ISE

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago I had a dream that I was riding a school bus. As it carried us across the countryside, we came upon an old bridge. As the bus went to cross, it went out of control and broke through the tenuous wooden barriers, sending the bus hurtling several hundred feet toward the shallow stream below. At some point I was no longer inside the bus, but falling, face toward the sky, as I watched the rest of the passengers sprout wings and soar into the air above me.

When I woke I could feel my blood pressure spiking. Although the dream was full of ridiculous details, it seemed incredibly real, enough to alter the course of my sleep (and subsequently, part of my day). In the studio, I think about subjective experiences such as this dream— where the psychological boundary between what is real and what is not blur together and the gap created in their aftermath. These kinds of virtual spaces, interstitial, liminal in nature, echo some basic truth. Dreams, memories, experiences, and altered states speak to both the potential and limits of what we think of as reality. I seek to explore and traverse these spaces and to create traces of them.

BOUNDARIES

The 2015 open-world video game *Fallout 4* is notable because of the range of identities it allows your player-character to *be.* On the surface it is not so different from other games. It predicates many of the same tropes present in the majority of games produced each year; trophies, achievements, and gratuitous violence which serve the power-fantasy of the player. However, in *Fallout 4*, much like in other open-world games, players are allowed control over the body and the physical features your avatar projects into the world. *Fallout 4*'s character creator is of note because it includes features rarely, if ever, seen in other games such as 'authentic-to-life' black hair and non-standard body shapes and weights. In addition, the games allows you a high amount of autonomy over the player character's body out in the world. The character can don opposite-gender dress, court same- and opposite-sex characters, and even practice polyamory. The game's narrative considers classical science fiction questions of artificial intelligence and it's relationship to humanness, which allows it the ability to hint at complex social issues as the players spends hundreds of hours milling about the game world.

My interest in video games as an artistic raw material is both nostalgic and grounded in questions of fantasy, othering, and individual relationship to social and political structure. Anita Sarkeesian, Briana Wu and other up-and-coming critics have, in recent years, questioned the video game platform and industry in its relationship to

normativity in terms of gender, race, and class. One example of this is Tauriq Moosa's infamous "Colorblind" article, discussing the hugely popular *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015) and *Rust* (2013) in relationship to minority concerns. Although key differences exist between these two games, neither is a contributing factor to discussing them in relationship to criticism. The commonalities are such that they are each huge, open world games with a lot of content to experience and complete. In other words, although there is a finite amount of content, there are many different ways to experience and enjoy those worlds.

Rust, Tauriq points out, is a very contentious game for one reason: the game randomly assigns you a body when you start a new game. Essentially what this means is that a young, white teenage body can be assigned as an elderly black body, or vice versa, or any other number of permutations. There are, otherwise, no gameplay implications or changes based on which body you are using. In pouring through comments and interviews, Tauriq learned that at the heart of the contention over this issue was this lack of choice as a limitation; players wanted more freedom to create whatever they wanted. He juxtaposes this against *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, a game that has been met with adoration and acclaim from critics and players alike. Yet, very few of the reviews and comments Tauriq studied focused on the enforcement of a static straight, white cis male player character (however; it's overt sexism was frequently a topic of discussion). Indeed, after spending hundreds of hours playing, Tauriq noticed something else: there are no non-white characters located anywhere in the world of *The Witcher III.* [1]

Foucault says that the first step toward a truly radical critique begins with examining the relation between knowledge and power. These two ideas are not separable; they work together to establish a subtle set of criteria for thinking about the world.[2] These sentiments are echoed in Alan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" where he examines the relationship between photography and "Others" who are victimized by it in a way that its progenitors failed to understand. He focuses on two pioneers of the bureaucratic visual document (Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton). Bertillon's approach was tied to the indexical qualities of photography, and sought to create an archive that contained traces of criminals (such as height, weight, and visual representation). Galton on the other hand sought to create composites, relying on ideas from physiognomy and phrenology to inform him about physical and biological

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[1] "Colorblind: On the Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem," Polygon, June 3, 2015, accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem.

