LOVE AND ROBOTS THROUGH A SCANNER DARKLY

On the unexpected optimism of Gus Fisher Gallery's exhibition *happiness is only real when shared*

By Samuel Te Kani

I was ten or eleven when I saw Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) for the first time. Back then the rumbling hype for the film was monstrous, ployed as an unfinished Kubrick project and subsequently froth-inducing for those who thought the Illuminati-fixated erotica of Eyes Wide Shut an insufficient swan-song.

Being a kid I was only half-cognisant of the media-led anticipation, and only wanted to see whatever was playing at our local multiplex because I was somewhere between craving escape from an inarticulate fear of the world, and intellectually flirting with cinema as an unholy and exhilarating medium; something which could potentially reimagine the world for me, put it under a more forgiving lens.

I didn't know it then but I was at the beginning of a passionate and obsessive (and insufferable to anybody else) romance with cinema which all these years later remains a steady preoccupation.

Anyway, after salivating at trailers and having my parents decide I was too young to see it in theatres (Christians, go figure) I finally saw it at home on VHS.

And I have never recovered.

What struck me then has stayed with me my whole life; the film's marrying of dystopian sensibilities with tenderness, a patience for humanity and its habits, its destructive impulses and monstrous (ravenous?) irrationalities surveyed more artfully than ethically. This, in particular, a poetic framing of our decline opened up a whole new psychic space for me quite separate from the Jesus-Good/World-Bad dichotomies of my Christian upbringing. For example, negatively terraforming the planet by unearthing and burning off its subterranean carbon stores seems absurd by the informed calculations of hindsight. But looked at in the richly tapestried sweep of history you have contained scenarios and events, actors responding to immediate situations without the omniscience we presume history's villains would've-could've-should've had regarding certain decisions. History, like politics, dehumanises.

While the camera eye, it seemed, could actually traffic the grace and forgiveness normally peddled as the reserve of Jesus Himself.

Also, we don't know what's making history until the fires have burned out and the photos have been taken and the publisher is going to print (more importantly, who is the publisher? What's their Modus Operandi?) Until that moment it's just this: miasmic, immediate, now. All the bristling, bustling fallibility of life as it happens.

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The themes of Gus Fisher Gallery's current show *happiness is only real when shared* orbits the same anxious reveries which science fiction as a genre, across mediums, has traditionally indulged; the mechanisation of human society, how artificial intelligence might engage with or even overtake species-dominance of the human race, what the future might look like on the other side of catastrophic collapse. Of this generic assemblage it's debatably the dystopian projections which are the most popular and publicly recognisable, if only because Hollywood tends to bankroll these more than any. The utopian equivalents, in which audience palates aren't manipulatively whet for scenes of urban destruction, offer less spectacle and, as such, are a more dower cinematic fare than, say, a movie about pandemics or meteors.

The industry, for better or worse, greets Apocalypse with fanfare. While reparative course corrections are less glamorous, it's somehow less desirable than hurtling towards certain death with a drink in one hand and a Marlboro light in the other.

Turkish-American artist Pinar Yoldas' video-work *The Kitty AI: Artificial Intelligence for Governance* is a work of speculative fiction in which an algorithm with a feline interface, recently tasked with running the world in the year 2039, addresses the newly made planetary nation. Kitty AI is predictably cute, but this is cuteness which we can assume has been harvested from big-data, cat-features drawn from millions of facially-recognised user responses and preferences; features intended to rapidly disarm and convince citizen's of Kitty AI's innate compassion, and wring consent for its mechanised and mechanising rule. This is one of the singularities early theorising about a networked world, tethered to Christian-mystic cultures in Silicone Valley circa the late sixties, first prophesied with retrospectively misplaced optimism: The Post Political World.

In his seminal book The Agony of Eros (2017) cultural theorist Byang-Chul Han quotes editor of Wired magazine Chris Anderson's article 'The End of Theory' thusly:

> Out with every theory of human behaviour, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they can do it,

and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.[1]

This seems to perfectly encapsulate the flawed optimism of Kitty AI, which on one hand proffers practical (dare we say elegant?) solutions to the collapse inevitably faced when urban infrastructures buckle, and on the other hand introduces what 'old-world' thinking would typify as fascistic approaches. This seeming stalemate of political discursiveness versus the prospect of letting big data manage every aspect of our lives, is a conundrum from which aesthetic choices are not exempt. In fact, we could argue the machinic preference for symmetry (feed big data a problem and watch the AI make salving counter-moves like some sidereal figure-skater) is entirely an aesthetic leaning, by which we could also (facetiously?) flirt with the notion that all fascists/totalitarians have stronger 'artistic' sensibilities than their democratic contemporaries, in as much as elegance takes primacy over process.

