out to be acknowledged without recognising that they are, like everyone else, adding to private interests.

³⁶ Byung-Chul Han. *Topology of Violence*. 2011 Trans. Amanda Demarco (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2018) 36

³⁷ Han. *Topology of Violence*. 91

³⁸ Han. *Topology of Violence*. 78

In this environment, capitalism and communism, former competing ideologies, are now data processing systems with worldwide reach. We can only look at these developments with dread. The original Baudrillard narrative with its virtual protagonist preying on the real individual seems like a dreamy meditation on loss and longing in comparison to the brutal totalitarian directives of today. Enter Yuval Harari as he takes on Baudrillard's crime scenario and beefs up the stakes. Harari's upgraded version of the crime resembles a video game set in the dark warehouses of a totalitarian regime. Only it's not a game; it's the real world and we are the real players in it. "The individual is becoming a tiny chip inside a giant system that nobody really understands... this relentless flow of data sparks new inventions and disruptions that nobody plans, controls or comprehends... as the global data-processing system becomes all-knowing and all-powerful, so connecting to the system becomes the source of all meaning."³⁹

³⁹ Yuval Harari. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 2015. Trans. Harari (Toronto, Signal Books, 2017) 449

CONTEXT REVIEW

Invented Fiction

For my contextual research, I sought out artists working in a similar vein to mine for their approaches to duality and paradox and for the manner in which they synthesized these elements in their work. I visited Iris Häussler's *Sophie La Rosière* Project with its "invented fiction"⁴⁰ from the late eighteen hundreds. Häussler built a memory environment around her half real, half created character, down to the details of her apartment and the memory objects she kept. Using information about the real lives of some of Sophie's contemporaries, Häussler's process had her character weave in and out of these stories as if being part of them. Häussler began to channel the essence of Sophie through images, artefacts and forensic investigation making her into a real person not unlike Häussler herself. As a real person, Sophie could then reveal her hidden talents as a painter, as well as her erotic secrets. But whose talents and secrets were they, Sophie's or Häussler's? "The two mirror each other," each reinforcing "the reality of the other while at the same time blurring their separation, each part contributing to a plausible whole."⁴¹ This was part of Häussler's methodology to create/recreate in the studio a seemingly identical environment and behaviour for her and Sophie. Thus, Häussler stepped across time, through reality and fiction, to join her creation, Sophie, while simultaneously constructing a process for the two of them, to become actors in their own intimate encounter. Did the duality she created become the operational paradox of her art piece? At what point did the artist cease to be herself? Or did she assume the other role while remaining herself? Häussler's resonances had the power to captivate and they were, for me, a way to connect to the core arguments of the perfect crime.

⁴⁰ Philip Monk. *Iris Häussler's Sophie La Rosière Project* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University 2018)

⁴¹ Monk. *La Rosière*, 167

Vital Illusion

In a self-reflexive moment I looked for examples of Baudrillard's vital illusion and how it manifested itself in memory images, dreams and shared experiences. Research brought me to the theatre to see Robert Lepage's *887* a Canadian Stage Production in Toronto, featuring three hours of his reminiscences of growing up in Québec City in the time of the FLQ and the Québec sovereignty movement. (887 was the number of his family home on Murray Street in Québec city.) In his mesmerizing auto-fiction, it was just he alone with his audience, backed up by an ingenious miniature model of the family apartment building rotating behind him. The set included apartment interiors and parking lot exteriors where his taxi-driving father could be seen pulling up to the building. Travelling iPhone cameras and micro interior video pieces all together created swirling representations of his life in different proportions. At times, the building opened up to a life-sized kitchen where Lepage continued his story as if talking to a friend who dropped by for chat. Suddenly, his narrative, the intricate design of the production with its animated characters and the mix of real and illusory elements, melded together in a holistic expression of self in the world. Thus Lepage conveyed the vital illusion of himself using the narrative of his past life brought forward in time to the present stage performance. He invited the audience to meet him in a version of Bergsonian duration where time stood still and imagination took over. Here the audience could share with him the ideas, words, images, objects, people and environment that defined him. The audience were willing participants because they could imagine, like Lepage the storyteller, their own lives as expressions of their vital humanness. Juxtaposing illusion with humanity brought me closer to understanding Baudrillard's paradoxical crime.

Time and Memory

For archival research, I sourced films with transformative themes that might inform my treatment of the “multiplicity of time” in the crime including Alain Resnais’ *Providence*⁴² from 1977, with its flash-backs and flash-forwards of time and memory, and *Children of Men*⁴³ by Alfonso Cuarón, 2006, with its dystopian view of not-to-distant-future.