[2] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

features that were supposedly common to certain groups (namely, criminals and lower-class people). As Sekula points out, this conveniently also creates a scenario where those with power are able to create a more divided system of hierarchy based on supposed biological evidence. Both systems ultimately predicated ideas of a mythical "average man" against which other bodies could be juxtaposed.[3]

Judith Butler talks about the impossibility of creating any kind of norm or average by examining the range of identities within gender and the impossibility of classifying desire by what is normative and what is not. In her words: "…it is characterized by displacement, it can exceed regulation, take on new forms in response to regulation, even turn around and make it sexy. In this sense, sexuality is never fully reducible to the "effect" of this or that operation of regulatory power. This is not the same as saying that sexuality is, by nature, free and wild. On the contrary, it emerges precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints. Sexuality, though, is not found to be "in" those constraints as something might be "in" a container: it is extinguished by constraints, but also mobilized and incited by constraints, even sometimes requiring them to be produced again and again."[4]

This is, of course, not to mention that those that belong to sexual and gender minorities are more likely to experience violence and harassment in their lifetimes in the name of normativity. The ultimate problem is that no definition of humanness can be complete. It is always predicated upon exclusion because the nature of categorization and definition demands an 'other' to compare by virtue of difference. Everything else ends in social death through erasure. "Queerness" is created through virtue of exclusion. This line, between "norms" and "other" is delineated by identities; those that are inside the accepted sphere and those who are not, creating a system where reality itself is defined along these lines. To be queer is to live in fantasy. If "norms" constitute a reality as Butler suggests, then the act of redefining an acceptable body also redefines reality and what it is to be human.[5]

"Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home."[6]

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[3] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986).

[4] Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

Fantasy is both created and destroyed by normativity. It is not the opposite of reality, but better thought of as the limits of it because it is what reality has foreclosed. "Queer" in the most general sense is created and made radical by it's exclusion.[7]

RECOGNIZING THE BOUNDARY

The term and popular idea of the flâneur already existed by the time Charles Baudelaire wrote *The Painter of Modern life* in 1860. However, this text paints an interesting portrait of the artist as an observer, idle but active, amongst the crowd but apart from it: "For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude…To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world…The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito…Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy…a mirror as vast as the crowd itself."[8]

Thus, the flâneur is engaged with the world but remains unattached. Walter Benjamin later took up writing about the flâneur. Largely drawing from a marxist critique, he saw it as a way to observe the underlying capitalist structure of the city. Nearly a hundred years after *The Painter of Modern Life*, Guy Debord of the Situationist International expanded on this critique of capitalism by growing and defining new terminology based around what he called the spectacle: "In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself."

"The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere."[9]

For Debord, the spectacle was a way to define the capitalist tendency to reconsider, repackage, and ultimately sell need. It was also a way to generally define the way in which capitalism psychologically manipulates players trapped in its system, both as

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[7] Ibid

[8] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

[9] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Eastbourne: Soul Bay Press, 2009).

workers and consumers. Ultimately Debord saw the wandering qualities of a flâneur-like-figure as a mode for resisting or breaking this structure, both of the city and everyday life. Through his writings he also defined other terms that relate to the action and results of the activities of the flâneur: the dérive and détournement. The dérive in many ways can be thought of as simply the action of the flâneur but seems more complex and nuanced: "Amongst the various situationists methods is the dérive, a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The dérive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects…" [10]

Debord thus differentiates it from the flâneur as an action but also confuses it as both purposeful and disconnected. In other words, a dérive is wandering, detached of the current structure and hierarchies, while simultaneously being aware of them. This last part is important as Debord makes clear that a dérive is not chance or randomness as this lack of mindfulness can inadvertently lead to patterns and habits, which stand in opposition to the dérive. The dérive, and other terms associated with it, in some way reference the act of making the invisible visible by interrupting and revealing the structure of everyday life. In other words, insight is a key element of the dérive.[11]

Another important term / concept written about by Debord is the détournement. This can in some ways be thought of as the results of the dérive or a method of achieving it: "Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations…when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed…the juxtaposition of two independent expressions…supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used."[12]

BREAKING THE BOUNDARY

The open-world genre of video games in many ways asks the player to some extent to become a flâneur each time they hit the power button. When I began working with video games, I did so to perform extreme dérives to capture the unseen. Virtual worlds, like any narrative set, are meticulously constructed. In general, the goal of a developer is for the player to never see the seams and edges of this set. It is not entirely unusual

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[10] Guy Debord, "Writings from the Situationists International," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003).

[11] Ibid

[12] "A User's Guide to Détournement," *Situationist International Online,* accessed March 20, 2016, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/usersguide.html.

to hit an invisible wall in the game world. You can see through it, but cannot traverse this space. Beneath the ground of the game world are not miles of earth, but rather bastions of color and floating polygons, either left-overs from the worlds construction or unused assets that ended up under the visible plane.

