

Szilvia Ruszev

**Mental and Material Images  
of Contemporary Capitalism**

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## Szilvia Ruszev

# Mental and Material Images of Contemporary Capitalism

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### Résumé

What are possible artistic forms of resistance in the context of contemporary capitalism, which is aiming at the colonization of our mind, affects and desires? This essay examines contemporary post-cinematic media within the framework of contemporary capitalism, labeled as cognitive, neuro, mental, emotional, affective, platform or surveillance and capitalism's entanglement with other oppressive ideologies and positivist neurosciences, that results in so-called "neuroculture". I explore how these oppressive ideologies exert themselves through contemporary media technologies and produce specific formal-aesthetic predicaments such as high quality, smoothness, operationality, modulation, fluidity, flexibility and the manipulative microtemporality. Furthermore, I point at artistic practices capable of unsettling hegemonic structures, underlying technology, form, and content, in contemporary media production and consumption such as the digital abject, the glitchy, the low resolution, and the extreme slowness. The transdisciplinary research is situated within the field of cinema and media studies and invites ideas from cognitive sciences, neurosciences, computer vision and philosophy.

### Mots-clés

cognitive capitalism, neuroculture, media assemblage, digital abject, hyperimage

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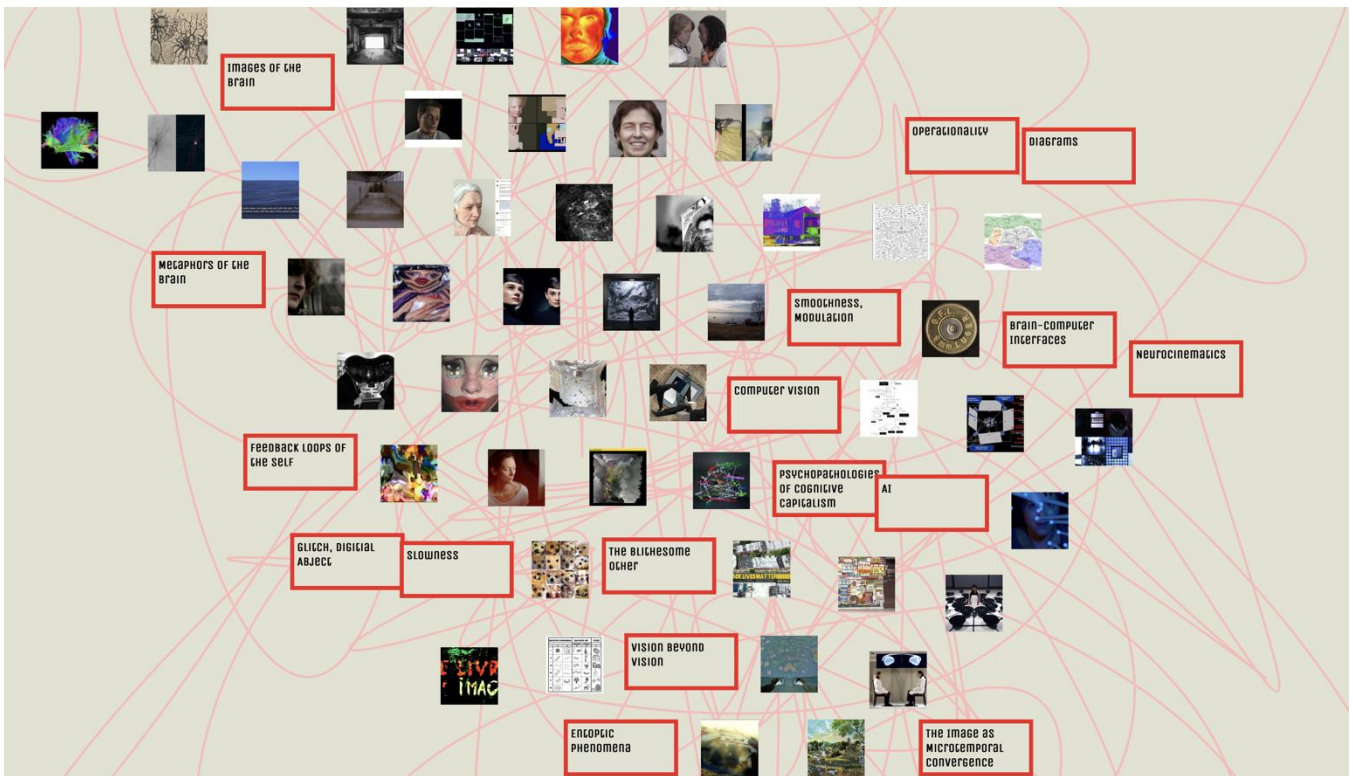