Wasn't Hitler an avid Sunday painter?

New Zealand artist Mark Schroder's exhilaratingly messy installation *Fortune Teller* riffs liberally on this idea of covering the planet in one homogenised infrastructure, whether that be the occult ministrations of a Her-styled OS, or the performative optimism of the neoliberal worker, enmeshed in the registers of productivity and wellness.

The installation itself is an office space but perhaps a version of this space denuded of pretence; rather, it is the office space bared in all its carnivorous absurdity, the office space replicated and mutated as a more honest account of the logics underlying administrative labour.

It is the office space as cartoonish vaudeville, which Schroder seems to argue is the real truth lurking between water-cooler sessions, a truth more aligned with the wildly reflexive dreamscapes of Charlie Kaufman than the droll servitude of Steve Carell. Schroder reminds us that the climate we're currently navigating, with its stress on optimising/exploiting the Self as a potentially profitable vehicle, exists not as the tidy arrival-point of Game Theory (which would have us believe humans are rational players making economical choices for themselves at all times—which is just not the case), but as the schizophrenic swan-song of a system consuming itself like Ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail.

And just like Ouroboros, especially now amidst eco-collapse and a world remade by pandemic, we're vibrating in the throes of imploding-and-not-quite-reborn, awaiting renewal with coiled spines and chronically withdrawn accounts.

Accordingly Schroder's installation is a squishy chaos, its colours frequently bleeding out of its own sporadic lines so that the actual gallery office-space seems deliberately fused with the work. Schroder's corporate partitions are littered with curious tangibilities, ceramics and literal dirt and forgotten coffee mugs and wine-glasses, all the very human detritus remaining from bodies moving through a space which would otherwise see them transformed into the stuff of algorithms. It's a far cry from the sterility normally associated with corporate ontologies. Which is the point.

The walls of Schroder's labyrinth-like structure are plastered with sunny platitudes about succeeding, about being happy, about optimising the Self for a bigger slice of cheese. (Cheese is a motif throughout, that hackneyed money-metaphor that makes competitive rats of its labourers.)

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[1] Anderson, C. (2008). *The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete*. https://www.wired.com/2008/06/pb-theory/

As you spend time with it you realise this install is also about the physical world and its frequent rebellions, even amidst the brut efficiency of a machine geared for profit, product, and punishment. It's a broke-down panopticon that proudly bears the stamp of fallibility, a glitch in the fascistic determinations of a society which nowadays exacts labour with an oppressively mathematical, super subtle, almost spiritual precision.

The (pathological?) detail of *Fortune Teller* weaves a cunning effect, wobbling the demarcation between the hallowed space of Art and its administrative scaffolding in a rigorous profanation of that which is only sacrosanct by the graces of an opaque market. And the manoeuvre, like a palindrome, can be read both ways.

Hong Kong artist Wong Ping's animations *Fables 1 & 2* speaks easily to both Yoldas' and Schroder's pieces, sustaining the post-humanism of the former and the dizzying whimsy of the latter—a whimsy which, far from being an indulgence, exists to mirror the insanities of neoliberal scripts, and the vicious comedy of neoliberal realities.

And I do mean vicious.

Ping's work, consisting of five short animated tales, does not pull punches. Each tale features an animal navigating increasingly absurd events and ratcheted stakes, reminiscent not just of Aesop but also Orwell's Animal Farm with their dystopian themes. There's a chicken driven to narcissistic achievement through overcoming adversity, there's a sensorily challenged elephant, there's a homicidal rabbit family, etcetera. These animals represent the worst of us, the anti-social impulses we in-advertently channel daily if only for being reared in a poisoned system.

When the village well is toxic, so are all the village kids.

Though, like with Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence*, there's a pathos amidst the tragedies, a sympathy for these characters that are being drawn and quartered (sometimes literally) by world-forces which, though rendered in monochromatic exaggeration, we can still recognise as unpleasantly familiar.

The fable about Cow the super-rich, the moral of which the exhibition's title is borrowed from (*happiness is only real when shared*), is especially depressing. But in this pathos it effects more deeply than the sunny moralising of something from Disney ever could.

Cow begins life as an activist, writing treatises on barbaric practices such as slow-roasted beef and its specific humiliations to the animal, protesting the same at rallies and marches. Cow is thriving despite his meagre lot, for Cow has purpose. However, at a protest he is arrested and imprisoned, spending years in jail and finding his resolve to change the world tested by rough treatment, solitary confinement, malnourishment; all the horrors of a sublimely indifferent state exacting profoundly impersonal punishment.