Providence opened with an old man hiding in a dark wood. He was fleeing from an unidentified military troop seemingly cleaning the area of undesirables. Once the troop was upon him he asked one soldier to finish him off; he was already wounded and would die anyway. The soldier obliged him while noticing that the man was changing into an animal. In Resnais’ surreal meditation on death, an ensemble of characters revealed themselves during a visit to their patriarch’s *grande-maison* in the country: the eldest son, his wife and the other “bastard son” together with their dying father. Flashbacks and flash-forwards figured into their reminiscences of family relationships over time. The element of time framed the drama into past and future until we the audience had almost forgotten the present time of the film. Resnais’ use of time in his storytelling resembled Bergson’s duration: a time without space, a time of imagination where reality and fiction were indistinguishable. To achieve this, Resnais used the character of the patriarch (a famous writer in the process of writing his memoirs) to recount in voice-over, the role each of his children played in his life including the real events of their lives and the events that could have been. We could only guess how the end of his story would unfold, when he asked his children to leave without saying good-bye. Thus the characters in the film and the audience itself were left inside their imaginations. This suggested to me a possible perspective in which to view the crime: through the non-space intuition of Bergson’s duration.

⁴² “Providence” Directed by Alain Resnais. (Paris: Action Films, 1977) DVD

⁴³ “Children of Men” Directed by Alfonso Cuarón’s (Los Angeles. Universal 2006) DVD

“The future is a thing of the past,” read a slash of graffiti on a grungy concrete wall in *Children of Men* by Alfonso Cuarón. Set in 2027 UK, a worldwide calamity had occurred causing mass infertility. It could have been the emergence of a biological agent, or an unconscious psychological syndrome, but women could no longer have children and humankind was dying out. When a young pregnant woman emerged out of strange circumstances, suddenly the entire narrative focused on her being brought to safety on the far shores and delivered to the “Human Project.” Based on the PD James mystery, Cuarón’s dystopian thriller depicted societal chaos, economic collapse, rampant terrorism, military oppression and normalized suffering among the population. It was sophisticated in its depiction of dystopia comparable to the dystopias in Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* without the sarcasm and in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* without the television series. All these depictions possessed dark irony and they represented our commonly held vision of the future. This dystopian view would seem to be an appropriate setting for the perfect crime with its obliteration of reality. Although a radically different vision of dystopia as life as usual among the young hip, high-rise condo dwellers of the western world would be even more disturbing. But these depictions remained as fictions and speculations or as Donna Haraway might describe them as “speculative fabulations.”⁴⁴ In its obstacle course-like narrative *Children of Men* offered hope to those who suspended their disbelief. When redemption from oppression and strife seemed impossible in the story, human survival instincts prevailed. It was another example of becoming. Could I apply this happy resolution to the narrative of the perfect crime? After watching Cuarón’s film I began to re-think all aspects of the perfect crime as I saw them in my thesis including the narrative points and the changes in the organization of the artworks.

⁴⁴ Donna Haraway. *Speculative Fabulations*. Fabula Magazine video interview May 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFGXTQnJETg>

Cut-out Shadows

Cut-out figures are not new. In the hands of artists, they continue to be used over time and globally in forms of magic lantern theatre, interacting puppets on stage or as working maquettes for larger scale works. Cut-outs can be imbued with personality. They can achieve amazing feats. As scale models, they can represent human situations. They speak of paradox in their persona as humans and simultaneously, as material entities in their own right with the ability to act on demand. Ultimately, acting is what they do and they perform in different environments constructed for them by the meticulous hands of someone seeking a bird's eye view of life. The film industry uses scale models, usually by designers to represent sets and space and actors moving within them. Model making is one of the art forms within the art form.

During the research period of this thesis I discovered the work of two artists working with cut-out shadows, David Hoffess and William Kentridge. I was not surprised to learn that both of them spent early days working in film or theatre art departments. Kentridge's haunting animated film from 1999, *Shadow Procession* showed an apparent unending line of silhouette people, seemingly from all walks of life, walking, pushing or carrying others, while crossing a charcoal-drawn landscape. There was no indication where the shadows were coming from or where they were going to but the iconic images spoke of mass migration and the colonial past of Kentridge's homeland, South Africa. So much was concentrated on the imagery that it became evident that Kentridge used process and layering techniques in his methods of creation. His emphasis on process is how I connected to his work. He said he never started with a fixed idea as to what the artwork should be; rather, he would allow a sequence of creative gestures to take place in order

to arrive, over time, at the finished work. “I invite the world into the studio, pull the world apart, then restructure it and send it back out into the world.”⁴⁵

Process also figured strongly in the work of David Hoffos. He created intricate miniature set pieces with small dioramas and figurative cut-outs, as in his *Scenes from a House Dream* from 2002, to create a “story world more than a story.”⁴⁶ At the exhibition of these shadowy illusions, at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, interviewer Mary-Beth Laviolette hinted at his psychological influences: “in this journey through interiors and exteriors of varying scale, and past solitary individuals posed like phantoms in the darkness, there are the underpinnings of the psyche and the human condition.”⁴⁷ Hoffos concurred that, especially in his early work, his illusions came from his internal spaces: recurring dreams and mental states of anxiety, depression, loneliness and melancholy. But over time he began to question his motivations and learned how to fold his anxieties into his art practice. This form of art therapy steered him towards making illusions of presence and movement that can be experienced by the viewer moving in space.

