

Polar Art and Aesthetics: Past and Present

Isabelle Gapp

Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics: Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic, by Lisa E. Bloom, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 288 pp., 32 col. and 64 b. & w. illus., paperback, \$27.95

Visual Culture and Arctic Voyages: Personal and Public Art and Literature of the Franklin Search Expeditions, by Eavan O'Dochartaigh, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 228 pp., 35 b. & w. illus., open access

In her influential text *Gender on Ice* (1993), Lisa Bloom commented: 'In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries polar exploration narratives [...] the difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions provided the ideal mythic site where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats'.¹ These tropes have continued to be perpetuated and reproduced by historians. In two recent publications, Eavan O'Dochartaigh, for the first time, and Bloom, once again, take up the mantle of expanding public and academic perceptions and understandings of polar art and aesthetics. Both books are part of a larger art-historical sub-field that was largely kick-started by Bloom's *Gender on Ice* thirty years ago. The field of polar art history is temporally, geographically, and materially diverse. The temporal scope of polar art-historical scholarship now ranges from the Renaissance to the present day. It encompasses both the northern and southern-most regions of the world and extends across traditional visual media, new and innovative technologies, and various Indigenous histories and materialities. And yet, both of these volumes reveal that what we know, and what we need to know, about the image cultures of nineteenth-century Arctic exploration and the urgency of artistic activism today requires ongoing critical evaluation.

Exploring shared themes and ideas in distinct time periods, Bloom and O'Dochartaigh both construct new methodologies and dissect common modes of analysing and framing the Arctic and Antarctic. Bloom's book is hugely ambitious and artist-orientated;

O'Dochartaigh's is more archival and textually rich. Describing Arctic ships searching for the missing Franklin expedition as 'microcosms of Victorian Culture' (4), O'Dochartaigh argues that shipboard visual records were transformed, commodified, and sensationalised for a public audience. In 1845, Sir John Franklin commanded the HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*, setting sail from England in yet another attempt to locate and navigate the North-West Passage. Both ships were lost, resulting in the deaths of all 129 men aboard the two ships, and it is often seen as the worst disaster in the history of British polar exploration. This fateful expedition famously spawned over thirty expeditions looking for the missing ships and crew, of which several are explored in O'Dochartaigh's volume. As objects of popular culture, these shipboard visual records concealed the idea of the Arctic as a 'local, intimate, and familiar' space (18). Where O'Dochartaigh proposes that the Arctic was 'everywhere' (2), Bloom frames her analysis around this larger geographical scale. She accounts for both the circumpolar Arctic and Antarctic, as well as the global networks formed by the effects of climate change and global warming. Bloom sees *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* as reprising and extending the groundwork undertaken in *Gender on Ice* and in her scholarship since, connecting 'nascent and resurgent imperialist heroism' to 'artistic responses to climate changes and earth's finitude' (6). Adopting what she terms an 'earthbound approach' (9), Bloom investigates inter-media and multifaceted responses by contemporary artists and activists to the prevailing narratives of mainstream media, in which wilderness and imperial imagery still abound.

Aesthetics play an important part in framing Arctic and Antarctic visual cultures in both volumes. For Bloom, a concern with aesthetics is fundamental to her assessment of contemporary artists working on polar climates and environments. From the outset, she argues that 'contemporary artists and activists are devising a new polar aesthetics' (2). There is, however, no singular 'critical polar aesthetics', as Bloom terms it; the artists in question reveal the multitudinal and multifaceted nature of aesthetic production, in contrast to work produced in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As new aesthetic practices 'sensitize us to the unfolding processes of climate breakdown' (18), Bloom frames each artist as embodying a different polar aesthetic. In relation to Indigenous made and collaborative filmmaking, Bloom borrows and

re-articulates the term 'aesthetics of survivance' as she, to varying degrees of success, situates and restores Indigenous knowledge, voices, and perspectives (85). Writing about Isaac Julien's *Far North*, Bloom looks to the politics of aesthetics and exclusion, as Julien focuses on the Black figure of Matthew Henson, rather than his white partner Robert Peary (73). In Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007) (plate 1), Bloom, writing in this chapter in collaboration with Elena Glasberg, finds a 'polar aesthetics of mystery and finitude' in the columns of glacial meltwater now preserved for eternity (145), and in Brenda Longfellow's *Dead Ducks* (2012) a contrasting 'aesthetics of intimacy' (165).