When Cow is finally released he is changed, a beggar reduced to selling his jeans for food-money which, to his delight, are a kitsch commodity belonging to a new activist chic which became popular when he was finishing his prison sentence. From this, Cow is able to create wealth. His jean-money acts as seed-money for a capitalist empire, a fortune which allows him to build a massive reverse-skyscraper, which is a skyscraper with all the same measurements of a traditional monolith only underground.

Among the codas of Ping's other fables, this one captures the ways in which practices of the wealthy and luxury consumption itself is geared to the preparation of lavish tombs, fortresses of disconnection which block the joys that wealth can allegedly purchase.

Further, Cow's journey from activist to capitalist is not an uncommon one. The lures of wealth and power can deter idealists in their pursuit of justice, can persuade martyrs down from their pyres into a pair of Louboutin shoes. Jane Fonda anyone?

After taking up residence in his subterranean palace Cow loses touch with reality completely, a reality he used to embrace with empathy and action which now only exists for him on a computer monitor. His only means of interaction with other animals is rigging the lottery by buying massive sweepstakes in a way he knows there's a win, his greatest joy in life the imagined happiness he's creating and subsequently sharing with the other sweepstake winners.

Eventually Cow dies in his subterranean lair, so close to the earth's core that his corpse slow-roasts. When he's found Cow is declared a new regional delicacy, better even than the acclaimed Wagyu.
The irony of Cow becoming the humiliated subject of his own indignant treatise is not lost on the public.

Finally, displayed as a solo presentation in the gallery's proposal space *The Booth*, there's New Zealand artists Vanessa Crofskey and Kimmi Rindel's Now You See Me, a 'smart mirror' set up in an intimate booth that gives its subject gently affirming messages—like our social media accounts, a closed loop of positive reinforcement, an echo chamber offering pleasant stasis.

Despite being the smallest work, *Now You See Me* is perhaps one of the most poignant, in as much as it exemplifies the self-programming required in a neoliberal society; priming ourselves like machines towards a blissful state of total productivity, the dutiful application of psychological prophylactics like 'wellness' and 'vibes' to gloss over the more damning discrepancies (if only to make work easier).

To paraphrase Byang-Chul Han again from his slim volume *Psychopolitics* (2018), he details our cultural shift from a cinematic unconscious to a digital unconscious, by which he means the collapsing of the negative space in the vector of seeing. Where the camera-eye necessarily presented reality as an object-image on a screen, the unbound 'digital' vectors of seeing disperse the object-image as something oceanic, as something which constantly eludes by being everywhere at once, and also nowhere. Taking this further, Han bemoans this eradication of negativity and the cultish proliferation of the positive which the digital has arrived us at, a positivity which for all its worship of happiness makes subjects incapable of love.

Love requires the negative, a voidish space around the beloved for desire to breathe, to roam, to bolster with fantasy. Without that space, without the wiles of fantasy, we lose our capacity to imagine alternatives to where we find ourselves; saturated in meaningless calculations and equations, adrift in data without the negative space to attach any real meaning to it.

In a world free of negativity there can be no wisdom, or love (contrary to Kitty AI's soap-boxing about replacing politicians with a politics of AI-love). There is only the indifferent causality of machines.

And yet . . .

I find myself reaching back to Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence*, which even being about the decline of humanity, the corruption of human society, and its inevitable extinction, still manages to be a story about a little robot boy trying to find love. Saccharine, definitely; but in its earnestness, profound.

David has been programmed to love, a living substitute for childless parents. The moral crux however proves too much for his adopted parents, who failing to meet the wholly alien presence of synthetically

unconditional love abandon David in the woods. Thus begins David's journey through the wastes of the late twenty-first century in which we see humanity torn between embracing the rise of the robots as tools and toys, and yet unable to fully greet the prospect of machines as human-equivalent presences.

None of which matters. Humanity fades anyway.

As the film hurtles through aeons we find David a thousand years later, immortal, being excavated from a frozen capsule where he spent a millennia prostrated to a model of the blue fairy, praying to be transformed into a real boy so that Monica, his foster mother, would finally love him. His excavators are the machine descendants, so advanced their synthetic bodies have taken on the subtlety of organic matter.

They take pity on David, whose concept of love is archaic, a concept from which they've graduated as gestalt empaths. As a mercy they clone his beloved for a day so that David may be with his mother in the blissful locus of love one last time. And as Monica sleeps never to re-awaken David joins her, a machine allowed to follow the procession of organic matter, ushered by love into the mystery of death.

Perhaps there is something to be learned after all in the concerns of a machine. Perhaps (a very tentative perhaps) there is something of the Grecian concept Agape, of limitless and cosmic love, in a machine's far-reaching omniscience. And perhaps (a very anxious perhaps) the difference between total surveillance and an oceanic love is less than we think.

GUS FISHER GALLERY

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