Figure 1. Screenshot interactive part. <sup>1</sup>

## Note on the structure

The essay consists of two parts. In the first, I map the framework of the essay: the entanglement between contemporary capitalism, other oppressive ideologies, and neurosciences; the formal-aesthetic predicaments produced by these entanglements; and possible ways of infiltrating these predicaments. The first part is a linear text. The second part of the essay is a hypertextual assemblage (Fig. 1.) of images and text fragments delving deeper on issues discussed in the first part. The collection of images constitutes a diagram offering a serendipitous reading through specific post-cinematic images. The form of the assemblage as a dynamic structure befriends heterogeneity and the fragmentary within its rhizomatic structure. The second part acts as a counter-gesture to the categoric, linear, and normalizing singular perspective of the first part, although they can be explored in any order. The media assemblage invites a contemplation and exploration of the montage of images

<sup>1</sup> [https://szilviaruszev.com/mental\\_material\\_images\\_capitalism/](https://szilviaruszev.com/mental_material_images_capitalism/), ©2022, Szilvia Ruszev, Dimitar Ruszev.

and text. The meandering lines represent the possibilities of entanglements between the images. By hovering and clicking on an image, predetermined paths can be actualized offering further readings. Let your imagination lead you to further associations!

## Introduction

Ubiquitous visuality, virtuality and technological acceleration are conditions of the contemporary media landscape that seem self-evident in our everyday life. Generations are growing up surrounded by the multiplicity of screens, in a hybrid techno-cultural mediasphere<sup>2</sup> that augments, if not completely supersedes our natural environment<sup>3</sup>. Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been theorized as post-cinematic, with new kinds of images continuously emerging in a “digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, and convergent media environment”<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, contemporary capitalism<sup>5</sup> has reached a stage in which it turned toward immaterial, cognitive and affective production and commodification. Capitalism is interested in our minds and affects, and thus positivist brain-centered neuroscience seems to be the perfect field to create ideas, tools and methods underpinning contemporary capitalism’s ideology. The interdependence of mind-focused capitalism and brain-centered neuroscience results in what some call neuroculture<sup>6</sup>, a cultural landscape that revolves around a normalized and biological view of the mind separated from the body. Material images, produced by technologies of contemporary capitalism, oversaturate our sensory environment and colonize our minds by imposing and normalizing mental images. As a consequence of the virtual and networked character of the surrounding mediasphere defined by the predicaments of contemporary capitalism, central categories such as the self, time, space and cognition have been re-evaluated through contemporary media. On the one hand, there is an immense normalizing force, not only in the ways in which these categories have been defined by contemporary capitalism, but also in the formal-aesthetic character in which these categories become images. On the other hand, media produced by the same technological and socio-cultural predicaments of contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Connected, Or What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> This statement and generally the premise of the article is mostly applicable to Western techno-cultures and societies that are increasingly employing an entanglement of technological and capitalistic acceleration.

<sup>4</sup> Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, “Perspectives on Post-Cinema: Introduction”, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, 2016. URL: <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/>.

<sup>5</sup> The term late capitalism (used first in print by German economist Werner Sombart and introduced in English by cultural theorist Frederic Jameson) goes back to the post-World War II economic expansion and foreshadows the kinds of inequities that neoliberalism and globalization brought. This article focuses on an even more accelerated version, in the specific timeframe of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, as the article will follow, connects it to the idea of immaterial labor and the expansion of digital, networked technologies.

<sup>6</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

capitalism, has the capacity to reflect, critique, question, infiltrate or destabilize the system from within.

## Contemporary Capitalism

There is common knowledge about the fundamental traits of capitalism such as the accumulation of profit, upholding private ownership and the freedom of the individual in a competitive market, based on wage labor. Capitalism's main critique is that this setup, seemingly geared toward a free market and economic growth, causes exploitative and oppressive structures for a large group of people. What this essay is focusing on is the way in which capitalism developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enmeshed with the exponential advancement of networked digital technologies in a globalized world. Currently, the product in which capitalism is interested is knowledge and affect, both invisible and inseparable from the person who "produces" them.

The contemporary state of capitalism has been labeled in different ways, such as *cognitive*, *neuro*, *mental*, *emotional*, *affective*, *platform* or *surveillance* capitalism depending on the perspective of the author. Nevertheless, all these adjectives converge around the shifting interest of capitalism from material production to the colonization of the mind by utilizing the power of networked, digital media technologies. As Yann Moulier Boutang asserts "material labour does not disappear, but it loses its central role as a strategic asset"<sup>7</sup>.