Video games (even open world games) like reality, are structured in specific ways. There are rules for how one plays the game and there are always prerequisites for completing the content. At the end you are rewarded in some fashion, typically with some object of desire (and as Arthur Chu and Anita Sarkeesian have pointed out, this object is sometimes a body with agency). In order to properly dérive and ultimately break the boundaries within a game, a player has to seek out modes of play that by-pass this empty reward system that goads the player into following the rules.[13]

The glitch may be the most prominent form of breaking the boundaries within a game. Entire communities on the internet are dedicated to documenting glitches within game engines, which often lead to humorous results. Injection of custom code and software, known as modding, adds new content or alters existing content in ways that developers did not intend. The 2012 *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* featured one such mod that replaced the game's primary antagonist, dragons, with 3D rendered models of Thomas the Tank engine. This kind of intentional breakage is utilized by some artists, notably Cory Archangel. His most well known work, *Super Mario Clouds*, features a hardware modded copy of the 1988 Super Mario Bros. which when inserted into a Nintendo Entertainment System, will display only the ubiquitous clouds that normally backdrop the majority of stages in the game.[14]

There are a number of levels of contrast between modding and glitching. Modding is most often the answer to glitching- i.e., a way to unofficially repair a broken part of the game world. However, as mods become more ambitious, more glitching becomes likely. The glitch is almost always a response to something: the limits of the game engine. Modders and glitch documentarians are similar in that they are both seeking to break the game purposefully. While the end products are very different, it's the breaking of the boundary between the game world and what's on the other side, a place where the rules the break down, a possibility of something else, that ultimately matters.

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[13] "Your Princess Is in Another Castle: Misogyny, Entitlement, and Nerds," *The Daily Beast*, May 27, 2014, accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/27/your-princess-is-in-another-castle-misogyny-entitlement-and-nerds.html.

[14] "Super Mario Clouds," *Cory Archangel's Portfolio*, 2002, accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.coryarcangel.com/things-i-made/2002-001-super-mario-clouds.

An earlier video piece, *Out of Order* (2016), focused exclusively on breaching the boundaries of the game world. The video consists of a space with two elevator doors adorned with "out of order" signs. In this instance of the game, the invisible barrier that prevents the player from breaching the doors did not load correctly. Upon traveling through the door, the player descends into a partially loaded game world, falling into a void of nothing until hitting a certain point, where the player is redeposited in front of the doors. In many ways this piece became diagrammatic, but ultimately served to show the difficulty in traversing barriers beyond individual control. The player attempts over and over to penetrate this space, but is always pulled back to the beginning by the rules of the game.
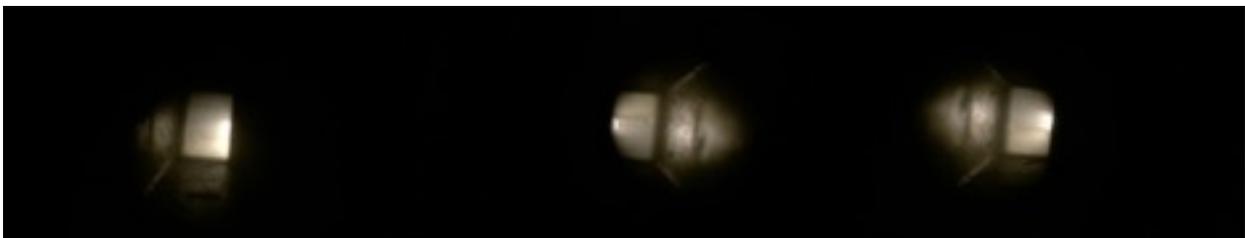
A number of my past works have focused on traveling through or viewing some space that is inaccessible. One example is *Tunnel* (2013). I used an iPhone camera to peer through the viewfinder of an old medium format camera. The frame, filled with blackness, occasionally pans through the viewfinder, briefly revealing a window. The video reveals not just the image of the window, but of the undefined between space. There is a sense of searching, looking for something that cannot be easily consumed and grasp. Even if the video is frozen and the between space and image are made

accessible, the window itself is curtained, becoming a barrier and denying access to what is truly on the other side.