I draw upon the influences of Kentridge and Hoffos for their attention to process and for their psychological impact on the viewer. I believe that similar processes are also at play in my thesis exhibition. I invoke Kentridge’s layered process of image/object making in my “Perpetrator-Victim” piece that utilizes a cut-out template to separate two planes representing data, one being superimposed over the other. I invoke Hoffos’ approach to creating illusions in my “Hacking Humanity” sculptural piece that utilizes five hundred cut-out shadows trapped in a cage as a result of the perfect crime.

⁴⁵ William Kentridge. *How We Make Sense of the World* Video interview. Louisiana Channel. 2014

⁴⁶ Mary-Beth Laviolette. Article on David Hoffos. Gallery West Magazine. 2008

⁴⁷ Laviolette. Hoffos. 2008

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research, self-reflexivity and practice-led methods of investigation led me to the concepts and strategies for this thesis project. Qualitative research was informed by my lived experience as a film director in the television crime world. For example, choreography was a key ingredient when re-enacting a murder: how the perpetrator, victim and any other players in the scene moved in the architectural space of the set and how that movement was reiterated in the camera-television frame. In the process of setting up the choreography, I assumed the role of the perpetrator and walked through the options of how to enter, commit the murder, and leave the scene in the most dramatic manner. Deciding on this path to murder informed the positioning of the camera, lighting and set pieces in coordination with the movements of the actors. Thus I participated in the crime process as a strategy for its re-creation. The consideration of time was also important to the choreography: the expectant time it took to move in space, the time to commit the murder, and the time of the aftermath of the crime. Inhabiting the perpetrator's body informed the penultimate two shots of the sequence before their escape: an emotional close-up when they paused for a moment to look back upon their grisly work and their point of view perspective of the complete tableau. I employed these strategies when visiting art galleries to view the work of two artists.

One was a show by Iris Häussler at the Daniel Faria Gallery entitled, *Lost Gazes: Wax Works From the 1990s*. The show featured items of sleepwear or underwear cast in six-inch thick blocks of wax. The garments seemed to float in the semi-transparent wax at different degrees of fading from view. I was surprised at how well her store-bought clothes and industrial wax, actually worked together. In the perceptual realm, they were contrasting materials with vastly different uses. But in this context, the contrast was the strength of the piece. I felt an

immediate connection to the pieces by imagining myself playing a part in their process: carefully pouring the wax over the clothes, spreading the clothes so they don't bunch up and supervising the curing of the wax over time. It was a form of studio-imagining or science-practice interconnectivity with "the potential to draw attention to hitherto neglected areas in qualitative methodology and to stimulate their future development."⁴⁸

At a visit to another gallery, Toronto's Power Plant Gallery, I saw *Same Dream* featuring the works of Omar Ba. "Omar Ba's work engages with some of the most urgent issues of our time: the growing inequality of wealth and power globally, questions around immigration, and our changing relationship with the natural world."⁴⁹ From my perspective it was his materials that drew me into his work. His paintings were painted on cardboard which was astonishing given their large size and seeming risk of softening or deteriorating completely. I found out that to avoid this, he primed his paintings with a special earth compound from his Senegalese homeland to keep their rigidity and shape. I entered his process, picturing myself bringing another container of earth compound to his studio, helping him apply it to the cardboard, then placing the cardboard in the sun to dry along with other pieces. Thus as an active participant in Ba's work process I shared in the meaning making of his art and mine "not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, (as) interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings."⁵⁰

Self-reflexivity was a tool to shape ideas, learn from mistakes and avoid falling into prejudices as they emerged. Employing an approach to making, observing the making then reflecting on the observations was a way to explore concepts and materiality as they presented

⁴⁸ Jarg Bargold and Stefan Thomas "Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion" Forum: Qualitative Social Research, Vol 13, No 1(2012)

⁴⁹ Nabila Abdel Nabi. "Omar Ba: Same Dream" Power Plant exhibition notes, 2019

⁵⁰ Stephanie Springay, Rita Irwin, Sylvia Wilson Kind "Qualitative Inquiry" Volume 11 Number 6, 2005. 889

themselves in my work. I gave myself the challenge of representing the polarities of humanity and data in one sculptural piece for my thesis. I started with this vague idea and hoped to be steered by a process of connecting the two concepts visually while evoking transformation each in relation to the other. My reflective process started by giving each polarity an existential value: one as science and the other as art which produced new possibilities and resonances I was not conscious of. “Just as science assists art-based research through its emphasis on systematic inquiry, art enhances the process of discovery in science by its responsiveness to the unexpected.”⁵¹

Practice-led methods helped to identify ideas and approaches that no longer worked. For weeks I laboured on a prototype for trompe-l’oeil office furniture that I planned to use in my thesis exhibit. I fabricated a trompe-l’oeil file cabinet out of a photo adhered to cardboard. With the added touch of real handles on the cabinet, the piece successfully captured the perception of paradox inherent in the perfect crime. But when the thesis exhibition venue was changed from an office environment to a museum-like space, the trompe-l’oeil furniture was no longer relevant as expressions of the crime and therefore had to be abandoned.