Where Bloom argues that, historically, there was only one heroic polar aesthetic which contemporary artists now refuse, O'Dochartaigh suggests that from the sketch to the print there is a 'very deliberate aesthetic manipulation' which sees the dialogue between image cultures altered (6). Perhaps most

indicative of this aesthetic shift is the evolution of the often personal shipboard sketch into a large-scale panorama or reproduceable print. O'Dochartaigh writes that sketches and lithographs, the latter itself a reproducible medium, provide 'a barometer of change as representations went through processes of transformation' (167). Where the dominant idea of the Arctic during the nineteenth century in particular was one of a 'desolate and frozen realm' (43), O'Dochartaigh shifts attention towards the polar imaginary showcased in these private pictures and personal records. There, summer scenes prevailed. There was no visualisation of the 'seas choked with icebergs [that] were an essential element of the public depiction of the Arctic' (36). This persistent image of the Arctic as white, barren ground ready to be conquered 'continues to configure the Arctic as the testing ground for white masculinity, an image that is not compatible with flora and greenery', as O'Dochartaigh identifies in her analysis of Peter Sutherland's bountiful, floral work (83) (plate 2). She also recognises that as naval officers and seamen, such

1 Roni Horn, floor-to-ceiling glass columns containing melted ice removed from Icelandic glaciers, from *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, 2007. Photo: Elena Glasberg.



as Francis Leopold McClintock, made repeated visits to the Arctic, their familiarity results in a lack of aesthetic interest. O'Dochartaigh returns to the constant discrepancy between private and public pictures throughout *Visual Culture and Arctic Voyages*.

This alternative narrative of nineteenth-century image cultures tessellates nicely with Bloom's agenda to move away from a clichéd and heroic imaginary of polar environments and histories. For Bloom, altering perceptions of a polar imaginary is more urgently concerned with censorship and political greenwashing. She highlights the fact that Longfellow's imagery of dead ducks, despite the outcry, resulted in oil corporations turning 'the tragedy into something to be managed and contained' (167). Subhankar Banerjee's 'activist directed art' of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, is framed by the artist's own methodology of 'slow violence' and as a visual alternative and manifestation of scientific data (107). Within the field of ecocritical art history, Banerjee's image of caribou migrations notably adorns the cover of Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher's *A Keener Perception* (2009). Bloom considers Banerjee's 2003 exhibition at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC and draws parallels with Ansel Adams's photography and ideas of the American sublime. However, looking at a photograph by Banerjee of a sandpiper, Bloom alerts the reader to how these photographs were censored through the editing of captions: 'that this sandpiper is on the move, migrating to the refuge and other locations within an interconnected world, was denied by the Smithsonian's imposed nationalist framing' (111). Nation-building around polar imagery persists in the present.

The idea of the sublime, and of an untapped wilderness, figures as both protagonist and antagonist in Bloom's and O'Dochartaigh's comprehensive studies of polar visual culture. Both authors think beyond, and with, the sublime to offer alternative perspectives and accounts of scientific discovery, environmental history, the climate crisis, and aesthetic experience within polar spaces. Referencing Edmund Burke, O'Dochartaigh outlines what is often meant by a nineteenth-century sublime: 'that which produces delight by the depiction of pain and danger' (6). She notes that the early romantic interest in marine subject matter, including shipwreck paintings, continued into the Victorian era, with the precariously leaning ship becoming a 'ubiquitous motif in Arctic publications, signifying peril and the possibility of disaster' (93). The



2 Peter C. Sutherland, *A Group of Thirteen of the Flowers most Commonly Found around Assistance Bay*, 1852. Colour lithograph, 17.8 × 11.6 cm. Plate 4 from volume 2 of Sutherland, *Journal of a Voyage in Baffin's Bay and Barrow Straits [...] in Search of the Missing Crews of H.M. Ships Erebus and Terror*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1852. Photo: Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

disappearance of Franklin's ships the *Erebus* and *Terror* in the 1840s in turn evoke terrifying images, where the Arctic is an inhospitable place that only brave men dare venture. For Bloom, ideas of heroism and the sublime are intimately intertwined, with the 'heroic ethos' returning to 'overcome planetary catastrophe' (5). Artists now have the potential to fulfil a heroic role as their work draws attention to global, ecological, and industrial crises. 'The heroic is understood as reactionary political and cultural stances that seek to claim lost wilderness and to reassert control over nature', Bloom writes (5).