In my extreme dérives, it became important to do more than wander the game map. A true dérive requires moving through the space in a way the player normally cannot. For *Ise* I utilized video games made in the Gamebryo engine, which contain a set of underlying developer console commands which can be used to alter physics and other in-game rules and features. This allowed me to play with the limitations of the virtual space. In the opening moments of the piece, the terrain appears fully formed and may even be mistaken for a true landscape. As the camera approaches objects in the space, the textures of the game world begin to reveal themselves, first through the appearance of pixels. When the camera breaches the foliage and trees, they are also revealed to be flat, only textured to appear three-dimensional. Whereas *Out of Order* focused on the impossibility of traversing this space, *Ise* focuses on simply revealing the signs of an overarching structure of what is otherwise, simply an undefined void.
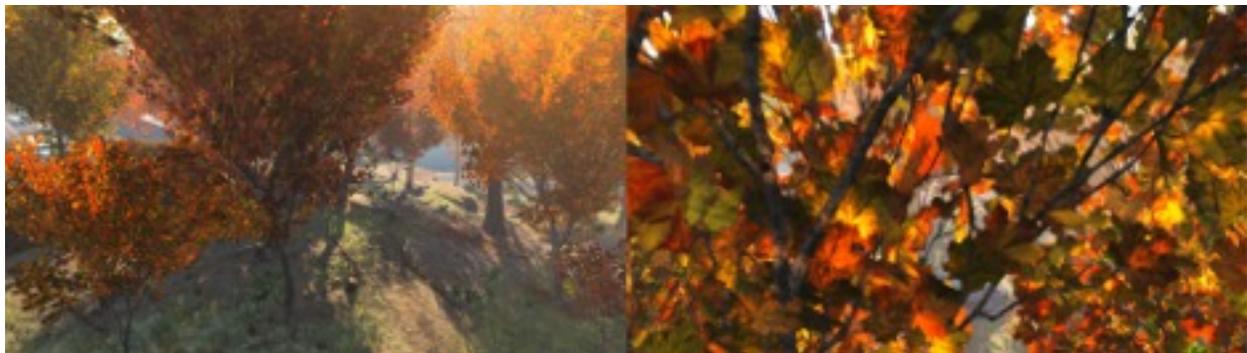

ISE, PT 2.

The name 'Ise' is borrowed from a Shinto shrine in Japan. I chose it not because of it's cultural association but because of the poetic qualities of the shrine and the rituals performed around it. Every twenty years the main temple is torn down and rebuilt on an adjacent lot. It is not rebuilt with the old materials, but reconstituted using wood from the nearby countryside. The result is a kind of rupture, a type of glitch in it's lineage. What is left is a memory of something from long ago, continually reconstructed in an endless loop.

'Ise' is also the name of the short story that precedes this video piece and constitutes the text of the voice over. The story is a memory, recalled from nostalgia, of a space that no long exists, and ends with a lament for this absence. The memory itself is a type of fantasy, made unreal by it's undoing. It is a type of borderland in and of itself, a

journey that cannot be completed. The now-absence of the space reveals the limits of memory, just as the game presents the limits of an analogous virtual space.