⁵¹ Shawn McNiff. “Art-Based Research” Knowles Handbook. (March 2007) 39

STUDIO PRACTICE

Duality Becomes Paradox

My research process included building a three-dimensional representation of a paradox: not a piece to be used in my thesis installation but a sculptural model demonstrating a material sequence from duality to paradox. Understanding the paradox of perfect crime was key to my investigation, so I thought it useful to experiment with materials to see what insights they could afford. I referred to Visual Thinker and Gestalt Therapist, Rudolph Arnheim's work on the mechanics of visual perception which he described as the "series of dynamic tensions"⁵² we bring to our unconscious orientations of balance and harmony. I live in an alleyway in the Junction. Beside my apartment is a machine shop fabricating wood and metal products. At their back door they leave out ends and discarded pieces in their Free Bin. It was there I saw two identical metal pipes. They were well finished and looked like bicycle handlebars but were in fact, dismembered parts of a larger consumer item. I brought these found objects home. The identical pieces began to speak. I do believe, as Janet Hoskins does, that it's possible to "make mute objects speak."⁵³ After a lengthy gaze at the pieces, they seemed to express that they wanted to be joined. There were two ways to join them: one was symmetrically to form a shape of perfect balance and flowing into each other holistically. The other way was joining them one end to the other then rotating them thus creating a more abstract configuration, one that was bent out of shape in visual contradiction to the other. The balance was broken along with the flow but the two configurations became the interplay of forces in relation to each other. This was my wobbly paradox: two radically different iterations (each with a different story to tell) coming from the

⁵² Katarina Stöver, DO Kim. "Arnheim's Theory of Visual Balance" *Iperception* (2011)

⁵³ Janet Hoskins. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Story of People's Lives*. (London: Routledge, 1998)

same source material. For added emphasis, I referenced the flow of the first and added (synthetic) blood and a sponge stopgap to the second. Awareness of paradox and duality in objects was something I could bring to my thesis installation.

Duality - 2019, 23X39” treated pipe, sponge, synthetic blood



Fig. 1: Duality, Pieces found in a Free Bin near my apartment



Fig 2. Duality, Two possible configurations



Fig 3. Duality becomes possibility



Fig 4. Add blood



Fig 5. Add blood-soaked sponge



Fig 6. Representation of paradox

Thesis Exhibition

My readings of Baudrillard's text create images and objects in my imagination before I digest the meaning of his words. I see more mental images when I read other approaches to the crime from other authors. So it is with my thesis installation; instead of creating literal interpretations of the crime, my approach is to make iconic symbols and objects in representations of the themes that evoke the crime. The images and objects are not alike and they indicate clues or evidence.⁵⁴

The works on view are made from a variety of materials and are informed by interdisciplinary approaches to video, performance, sculpture and graphic design. The pieces follow a non-linear narrative as signifiers of something outside of themselves and they are objects in their own right. They include a time component including representations of the three versions of time from my thesis: Baudrillard's virtual time, Prigogine's arrow of time and Bergson's concept of duration.

Early on in my art training, process spoke its own language and often determined its own outcomes, like Tim Ingold's example of sawing wood: "Sawing a plank is like going for a walk. In walking, steps do not follow one another in succession, like beads on a string. Rather, every step is a development of the one before and a preparation for the one following. The same is true of every stroke of the saw."⁵⁵ Process is my first thought when determining whether or not to undertake a project and my working partner when I decide to do so. Process is not just the logistics of material organization but the reflexive series of images needed to conceptualize a project including models and sketches. I employ this formula in my thesis installation to arrive at conceptual iterations of the

⁵⁴ Jonny Silver. Thesis Exhibition Video. <https://vimeo.com/401522242>

⁵⁵ Tim Ingold. *The Textility of Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge Journal of Economics, 2010) 34

crime. Karen Barad helps me to reconcile the installation and the written paper with her view that “concepts are not ideational but rather are actual physical arrangements is clearly an insistence on the materiality of meaning making that goes beyond what is actually meant by the frequently heard refrain that writing and talking are material practices.”⁵⁶

I communicate through a visual language of symbolism, allegory, mimesis, and sometimes non-human signification to create “forms of meaning-making.”⁵⁶ My investigation into the perfect crime is headquartered in the black box media room in the OCADU Gallery at 49 McCaul Street. This room features semiotic representations of the crime, with their signs, signifiers and symbolism on display as exhibits. Here I agree with Karen Barad that written language is too substantializing and that “allowing linguistic structure to shape or determine our understanding of the world”⁵⁷ is worth questioning. The gallery exhibit comprises two walls at either side of the entrance space to the “black box.” The black box itself has black curtains on all walls, a black floor and a ceiling grid with two video sources projecting on an eastern screen and on a southern screen. The installation incorporates gobo lighting effects illuminating moving objects thus giving the impression of a macabre playroom. The space alludes to Bergson’s duration, the non-space environment of imagination and intuition, where I can give my perspective to the crime. The pieces in the installation are abstract and intended to invite discussion.