To problematise this heroic age of polar exploration, Bloom frames the work of Anne Noble through the 'kitsch aesthetic of sublime wilderness' (31). Noble's work parodies Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley's Antarctic imagery, reproduced

within an indoor setting. Bloom argues that the sublime is inverted and domesticated, reduced to mundane man-made structures on the frozen continent. Experienced through dioramas, videos, and entertainment centres, Bloom might have made further comparison with modern-day technologies and the entertainments of nineteenth-century polar exploration, including magic lantern slide lectures, panoramas, and the eidophusikon. O'Dochartaigh similarly reduces the sublime to a human scale by thinking through shipbound image cultures and the 'small, self-effacing sketches' made by ships' crews. In her analysis of William Browne's drawings from 1848–49, for example, she proposes a 'contemplative sublime' (31). Browne's work prioritises a subjective response to the landscape beyond the confines of a topographical maritime study. O'Dochartaigh argues that nineteenth-century shipboard periodicals, the *Illustrated Arctic News* and the *Queen's Illuminated Magazine*, and the surrounding image cultures were conceived as Arctic souvenirs. She notes that the creation of periodicals, through image and text, indicated that 'turning inwards' was an 'effective way of negating the Arctic sublime' (52). She writes: 'The Arctic of periodicals was not sublime, heroic, or astonishing, but familiar, personal, and sociable' (65). Unlike the image and narrative that was packaged and publicised back in the UK, the writers and illustrators of these nineteenth-century periodicals 'satirised themselves, the idea of terror, and the metropolitan Arctic imaginary' (68). Through a collective and familiar narrative, the imaginary they invoked offered a very distinct and human image that was subsequently lost as sketches were altered and transcribed into suitably public scenes of a polar heroic imaginary, as found in Robert Burford's panorama *Summer and Winter Views of the Polar Regions* (1850).

The nuances of the sublime invoked throughout both Bloom's and O'Dochartaigh's books indicate its continued usefulness for thinking through Arctic and Antarctic visual histories and environmental spaces. Where the legacies of polar exploration linger in public perceptions of polar environments and are packaged for and experienced by tourists, as Bloom notes the sublime is now closely tied to ideas of industrialisation and resource extraction. Bloom does not disregard the word sublime, but employs it to highlight how the ravaging effects of abundant industrialisation have largely supplanted nineteenth-century notions of a barren wilderness. Echoing Burtynsky and his

'ravaged earth' photographs (179), Bloom examines the work of Ursula Biemann, notably her video *Deep Weather* (2013), which engages a 'tar sands sublime', where the terror of industry has similarly replaced the terrifying nineteenth-century landscape (157). Bloom also references Isaac Julien's phrase, a 'contaminated sublime', which politicises and highlights the traumatic resonances within such beautiful images (75). Looking at Biemann's work, Bloom deftly and poignantly draws lines between the ruining effects of industrialisation on Canada's Arctic coastline and the devastating sea-level rise in Bangladesh. She reminds us that the industrialisation of the Arctic is not restricted to the Arctic; its effects are global.

The visual history of the sublime often invokes ideas of wilderness, of landscapes devoid of human and other-than-human life and has been used to 'justify Indigenous absence rather than presence' (9). Bloom, as with many other scholars over the last few decades, including Mark Nuttall, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, Gry Hedin and Ann-Sofie N. Gremaud, and Amanda Boetzkes, to name a few, argues that such thinking is counterproductive to understanding the realities of the climate crisis within polar spaces and communities.² Both O'Dochartaigh and Bloom confront these inexcusable exclusions and recentre Indigenous positionalities, perspectives, representations, and histories.