Historically, the perspective on contemporary capitalism that concentrates on the ways power structures target cognitive production connects to the Italian Marxist movement of *operaismo*. Giorgio Grizzotto writes about a shift from the industrial to a biocognitive stage in which technological transformation exerts its power through devices such as mobile phones that became inseparable from our lives as thinking, feeling and material bodies. Tiziana Terranova summarizes it as follows:

This transition is expressed not only in technological transformation and innovation, but also in the way in which technological mediation invests the social body, from allergies and autoimmune diseases to burn-out syndromes caused by hyper-competition between precarity, anxiety and stress caused by the fact that attention becomes the central and integral part of work to the materialization of the mobile phone as a biopolitical device in the mobile phone.<sup>8</sup>

Attention is the central parameter through which the body-mind gets hooked up to the invisible force of technological transformation and normalization. The individual body is added to the social body through its attention, a channel for mediation, which narrows down the human biocognitive existence to competition and other anxiety-driven, negative parameters.

In his article "The Economy of Attention", Georg Franck connects the influences of social and mass media in constituting a so-called "attention capital." He uses the term "mental capitalism" in which,

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<sup>7</sup> Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, Polity, 2012, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Grizzotti and Tiziana Terranova, *Neurocapitalism: Technological Mediation and Vanishing Lines*, translated by Jason Francis McGimsey, New York, Minor Compositions, 2018.

he observes, “we seem to have a nearly perfect reflection of the material base in our mental superstructure”<sup>9</sup>. Yves Citton talks rather about an “ecology of attention” and focuses on the synchronicity and communality by which media content is consumed. In his words:

And so the general function of this entire mediasphere, of which we had difficulty deciding whether it related to the necessities of production or to the puzzling pleasures of entertainment, comes into view. The very fact of watching the same things together at the same time, even if in apparent isolation from each other, produces effects of communal valorization which are indispensable to the constant renewal of the system of production.<sup>10</sup>

The term “ecology of attention” points to the inseparability of the natural, media and technological environment, on the one hand, and the underlying hegemonic structures, on the other. The pervasiveness of power exerted through networked digital technologies is expressed through the vanishing of the demarcation between being on and offline, work and leisure, public and private spaces. The vision of a coming metaverse<sup>11</sup>, or the web 3.0, brings in yet another kind of immaterial ecology: the ecology of the hyperreal.

The hyperreality of the metaverse assimilates and commodifies not only cognitive aspects of the human life. Emotion and affect are tools in achieving the desired attention, but they can also be seen as products, constructed and utilized by capitalism. Eva Illouz defines emotional capitalism as follows:

Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange.<sup>12</sup>

The term “affective capitalism” goes in tandem with “emotional capitalism”, emphasizing the body, its feelings, longings, and desires. Brian Massumi describes how affect becomes an intrinsic commodity of capitalism: “The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory”<sup>13</sup>. Affect is not only a variable as a means of control but also as a means of production. Thus, attention and affect are closely intertwined in a vicious spiral in the contemporary mediasphere.

In turn, the terms “platform capitalism” and “surveillance capitalism” focus on technologies and digital networks that commodify, produce and control fundamental aspects of our human existence

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Franck, “The Economy of Attention”, *Journal of Sociology* 55, November 2018. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318811778>.

<sup>10</sup> Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2017, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Metaverse generally refers to what the Internet could or will eventually evolve to, amending our physical reality with an interactively accessible real time extended reality (augmented, virtual and mixed reality). Since I've been writing this article, Facebook decided to incorporate all his companies under the name Meta, claiming copyright for it, and aligning its ambitions to build the metaverse.

<sup>12</sup> Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, Polity, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Durham, NC, Duke University Press Books, 2002, p. 45.



such as knowledge, memories, decisions, emotions and affects. In his book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek places data at the epicenter of the production of contemporary capitalism. He looks at various digital platforms that are specialized in extracting, interpreting, and using data as the main asset to achieve growth in a knowledge economy<sup>14</sup>. Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* focuses on data as a commodity as well. She asserts that "surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data"<sup>15</sup>. Behavioral data, and specifically the so-called "behavioral surplus", has been used to create predictions and profiling with detrimental consequences for the future of democratic societies. In that sense, digital technologies and contemporary capitalism are perfectly entangled.