⁵⁶ Karen Barad. *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2003) 81?

⁵⁷ Jordan Zlatev. “Cognitive Semiotics: An emerging field for the trans disciplinary study of meaning” Centre for Languages and Literature, (Lund 2008) 2

⁵⁸ Barad. *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003)

Outside the black box exhibit room,, the viewer is confronted with four images of humanity as data. Each looks like a different version of a figure, a human figure as a flat data figure, set against a wall of data, the same data as the figure. Thus the viewer is initiated into the world of paradox in the perfect crime. Called “Perpetrator-Victims,” the images resemble photos of suspects pinned up on a police blackboard but they portray no identifiable person (Figure 7). They are one flat image superimposed on another flat image. Their duality is expressed as sameness. They represent the virtual collapse of polarities in the contemporary world. “It is of some consequence whether the virtual illusion upon which we are entering is a beneficent illusion or whether... it is a deliberate choice on the part of the human race, fascinated by the idea of inventing an artificial destiny for itself.”⁵⁸

⁵⁹ Barad. *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003)

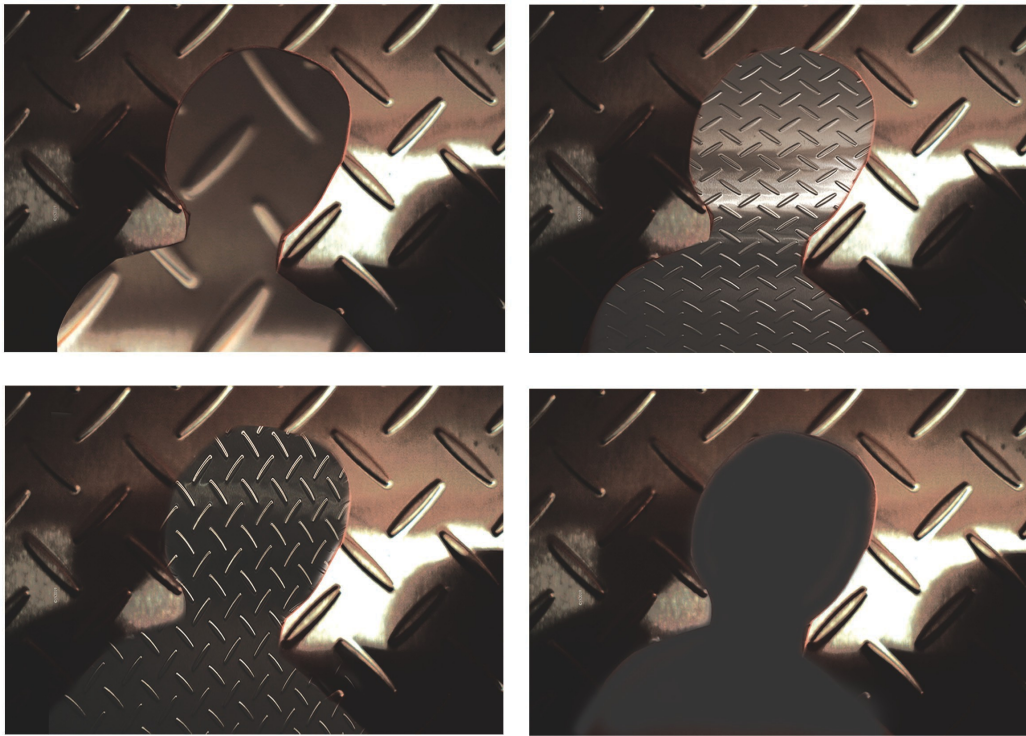


Fig. 7. Perpetrator-Victims – series of 4 digital photo composites -- ink jet prints ea.16X22”

On the other wall at the entrance to the exhibit room, the viewer encounters a grouping of three graphic designs representing interpretations of time. Prigogine proclaims the new science of non-equilibrium and uses a symbol from astronomy, the “Arrow of Time” to illustrate his theory of becoming (Figure 9). Bergson sees multiplicity in time including internal time containing the “immediate data of consciousness”⁶⁰ and corresponding to the individual’s perception of events in imagination, which he called “Duration.” If a timeline was established in the perfect crime based on the Prigogine or Bergson systems, we might find a clue to its unravelling. But Baudrillard introduces the conundrum: his notion of virtual time, describing it as eternal present time, going backward and forward simultaneously. I’m giving a special place

⁶⁰ Suzanne Guerlac. *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) 63

for time in this thesis exhibition to suggest an interpretive meaning to the crime: that time is flexible in our perceptual imagination. Incorporated into the three images is a peppering of words, propositions and questions about the perception of time in reality, intended to engage the viewer with possible perspectives.