With a focus on several expeditions involved in the search for Franklin, O'Dochartaigh brings attention to the difference between those ships that overwintered in isolation and those that found themselves trapped in the ice near Indigenous communities. She insightfully debunks the idea of the lone ship trapped in the ice, and instead uses the idea of contact zones, where ships established temporary communities with Canadian and Kalaallit Inuit around Baffin Bay, and the Chukchi, Yup'ik, and Iñupiat around the Bering Strait. In these instances, socialising with Indigenous men and women offered a break from 'homosocial shipboard relationships' (103). Here, O'Dochartaigh plays with the heroic polar trope and instead, through her analysis of the *Illustrated Arctic News* and the *Queen's Illuminated Magazine*, suggests that men transplanted the domestic and gendered roles of women. In the absence of women, not only were men required to do their own laundry, prepare their own meals, and make elaborate, theatrical costumes, and the 'presence of so many men dressed as women [in plays and] in the on-board periodicals shows its

wide acceptance as part of naval culture in the mid-Victorian period' (64).

Importantly, O'Dochartaigh addresses how the representation of Indigenous peoples in personal records and print media was 'influenced by merging filters of aesthetics, gender, ethnicity, and unequal power relations' (99). This recognises the disciplinary shift toward problematising, recontextualising, and correcting Arctic visual and literary histories and narratives. Where Edward Adams's portrait of his first love, *Koutoküdluk – My First Love* (1851), which adorns the cover of *Visual Culture and Arctic Voyages*, reveals a rare intimacy, in Edward Augustus Inglefield's photographs from 1854, 'the female Inuk [...] is a servant, unnamed and anonymous [...] Her docile appearance is further domesticated' (101). This sexualised gaze foreshadows the dehumanising effect of later ethnographic photography of Indigenous people. Conversely, in her analysis of Julien's *Far North*, Bloom draws attention to the Black model Vanessa Myrie, who played the role of Henson, and how she is 'cold and iconic, as she is made both very visible and radically unavailable sexually, unlike Peary's youthful Inuit mistress' (77). A nude photograph of Aleqasina (Allakasingwah), a teenage girl, was included in Peary's autobiography *Northward over the 'Great Ice'* (1898) and is, uncomfortably, reprinted in the pages of Bloom's *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics*. Both the author and the press should have been alert to the ethics involved in reproducing such an image. Unanga scholar Eve Tuck, for example, has warned of the dangers of reinscribing damage-centred narratives, 'research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that established harm or injury in order to achieve reparation'.³ Regarding the reproduction of such imagery more specifically, Temi Odumosu has asked 'What is the best way to attend to violated bodies and biographies without replicating historical patterns of abuse? Under what conditions should this document/artifact/image be seen?'⁴ As Odumosu argues, there is an ethics of care required in consulting, let alone reproducing, the often fetishised images of Indigenous people. Given the inequalities of power inherent in these ethnographic images, these are questions that all art historians should be asking when working with settler and colonial visual cultures.

Where travellers and explorers during the nineteenth century were mostly temporary visitors within the Arctic, Bloom positions these outsider artists in contrast with Indigenous residents. Unlike Antarctica which is an environment without an

Indigenous people and thus often seen as up for grabs geopolitically, Bloom recentres the work of Indigenous artists and other makers. Although the work of the Inuk photographer Peter Pitseolak and Isuma-TV co-founder and filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk has been well researched in studies of Canadian and Inuit art history and visual culture, Bloom and Glasberg also delve into the work of the late Annie Pootoogook, and collaborative image making processes such as that between Andrea Bowers and the Gwich'in Steering Committee, Alaska. Bloom and Glasberg's analyses address 'the visual logic of the connected, integrated Earth' in Bowers's collaborative practice, for example, bringing together Gwich'in, white, and Nigerian perspectives against Shell Oil (118–119). By contrast, Pootoogook's 'sly, apparently humble drawings' (123) capture what Bloom and Glasberg see as 'deep environmental disruption' within Nunavut and Canada at large (124). They suggest that Pootoogook's drawings might be thought of as examples of 'crypto-mapping' as proposed by anthropologist and geographer Claudio Aporta.⁵ This aligns with several alternative geographical practices, including deep-mapping and counter-mapping, as found in Aporta and Michael Bravo's *Pan-Inuit Trails Atlas* for example, which offer multifaceted social and scientific depths to mapmaking and visual processes. Bloom and Glasberg might also have compared Pootoogook's work with Inuit wayfinding techniques, which typically involved an understanding of space drawn out in the environment or in memory, as well as with Inuit who historically aided in the making of European-style cartography, as with Sir John Ross's 1829–33 expedition in search of the North-West Passage.