To summarize, the interdependence between contemporary capitalism and networked digital technologies results in a pervasive power structure that aims to colonize cognitive and affective aspects of human life by subjugating them to the logic of the binary computation. In other words, everything that is computable is commodifiable and controllable at the same time.

## Neuroscience, Neuroculture, and its Critique

Contemporary capitalism and neuroscience have found interdependency in their shared goal of understanding and eventually manipulating human behavior based on the positivistic belief that mapping the brain as a distinct and biological entity is possible. In other words, conceptualizing the brain as a computational machine can eventually lead to an optimization and commodification of the human mind. On the one hand, already the term "optimization" is problematic as it is tainted by capitalism's profit-oriented goals and the idea of the exclusivity of the optimal, which moves close to eugenics. A more appropriate term could be normalization, which lacks the seemingly positive goal setting, yet expresses an external force willing to smoothen the curve of differences. Another consequence of the convergence between capitalism and neuroscience is the development of machine learning algorithms toward a general artificial intelligence (AGI) as a problem solving technological tool in a framework that does not consider ethical questions in the first place. The goal of developing artificial intelligence is to mimic and eventually surpass human perception, cognition and behavior, which reiterates the idea of the human brain as a computational machine. This approach has far reaching consequences for questions such as: what kind of artificial intelligence is being built; what kind of relationship is being cultivated to it; and lastly, how we situate ourselves as a human species in a post-Anthropocene world.

Contemporary capitalism is neurocentric, with neuroscientific results offering the necessary knowledge and tools that feed into capitalism's main goals – profit through commodification, and control through surveillance and normalization. Currently, the prefix neuro- is on the rise. Neuroscience has been at the scientific forefront in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enabled by the rapid development of brain imaging technologies, artificial intelligence, and specifically machine

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<sup>14</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA, Polity, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, reprint edition, New York, Public Affairs, 2020, p. 12.

learning. In the quest to better understand human consciousness, perception and action, empirical, speculative, and executive approaches favor implementing outcomes of neuroscientific research. Neuroaesthetics, neuroarchitecture or neuroeconomics are just a few of the emerging sub and cross fields claiming ties to recent research outcomes in neurosciences. The brain as a biological entity has been targeted by pharmaceutical, media and neurotechnologies in order to map, control, surveil, and manipulate, yet covering these actions as news, entertainment, or medicaments. In this sense, capitalism, positivist neuroscience and technology result in an intricate entanglement whose main focus is the commodification and colonization of the mind. The term “neuroculture” mirrors the contemporary phenomena of neurocentrism that expands into the cultural, social, political, and economic life<sup>16</sup>. The interest in the brain as a biological entity is not new as the brain has been seen as the key in understanding human consciousness in all its facets. Nevertheless, what is manifested in the term neuroculture is the positivist belief that the brain as a biological organ can be completely mapped and connected to thought, emotions, and behavior. On the one hand, neuroculture is a product of the contemporary form of capitalism, fueled by the networked capacity of digital technology. But on the other, neuroculture also produces its own critique in various forms of theory and practice. A common denominator in the countercurrents is the refusal or destabilization of a positivist and mechanistic view of the brain and cognition. In this context, cognition is embedded, embodied, enactive, and extended, referred to as 4E cognition<sup>17</sup>. The brain’s boundaries as a biological entity are questioned. British author Tony D. Sampson talks about the brain as an assemblage which is in constant becoming<sup>18</sup>. Feminist neuroscientists aim to reframe neuro-epistemologies by uncovering social influences on the gendered development of the brain<sup>19</sup>. The idea of “neuroplasticity” is key in this regard as it sees the brain as a dynamic system that is not only biological (shaped by evolution) but also social and cultural (shaped by socio-cultural environments). Neuroplasticity is a key term in the critique of contemporary capitalism and especially cognitive capitalism as it is the targeted field of exerting neuropower.

In his article “Neuropower: Art in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism”, Warren Neidich claims that the next stage of the ontogenetic process of society is the so-called noo-politics (using the term invented by Maurizio Lazzarato). Noo-politics can be most broadly understood as a process that re-configures perception, memory, and attention, and implicates potential ways and means by which neurobiological architecture is undergoing reconfiguration<sup>20</sup>. He writes about neuropower as a type of bio-power that is able to re-configure the human brain using its capacity of neuroplasticity. He claims that neuropower is aimed at changing the working memory of the brain

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<sup>16</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture*, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Richard Menary, “Introduction to the special issue on 4E cognition”, *Phenom Cogn Sci* 9, 2010, pp. 459-463. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-010-9187-6>.