ABSOLUTISM	DURATION	IRREVERSIBILITY	BECOMING
ECSTASY DISAPPEARING	DISTANCE COLLAPSING	ENTROPY	
IMMORTALITY A CERTAINTY	ILLUSION OF OTHERNESS	FADING	
ALWAYS-ALREADY TIME	OBJECT & SUBJECT BECOMING	OCYCLE	
UNRAVELLED	MOMENT OF TRANSFORMATION	ARROW AT REST	
ETERNAL PRESENT IN QUESTION	INTUITION AS TIME	TIME BETWEEN TIME	

Figure 8. Provocative word phrases in the three Conflicting Timelines

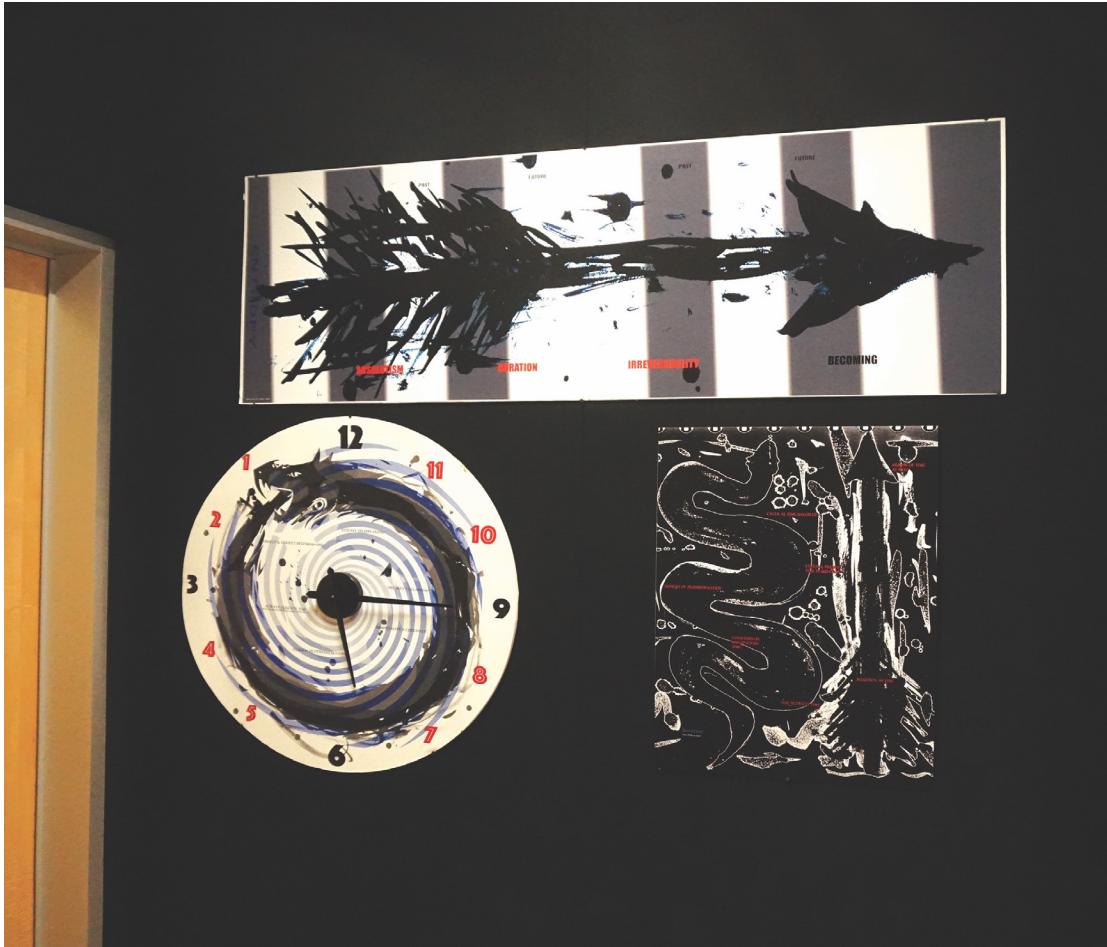


Fig. 9 “Conflicting Timelines” - three representations of time – brush and ink, inkjet prints on photo paper
 Arrow of Time 2019, 22X72” - Virtual Time 2019, 36”diametre – Duration 2020, 24X32”

A notice at the door of the Black Box Gallery provides a quote giving the themes and provocations in the exhibition: “This is the story of a crime – the murder of reality. And the extermination of an illusion – the vital illusion, the radical illusion of the world. The real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion that disappears into integral reality.