The story is not narrated in a conventional sense but is a composite of digitally created voices. The synthetic quality of the voice creates an emotional distance between the viewer and the story shifting it beyond mere nostalgia. The result is a nostalgic memory, a seemingly natural and human occurrence, juxtaposed against an unnatural aural simulacrum.
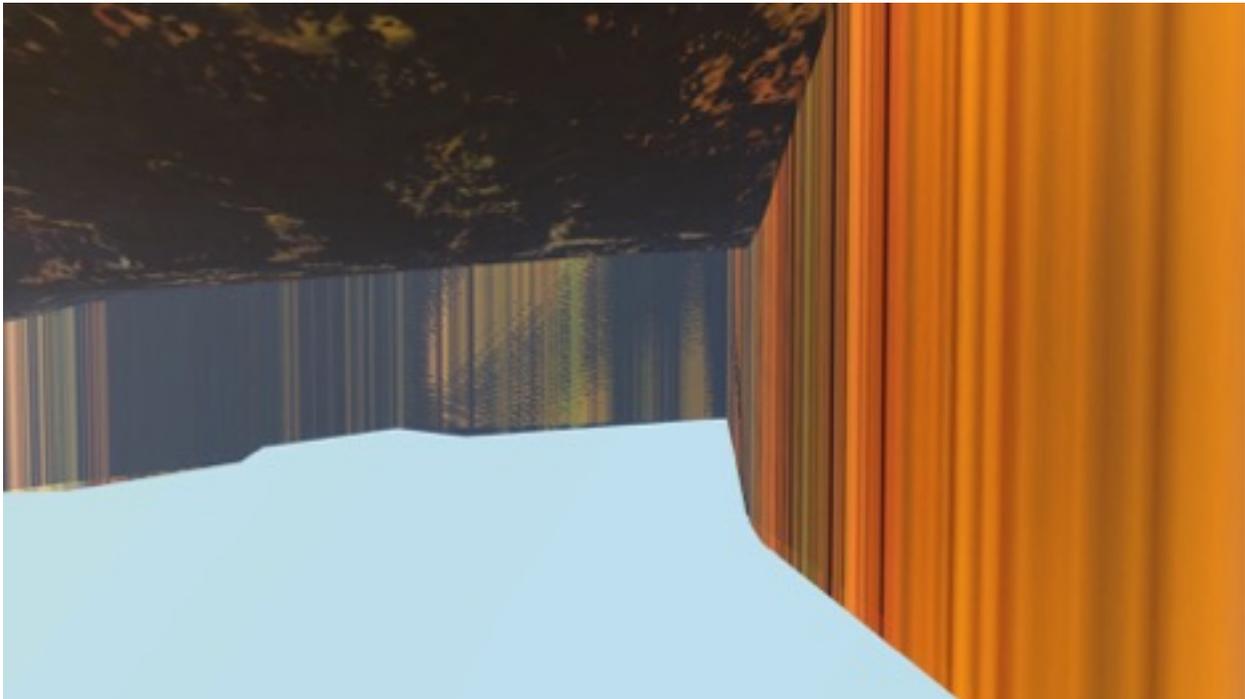
ISE, PT 3.

The second aural accompaniment for *Ise* is a mix of sound effects from video games which would be considered primitive by 2016 standards. In their day, these sounds were considered "high quality" and "realistic" compared to what was otherwise available for cartridge based, low-computing consoles. Today's video games, on the whole, are more likely to gather sound the same way that a movie studio sound department would— out in the real world or by a composer's instrument. Many older games (and newer independently produced games) feature fully synthetic sound. This was largely because older video game consoles had primitive sound reproduction that usually relied on cheap midi hardware.

With the visuals for the video, I took a collage approach in order to create an abstract narrative of descending through layers of borderlands. Each image is a response to the narrative and vice versa. For this second soundtrack, it made sense to follow the same line of thinking. The tracks I sampled for the droning are sounds of water and wind. These elements are alluded to in both the writing and the visual of the video. The synthetic nature of these sounds is apparent and indeed, may not be recognized at all. The synthetic wave crash that comes and goes throughout the piece can be recognized, but through the editing I've intentionally drawn out the duration to make the breakage and digital-ness of the sound more apparent. Much like the foliage that flattens and pixelates as the camera approaches it, this break-down is a signal that we are at the edge of what masquerades as 'natural'.
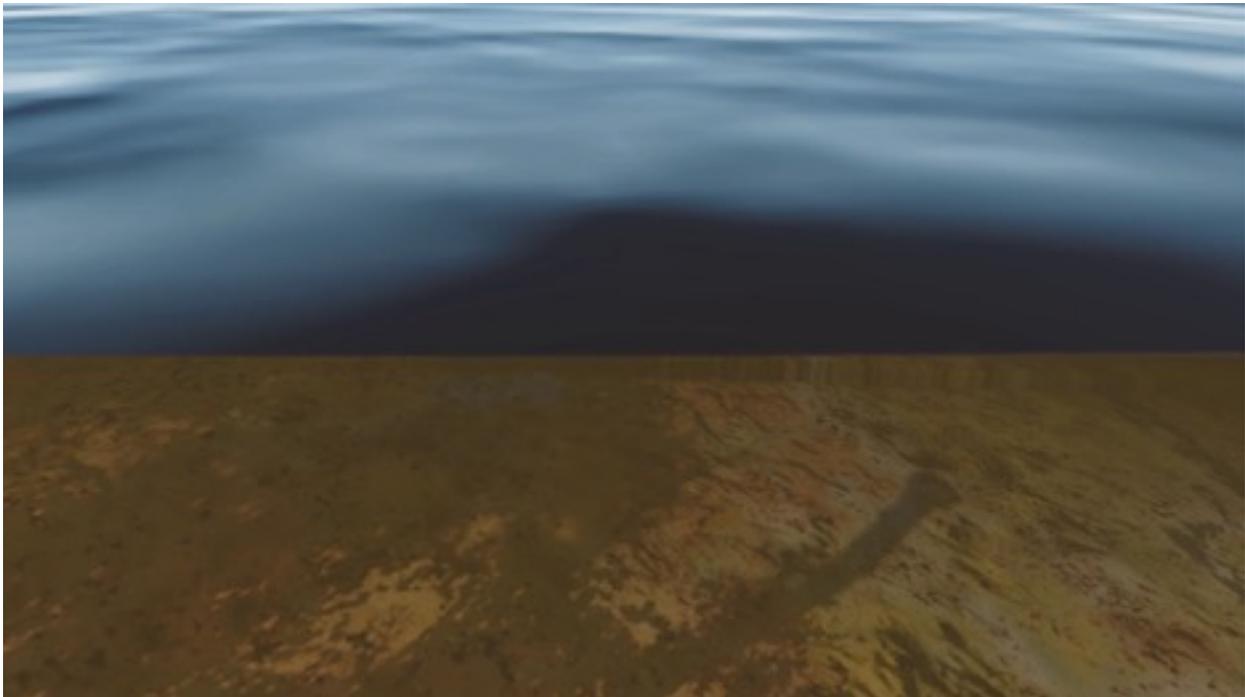
BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