<sup>18</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Sigrid Schmitz and Grit Höppner, “Neurofeminism and Feminist Neurosciences: A Critical Review of Contemporary Brain Research”, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8, July 2014. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00546>.

<sup>20</sup> Neidich Warren, “Neuropower: Art in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism”, Arne De Boever and Warren Neidich (eds.), *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part One. ... Part One*, Berlin, Archive Books, 2013, p. 228.



which capacitates decision-making processes. The consequences of neuropower are, as Warren Neidich argues, directed against neuro-diversity and aiming at its limitation. In his words:

In the new information economy, characterized as it is by semio-capitalism, in which the production of objects has been superseded by the production of psychic effects and new powerful tools such as software agents that trace our choices and calibrate the level of our desire, the ability of neuropower to map institutional paradigms upon the materiality of the wet, mutable organic surface of the brain itself is being realized.<sup>21</sup>

In his book *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung-Chul Han follows a similar trajectory regarding cognitive capitalism. He states that contemporary capitalism has surpassed the biological and the physical and “has discovered the psyche as a productive force”<sup>22</sup>. In that sense, biopolitics has turned into psychopolitics. Han claims that neoliberalism, as a particular mutation of capitalism, has turned workers into entrepreneurs, who are self-exploiting their own affective and emotional labor. Therefore, they interpret anxiety not as systematic but as a personal failure. The freedom of the self, turned from a subject to a project, is now “subjugating itself to internal limitations and self-constraints, which are taking the form of compulsive achievement and optimization”<sup>23</sup>.

Another strand of thought that aims to critique contemporary capitalism and its turn to the immaterial and disembodied psyche is feminist new materialism. In her book *A Capsule Aesthetics*, Kate Mondloch investigates specific new media installations in the context of how they explore, inhabit, and critique our relationship with science and technology<sup>24</sup>. Mondloch’s main argument is that these installations develop a different way of critiquing technology and its ideological embeddedness. Instead of reducing the object of critique to a media spectacle and positioning themselves in an outside perspective, these installations perform the viewers’ affective encounter with media art, biotechnology and brain sciences<sup>25</sup>. Mondloch argues that these installations enact a feminist epistemology which is deeply interested in bodies and matter and their relationship to technology and science.

To sum up, interdependencies between contemporary capitalism, neurosciences and technology result in so-called neuroculture, based on the positivist view that the brain as a distinctive, biological entity is the key to understanding and controlling human cognition and behavior. The critique of this view has been formulated from various perspectives: on the one hand, by negating the closed and internal view of the brain, rather seeing it as a biologically and culturally situated, dynamic system; and on the other, by reclaiming the interdependence between mind and body in an organic and inseparable unity.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>22</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, translated by Erik Butler, London; New York, Verso, 2017, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Kate Mondloch, *A Capsule Aesthetic: Feminist Materialisms in New Media Art*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

## The Role of Images in Neuroculture

Images are a substantial part of contemporary neuroculture. As immaterial labor and the colonization of the mind are at the center of contemporary capitalism, images are at the core of how this system exerts its power. Images of contemporary capitalism cater to the oculo-centric character of contemporary culture through ubiquitous screens and visual interfaces. Nevertheless, images, both as representations of physical phenomena or abstractions of ideas, are multimodal. An image entails a multimodal reference to all senses. Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra point out the neurological background of a multimodal perception investigating “embodied simulation” in the context of cinema. They show that neurons in the human brain exhibit multimodal properties guided by our bodily experiences.<sup>26</sup> In other words, different senses are converging in the brain on a neurological level, so that a tactile sense can be triggered as much by the image of a caressing hand as by the description of the same image.<sup>27</sup>

Investigating what an image can be, Hans Belting stresses the bridging function of the image between medium, technology and the body. Images are transmitted and made visible (perceivable) by the media; but they are not the media itself. Belting argues that bodies themselves “operate as living medium by processing, receiving and transmitting images”<sup>28</sup>. Images can be grasped as symbolic cultural objects that arise in the process of mediation between bodies and media technologies. This is even more true in the digital era in which both the ontology of the image, and the ontology of the media technology that transmits it, has radically changed. The image has lost its indexical relationship to reality. Its fabric isn’t woven from light. Digitalization has turned physicality into an imprint of data rather than physical reality.