- Jean Baudrillard”

Upon entering the darkened exhibit room, the viewer is confronted by two sculptural pieces on the floor and two video projections high on the walls. The sculptural pieces look like consequences of the perfect crime: the first is a rotating cage containing five hundred miniature cut-out figures bent out of shape and in a heap on the cage floor and with some climbing its interior walls. It is a three-dimensional representation of Harari's narrative about technology hacking humanity, featuring people as one-dimensional beings made of pure data trapped in a data continuum (Figure 10). Positioned inside the cage at each of its eight corners, pointing inwards, button-sized LED lights cast rotating angular shadows moving across the gallery walls. Sound Effects accompany the rotating cage: emanating from within the cage (from an iPad) is the spatial audio of ambient crowds, thus giving voice to the multitudes in the cage.

On an evidence table, the viewer encounters a transparent container filled with brown water and an orange cylinder-shaped strongbox with its identification seen through the water: "Life Data Recorder – Do Not Open" (Figure 14). This take on the iconic aircraft data recorder or black box containing the digital operational history of the flight, becomes the representation of an individual's lifetime as data stored in its own container and living on after the flesh and blood of that individual has ceased to exist. Does data have shape or mass? Is this what becomes of our data after the murder of reality? "Every click that one makes is stored. Every step that one takes can be traced. We have digital tracks everywhere. Our digital life is reflected, point for point in the Net. The possibility of each and every aspect of life is replacing trust and complete control. Big Brother has ceded the throne to Big Data. The total recording of life is bringing the society of transparency to completion."⁶¹ This evocative artefact (adapted symbolically from a garbage can,) attests to the mystery of dataism. "The seed algorithm may

⁶¹ Byung-Chul Han. *In The Swarm* 2011 Trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2017) 71

initially be developed by humans, but as it grows it follows its own path, going where no human has gone before – and where no human can follow.”⁶² Is this the destination we can expect?

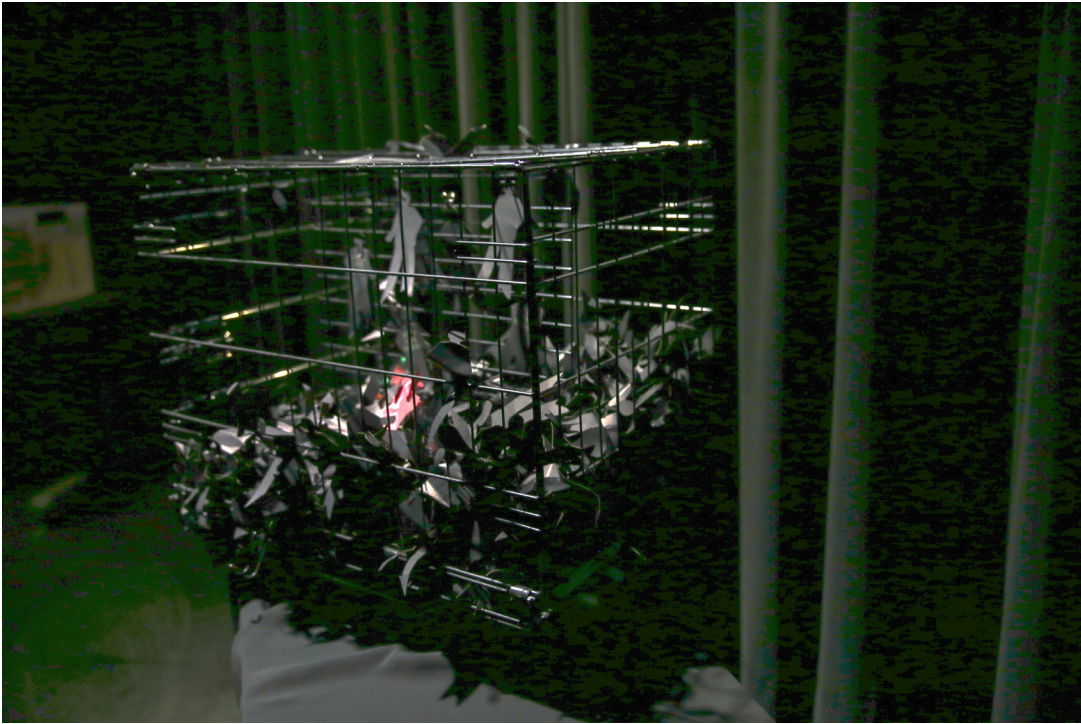


Figure 10. Hacking Humanity, 2020 – metal cage 20X24X17”, turntable 18”dia, 500 card cutout figures 2X6”



Figure 11. Detail

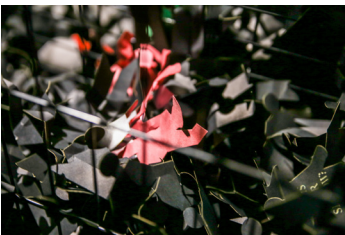


Figure 12. Detail



Figure 13. Detail

⁶² Harari. *Homo Deus*. 458



Figure 14. Life Data Recorder, 2020 – Steel, aluminium cylinder, 20X10X10” plastic container 36X20X18” (with simulated seawater), red signal light 2X1/2”