In addition to the Indigenous peoples of the North American continent and Greenland, Bloom and Glasberg briefly look at Sápmi and the Sámi people. They consider settler artist Lillian Ball's *66 Degrees, 32 North, 50 Years* (2007) as a means through which to discuss not only the latitudinal point at which ice is rapidly melting (which the title denotes), but also Sámi reindeer herding practices (114–115). Sámi perspectives and voices, however, are notably absent from the book. This is certainly a missed opportunity given the noteworthy publication *Sámi Art and Aesthetics* (2017) which, as Bloom does, holds that 'aesthetics is fundamental to an understanding of the art of the Indigenous North'.⁶

Both Bloom and O'Dochartaigh examine how and where polar aesthetics converge with archival

practices and theories. Where today's public imaginary is perhaps most familiar with the idea of Svalbard as a futureproofing 'repository of the past', as Bloom notes in relation to the work of Katja Aglert (58), larger discourses around art and the archive are particularly apparent in both Bloom's and O'Dochartaigh's books. In *Visual Culture and Arctic Voyages*, O'Dochartaigh presents a critical examination of the 'visual archive' of the Franklin search expeditions, consulting materials that are largely unpublished (13). She highlights how many of these materials are 'often small and fragile, created on paper with pencil, watercolour, crayon or ink, making them vulnerable to fading, damage, and loss' (21). The nineteenth-century Arctic is reduced to a human material scale, contained within journals or sketchbooks, themselves now held within storage boxes. 'In the archive, the Arctic is often represented as a familiar, local, social, and humorous place', O'Dochartaigh writes (178). As an archive scattered across the globe, from Canada to Australia, she further alludes to the difficulties inherent to her own research, in which the result is an 'incomplete and fragmented visual register' (23). As two books that were completed during the Covid-19 pandemic, this is a problem that scholars in many fields will sympathise with. Beyond O'Dochartaigh's own research methods, she invokes the idea of the archive throughout the visual corpus of nineteenth-century shipboard image cultures. As science became increasingly visual during the nineteenth century, O'Dochartaigh argues that through field observations, or 'on the spot' drawings, the 'picture functions as a record of the condition of the ice and of the ship confined within that environment' (33). Most notably, the prevalence of summer views over the winter scenes of ice and snow in this archive alludes to the feasibility of on-the-spot sketches and might suggest an alternative climate-determined archive. The visualisation of science is also integral to the work of Judith Hersko, whose contemporary Antarctic imagery Bloom explores. Bloom describes how Hersko brings into focus the microscopic life beneath the water's surface through stories and scientific documentation, 'making these fluid and fragile creatures visible' (41). Bloom highlights not only the large-scale ramifications of global warming, notably ice melt, but also the less tangible and visible effects playing out beneath the water's surface, including the effects of warming waters on microbial life.

Hersko's work is more broadly indicative of the important role of the archival material in many of the artist's creative processes that Bloom describes. Hersko

maintains her own archive, including 'cinematic images, etched photographic images on glass and silicone, and photomontages' (42). Zacharias Kunuk, Ashlee Cunsolo, and Kimi Takesue's films, explored in Bloom's third chapter, 'create an alternative visual archive and cinematic language' that represents 'disrupted Inuit traditions' as their lives are rapidly altered by changing climate conditions and global warming (100). Bloom and Glasberg structure an entire section around this idea of 'Archives of Knowledge and Loss'. They contrast Roni Horn's 'site-specific and permanent installation' with Amy Balkin and her contributors' 'movable archive' (131). Bloom and Glasberg propose that Balkin complicates 'the notion of the future' by revealing that art is often seen as more valuable than its 'constituent materials' (133), and that Horn proposes through her glacial columns 'a narrative of a broken caretaking relation among humans, nonhumans, and earthly materials' (139). Making reference to the wealth of scholarship on Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, alongside many of the contemporary artists featured within the book, would have strengthened its ambitious contribution to the field of polar art history and visual culture studies.⁷ Unsettling the relationship between data and aesthetics, however, Bloom and Glasberg reduce the making of art to its materials, restoring focus on art production in a time of global climate change and environmental disaster.