Consequently, the image has become a hyperimage<sup>29</sup>, because its relationship to reality unfolds through computational processes pertaining to generated and simulated data-realities instead of an indexical origin. The term hyperimage relates to terms such as simulacra, simulation and hyperreality used by Baudrillard<sup>30</sup>. He defines hyperreality as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”<sup>31</sup>. Following this logic, hyperimage is the actualization of hyperreality.

The image is not representational anymore, even if realistic. It is rather imaginative. The indexical and mimetic is replaced by the living process of imagination, which is a constitutive process in the triangle of the medium-image-body. W. J. T. Mitchell attributes “vitality” to images ascribed to them “in forms of their agency, motivation, aura, fecundity”<sup>32</sup>. He assumes that pictures are like life-

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<sup>26</sup> Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience*. Translated by Frances Anderson, illustrated edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, translated by Thomas Dunlap, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> In his book *Mehr als ein Bild: Für eine Kunstgeschichte des Hyperimages* (München, Fink Wilhelm GmbH + Co.KG, 2013), Felix Thürlemann explores ensembles of images as hyperimages throughout art history and the ways in which these configurations change the meaning of the art objects entailed.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. 31<sup>st</sup> edition, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 6.

forms driven by desire and appetite<sup>33</sup>. The idea of vitality can be traced in Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska's approach to new media and mediation. In their book *Life After New Media*, they think about new media not as separate objects, but rather as a process of mediation that creates a dynamic entanglement of media, image and body<sup>34</sup>. In the process mediation, categories such as inside-outside, self-other, public-private have been disrupted and in consequence instigate changes on a sociocultural, biological and political level.

What is a mental image in the context of the hyperimage? And what is the relationship between material and mental images within this context? Without delving deeply into various fields and their understanding of a mental image, the mental image can be positioned from the perspective of media studies in the dynamic entanglement of medium, image, and body. In that sense, the hyperimage can have two actualizations. Pasi Väliäho summarizes it as follows:

Images work and shape the ways we map constantly shifting perceptual scenes, both internal and external, real and fictive. In other words, material images fix mental ones and vice versa, which, as we have seen, involves a complex interplay between the somatic, the personal, and the social.<sup>35</sup>

### **Oppressive predicaments expressed in formal-aesthetic characteristic of the post-cinematic image**

Images are part of the contemporary mediasphere that has been theorized as post-cinematic. Moving images have left the movie theater and permeate our everyday life on all kinds of screens, converging and traveling through various media. The dichotomy of the viewer and the media object seen as two separate entities seems to be vanishing. The permeability of the self, on the one hand, and the malleability of media, on the other, allow for an open, dynamic, and embodied relationship between human, non-human and machinic elements which congregate through various interfaces into what I call "media assemblages". The recursive process between brain/mind, body and image/culture within a media assemblage results in a technologically defined, ubiquitous visuality, driven by the politics of contemporary capitalism, yet at the same time carrying the possibility of infiltrating the system from within.

Oppressive systems such as capitalism, white supremacy and colonialism are historically interconnected. They are driven by the exertion of power through exclusive hyper-individualism. In this essay I focus on common ideology of capitalism and white supremacy which, I argue, can be traced in the characteristics of the post-cinematic image. In order to connect the traces of these oppressive systems with the formal-aesthetic characteristics of the post-cinematic hyperimage I will

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, reprint edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The MIT Press, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Pasi Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2014, p. 89.

refer to a text by Tema Okun *White Supremacy Culture*<sup>36</sup> listing the characteristics of white supremacy culture and Julie Wilson's book *Neoliberalism*<sup>37</sup> discussing characteristics of neoliberalism<sup>38</sup>.

One of the often-mentioned characteristics of our time is the ambition for *growth* combined with *competitiveness*. Tema Okun describes the following subsets of this ambition: “perfectionism”, “a sense of urgency”, “quantity over quality”, and “progress is bigger”<sup>39</sup>. Julie Wilson defines neoliberalism as “a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life”<sup>40</sup>. This ambition to a never-ending enhancement finds its parallel in the *high-quality* and *smoothness* of the generative-computational. As media technologies develop, post-cinematic images become increasingly perfected while being produced at a higher frame rate, pixel density and color depth. Although the increased image quality (in technological terms) becomes imperceivable by the human eye, the pressure of constantly raising resolution can be felt as an invisible affect. In his book *Technologies of Vision*, Steve Anderson describes the reaction to the phenomena as the “frenzy of the digital”<sup>41</sup>. He points at the controversy that this notion hold: frenzy includes both surrendering to the excess of resolution, and yet finding the possibility of resistance in the frenzy of the digital. In his words: “The frenzy of the digital is as much a vortex of possibility as it is an inferno of loss: privacy, anonymity, obscurity”<sup>42</sup>.