In "Beside Oneself", Judith Butler discusses the difference between living and having a livable life. Politically, this has great implications; the closer one's full identity sits in relation to normativity, the more likely they are to enjoy institutionalized support. In her words: "To live is to live life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future. To assume responsibility for a future, however, is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness; it

implies becoming part of a process the outcome of which no one subject can surely predict."[15]

Butler's assessment points to a breaking down of traditional barriers, the effects of which may not be easily chartable. It is a kind of societal and political apocalypse, a break with the past and our more traditional ideas of humanness. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" offers one view of a new reality. She positions the cyborg at the center of this new age. The cyborg, a human and technology hybrid, does not identify with nature and thus has no notions of identification with supposed original unity. Thus, this new being, no longer beholden to traditional ideas of human, is able to live life free of antiquated social and political boundaries.[16]

Virtual spaces, like the cyborg, hold the potential of a fantasy of a new reality: one in which an avatar can be a replacement for the failure of nature and the sociopolitical landscape. In the aforementioned "Colorblind" article, Tauriq points out the discrepancies between these virtual worlds and what they can offer. "Fantasy" in *Witcher III: Wild Hunt* for many players may evoke images of magic, knights, and dragons, but for Tauriq, he sees a world where people with his skin color do not exist.[17]

The experience of viewing *Ise* is that of passing through borders in a way that highlights the fragility of the structure of the virtual space. At ten minutes in length, it should be seen in one continuous viewing. The sound is both nostalgic through the

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[15] Butler, *Undoing Gender.*

[16] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[17] Moosa, Colorblind.

story and unsettling in its delivery and the underlying droning; it evokes an uncanny experience of moving into the unfamiliar. It also highlights the fractured nature of these virtual structures and spaces, constantly moving through layers to reveal signs that are increasingly divorced of recognizable reality. *Ise*, like the cyborg, appears natural on the surface and gradually reveals itself to be synthetic and constructed.

The cyborg that Haraway wrote about spoke specifically to feminist ideology and the desire for women to no longer be beholden to ideas that harken back to a more natural state, to free them from gender norms and expectations. In science fiction, the cyborg and other synthetic humans have often been a way to construct allegories for othering. In the closing portion of *Blade Runner*, a replicant (synthetic human) laments mortality and not just his own death but that of his memories: "They will be lost like tears in the rain." Though the replicants in *Blade Runner* are hunted down and killed because of their unnatural origins, they possess all of the meaningful characteristics of a living, thinking, feeling being. Much like an other who is defined beyond the barriers and borders of normativity, the replicants are fractured beings, not because of their origins, but because of the way society has pre-defined them.[18]

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[18] Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner," *October* 41 (1987).

Ise embodies a kind of apocalypse that celebrates the recognition and crashing through of borders and boundaries. It laments the limits of reality, the failure of memory. Although many levels of synthetic exist within the video, at its core lies a story of a very human memory. Although these things may seem, on the surface, to be at odds with one another, ultimately they are not— because to be human is not to be one thing, but to be fractured, to be many things at once.

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