Read together, Bloom's and O'Dochartaigh's books signal the wealth and scope of polar art and visual culture. Where O'Dochartaigh underscores the ongoing relevance of turning a critical and corrective lens on historic, especially nineteenth-century, Arctic visual cultures through archival materials, Bloom pushes for more urgent, climate-orientated perspectives, working in tandem with contemporary artists. Whether offering a snapshot of one period during an extremely productive and eventful century or in the introduction of a multitude of complementary, though not fully developed, aesthetic frameworks, both books share a hopeful incompleteness. They recognise how materially, culturally, historically, and environmentally diverse polar art history can be, and together offer ways of looking critically and thoughtfully at the art and visual culture of the Arctic and Antarctic.

Notes

- 1 Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, Minneapolis, 1993, 3.
- 2 See Mark Nuttall, *Protecting the Arctic: Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Survival*, Reading, 1998; Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds, *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and*

- Epistemologies, London, 2015, DOI: 10.26530/OAPEN_560010; Gry Hedin and Ann Sofie N. Gremaud, eds, *Artistic Visions of the Anthropocene North: Climate Change and Nature in Art*, London, 2018; and Amanda Boetzkes, 'How to see a Glacier in a Climate Landscape', *Weber – The Contemporary West*, 34: 1, 2018, 123–137.
- 3 Eve Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', *Harvard Educational Review*, 79: 3, Fall 2009, 413.
 - 4 Temi Odumosu, 'The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons', *Current Anthropology*, 62: 22, October 2020, 295. <https://doi.org/10.1086/710062>
 - 5 Claudio Aporta, 'From Map to Horizon; from Trail to Journey: Documenting Inuit Geographic Knowledge', *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 29: 1–2, 2005, 221–231.
 - 6 Svein Aamold, Elin Haugdal, and Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen, eds, *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives*, Aarhus, 2017, 16.
 - 7 For more on the work of Roni Horn, see Gill Perry, 'Watery Weather: Roni Horn in Iceland', *Art History*, 32: 1, 2009, 177–182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2008.00659.x>; and Elizabeth D. Harvey and Mark A. Cheetham, 'Tongues of Glaciers: Sedimenting Language in Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* and Anne Carson's "Wildly Constant"', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 31: 1, 2015, 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2015.1013272>

A Totalising, Political Environment: How Art History Understands Media

Tom Day

Distant Early Warning: Marshall McLuhan and the Transformation of the Avant-Garde, by Alex Kitnick, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 224 pp., 56 b. & w. illus., paperback, \$30

The Channeled Image: Art and Media Politics After Television, by Erica Levin, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 240 pp., 11 col. and 44 b. & w. illus., paperback, \$32.50

Art vs. TV: A Brief History of Contemporary Artists' Responses to Television, by Francesco Spampinato, London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 368 pp., 105 b. & w. illus., hardback, £95

It is a truism to state that we live in a postmedia world. Technology and apparatuses which modulate and alter our capacities for seeing and hearing have merged into our every waking moment and have taken on a constitutive force. The argument that we are products of our media environment is foundational in media studies. At the same time, the full integration of networked culture since the late 1990s and the ever-contingent expansion and synthesis of methods of capital accumulation alongside technology culture since the new millennium have taken us further down a path in which we at once lead and are led by media technologies. We are consistently asked to define ourselves through media while being denied access to the proprietary programming, powers and algorithms that make it.¹

We are by now prosumers of our own subjugation by surveillance capitalism. Subjects propping up illusory barriers between the realms of the public and the private, between the line demarcating entertainment and exploitation. This is leading to an ever-growing sense of unfreedom in our contemporary mediated environment which is now almost uniformly driven by screen-based and app-led tech, utilising the gamification of politics, education, social interaction and health and the algorithm as the dominant paradigm of (mis) information accumulation; as method for racialised surveillance and architect of hyper-consumption.