Another expression of a technologically induced and accelerated visibility is the *manipulative micro-temporality* that goes beyond storytelling and targets the affect. It finds itself in various forms: in the post-continuity style of editing in Hollywood action films<sup>43</sup>; in the emergence of non-computational high-density image formats discussed in the former paragraph; or hidden in the smoothness of the computationally generated images, in the imperceivable succession of data fragments.

Tema Okun writes about the intention of white supremacy to uphold alleged *objectivity* through “the worship of the written word”, having “one right way” or “either/or thinking”<sup>44</sup>. Insisting that there is a possibility of objectivity and hiding ideologies of oppression behind alleged objectivity turns a false assertion into action. In a similar vein, *operational images*<sup>45</sup> made by and for machines not only assert an alleged objectivity but turn it into a function, an operation. Computational processes give the illusion of objectivity but in fact mirror the messiness of our world. Big data is the metaphor for the

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<sup>36</sup> Tema Okun, “CHARACTERISTICS.” WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE, n.d.. Accessed January 10, 2022. URL/ <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Julie Wilson, *Neoliberalism*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. New York, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> It can be debated how capitalism and neoliberalism relate to each other. For the purpose of this essay, I suggest a simplified view. Neoliberalism can be seen as a political-economical sub-system of capitalism that fortifies ideas such as economic liberalization, deregulation, globalization and increased privatization.

<sup>39</sup> Tema Okun, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Julie Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Steve F. Anderson, *Technologies of Vision: The War between Data and Images*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2013, p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Steven Shavero, “Post-Continuity: An Introduction”, Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, 2016. URL: <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/>.

<sup>44</sup> Tema Okun, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Trevor Paglen, “Operational Images”, *E-Flux*, Issue 59, 2014. URL: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images>.

complexity of this world: visualizations give us the illusion that we can understand underlying relationalities, but we tend to forget about the human bias that is implicit in these systems from the very beginning of gathering the data, through sorting and visualizing it.

*Modulation, fluidity and flexibility* are not only technological consequences of new digital tools but also aesthetic materializations of the post-cinematic affect. Post-cinematic images not only wander between media by shifting their materiality, but they are also unstable as entities, freely intermingling with other images within and outside screens. But these affordances don't mean infinite possibilities of permutation; malleability is only achievable within a given system as a reaction to a post-fordist, neoliberal society that is no longer disciplined but also controlled.

In this context, individualism, and especially “self-enclosed individualism”<sup>46</sup> that lies at the basis of these cultural systems, is a result of the competitive and controlled way of conceiving one's life. Julie Wilson builds up on AnaLouise Keating's understanding of self-enclosed individualism as a “form of ‘hyper-individualism’ that tends to ‘focus exclusively on the human and define this human self very narrowly, in non-relational, bounded, terms’”<sup>47</sup>. In other words, individualism is not interested in anything except itself. Fueled by competition, the individual is closed in self-destructive feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

The expansion of our digital selves, amplified by the delusion of social media, has long been experienced through a multitude of digital images – the cyber avatars created for online and video games, and lately multiuser social VR platforms, augmented reality enhancements and overlays in Snapchat, or digital prefiguration created in Photoshop or similar software. At the same time, the proliferation of the digital other is exponentially supported by the bursting development of AI. The digital other isn't unfamiliar – the media specificity of animation films and computer games builds on the notion of the digital other (or digitally created human-like non-human other). As technology evolved and AI entered the field of creation, the digital other left the uncanny valley and became increasingly human-like. With the exponential development of virtual effects creation, virtual humans indicate the convergence of real-time and computer-generated media starting with the movie *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and the recently announced MetaHuman Creator by Unreal Engine<sup>48</sup> that allows for accessible and easily customizable digital characters for any kind of virtual production. Alongside this development, the digital other also left the well-defined field of fictional entertainment and increasingly penetrates situations beyond mediated leisure in the form of virtual assistants and virtual influencers. As part of the field of affective computing, virtual humans are created to converse, understand, reason and exhibit emotions. These automated agents<sup>49</sup> with three-dimensional bodies can perform tasks through natural language-style dialogs with humans deployed in fields such as healthcare, education or as a personal assistance.