Figure 15. Life Data Recorder, front view

High on the south wall of the exhibit, surveillance video shows a human figure in a holding cell. Suspended from the ceiling, in front of the video projector is a “jail gobo” consisting of a rack of bars that clearly situate the video in a cell. The figure is wearing a mask, half resembling a human face and half resembling the flat, non-descript face of pure data. The figure walks around the cell killing time, without purpose, seemingly waiting for something to happen or to be called up by its masters. It is the representation of human in the act of

transforming to data. Like the cage, this scene has no indications of authority or control, just the automatic process of existing. Given the intrusion of data on every aspect of our lives, wondering what will happen next will be the burning issue of our time. What does transformation look like? What destiny awaits Han's *homo digitalis*?⁶³



Figure 16. – Becoming Data, 2020 – Featuring Andrew Kostjuk – video projection (42min loop) + gobo FX

⁶³ Han. *In The Swarm* 11

On the east wall of the black box, another video projection portrays the original visual concept for my thesis-investigation: the motion imagery of the shadow overtaking its host (Figure 17). It is a recurring image in my dreams and one used by Baudrillard to illustrate his theory about virtual reality overtaking physical reality. He took McLuhan’s notion of “discarnate mankind”⁶⁴ a step further and presaged Harari’s prediction that “algorithms will decide who we are and what we should know about ourselves.”⁶⁵ Is this the pictorial illustration for the perfect crime? Or is it an image of human evolution? The video representation features the shadow of a cut-out figure moving from behind it and eventually surpassing it.



Figure 17. Murder or Becoming – 2min loop - Video stills of the shadow overtaking its host

⁶⁴ Terrence Gordon. *Marshall McLuhan, Escape into Understanding* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1997) 224

⁶⁵ Yuval Harari. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Toronto: Signal Books, 2018) 326

CONCLUSION

“What does it mean to be human in the age of bewilderment?”⁶⁶ Today we are the receptors of mixed messages. The images engulfing us are either violent or emotional causing us to be pulled in two directions simultaneously. Our air is thick and our water is brown. We’re neurotic, drugged and poisoned. In historical time, data was at the entrance of the house of knowledge. It was at the bottom of a succession: data became information and information transformed into understanding, then understanding became wisdom at its *summum bonum*. Now data is the unforeseen dictator of our lives. “Digital continues to permeate our society beyond what we can comprehend and predict. The importance of digital communication as a shaping force in society is something that we should all be cognizant of, and Han’s call to acknowledge the power of digital is a philosophy that should be carried into further research.”⁶⁷ So how can we project our “vital illusion” into the world?

This thesis project hopes to raise more questions about media intrusion into people’s lives, while continuing the discussion about algorithms, hyperactivity and the nature of truth. Our transformation has seen the loss of corporeality and the adoption (seemingly without resistance) of complete one-dimensionality. “The digital turn means we are leaving the earth – the terrestrial order – for good.”⁶⁷ We now exist as pure data in the global dataflow without recourse to all the characteristics that define our essential humanity. Has technology hacked our humanity as Yuval Harari has claimed?

We can accept we’re at the centre of a paradigm shift, but we still need to understand what our role will be. We are unable to comprehend being but we still face the mysteries of life.

⁶⁶ Harari. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* back leaf

⁶⁷ Laura Ivey. “Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge” Issue 32. 2017

⁶⁸ Han. *In The Swarm*, 51

We are not stories to be algorithmically recorded and archived but we have our own physical drama to play out. *The universe has no plot, so it's up to us humans to create a plot.*⁶⁸ There is still time before we succumb to total “datafication.” In the meantime, we can begin to self-observe. We can reclaim our presence in the physical world allowing life to radiate through our senses. We can become aware of the flexibility of time in order to understand Baudrillard’s paradox of reality and illusion.

My investigation into the perfect crime produces no hard evidence that would stand up in court (if there were a court). But my investigation engenders for me, the discovery of a multiplicity of perspectives by others who have reflected on the human impact of media and have furthered its conversation. It is hoped my thesis project adds to this discussion and encourages others to do likewise. I mention “becoming” earlier in this paper as the philosophy of constant renewal. The becoming arrow may be the alternative to Baudrillard’s repeating cyclic system of time symbolized by ‘Ourobouros,’ the serpent eating its tail. Is societal fear inhibiting our becoming? Does art play a role in the understanding of this becoming? My thesis exhibition is an opportunity to address these questions by rendering them into material expressions of meaning. I’m aware of the gravitas of the perfect crime and its implications for the human condition - including my own. “ If there is a secret to Illusion, it involves taking the world for the world and not for its model. It involves restoring to the world the formal power of illusion, which is precisely the same as becoming again, in an immanent way, a “thing among things.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Harari. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*, 88

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