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<sup>46</sup> Julie Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> The MetaHuman creator is a game engine based real-time 3D character creator. It has been released in 2021. See: <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/metahuman-creator>

<sup>49</sup> <https://ict.usc.edu/groups/virtual-humans/>

## The possibility of the critique within

Following the argumentation that contemporary capitalism, entangled with other oppressive systems and networked digital technologies, produces specific formal-aesthetic predicaments, the possibility of reflection, critique and infiltration can also be found on the formal-aesthetic level. Although formal-aesthetic gestures of subversion have been present in art and respectively media art history, there is a specificity in the present moment's configuration of the neurocentrism of contemporary capitalism and the technological apparatus underlying formal-aesthetic characteristics. The possibility for critique stays within the system. Critical work uses the same technologies and resides within the same system that has been produced and is upheld by contemporary capitalism. Media entertainment technology is a byproduct of massive state-funded defense research, fueling into a globalized surveillance and commodification.

The possibility of infiltration can be found in well-known gestures of destabilization and recontextualization of the cut-up, collage, assemblage, and juxtaposition which have been repurposed in the context of post-cinema. These contemporary gestures can be found in the digital abject, the glitchy, low resolution, the altered image, the extremely slow or near stasis. Technologies of vision have been deliberately repurposed in media art, dismissing their ontological specificity. The analog is not for the nostalgia of realism. Scientific vision technology is not there to gain empiricism but rather to divert from the stereotypes of the representational image. The performative and participatory of the pre-digital era can be found in embodied, virtual spaces and in the becoming of digital media assemblage. In the media assemblage, human and non-human agents are dynamically entangled and become what Katherine Hayles calls a "cognitive assemblage"<sup>50</sup>. The participating agents can create so-called "inflection points" that can disturb, invert, or defy the cognitive assemblage on a systematic level.

Critique of the workings of contemporary capitalism has been explored within the field of cinema and media studies as well. Patricia Pisters and Steven Shaviro probe the consequences of contemporary capitalism in the realm of the post-cinematic.

Steven Shaviro centers his thoughts on the notion of post-cinematic affect as the emotional-affective state in which we live in 21st-century Western societies. He talks about "radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience"<sup>51</sup>. Post-cinematic affect is the material expression, an ambiguous sensibility of underlying and ungraspable flows of globalization and financialization.

In her book, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Patricia Pisters develops the concept of the "neuro-image" in the tradition of the Deleuzian understanding of cinema. Pisters describes the double-logic of our contemporary culture, in which new technologies produce objects that can enhance creativity and yet at the same time serve manipulation, control and mediocrity. Neuro-image is an expression of this schizoid techno-media field. The symbolic, and yet literal, image for this schizoid state is the cityscape full of

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<sup>50</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, illustrated edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 116.

<sup>51</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



networked electronic and digital screens – “screens that are themselves always already connected to assemblages of power, capital, and transnational movements of peoples, goods, and information”<sup>52</sup>.

Another realm of possible critique is the mental space subjugated by contemporary capitalism. Several thinkers, such as Patricia Pisters, Warren Neidich and Byung-Chul Han, argue that certain mental states such as depression and anxiety are products of the functioning of contemporary capitalism. The way out, as they argue, is actually finding an “autonomous zone” in which the normalization of the mind can be suspended. These are states of delirium<sup>53</sup> or idiotism<sup>54</sup> that amplify the imaginative capacity of the mind.

Concluding this part of the essay, let’s point back to the main characteristics of contemporary capitalism, which hand-in-hand with networked digital technologies and neuroscientific research, is aimed at the invisible – affective, emotional and cognitive – labor and the commodification and normalization of the mind. Treating capitalism as an oppressive ideology, the essay drew parallels with other oppressive ideologies such as white supremacy and mapped out its characteristics (perfectionism, growth, competitiveness, and individualism) as well as formal characteristics of post-cinematic images (high quality and smoothness, manipulative micro-temporality, operationality, modulation, fluidity, flexibility). In answer to these predicaments, the essay pointed to both formal (the digital abject, the glitchy, low resolution, and the extreme slowness) and mental (delirium, idiotism) “autonomous zones” where the extreme pressure of contemporary capitalism can be suspended by the imaginative capacity of the mind.

### Szilvia Ruszev

Szilvia Ruszev is a film editor, media artist and scholar working across different media formats. Her broader research interest focuses on sensuous knowledge, montage theories and the politics of post-cinema. Her praxis is interested in transdisciplinary creative-critical experimentation challenging the materiality of digital time-based media, producing an alternative discourse concerning perception, cognition and affect. Currently, she is finishing her Ph.D. degree in Media Arts + Practice in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.

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<sup>52</sup> Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, *op. cit.*