JEFFREY STUKER

IN CONVERSATION WITH CARTER MULL



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CARTER MULL: We got to know one another through a class on mimicry that you and Jan Tumlir put together earlier in 2020. Could you discuss the impetus behind the course?

JEFFREY STUKER: Our seminar on mimicry started with a conversation that continued to raise questions about where mimicry emerges and how it functions in our experience, which alternates between the magic formulation of *like produces like*, and the unreality of despair. One of the first questions was to what extent the classical concept of mimesis continues in modern theories of mimicry as well as contemporary technologies, such as computer simulation and artificial intelligence.

Looking at the seemingly boundless capacity we have for being captivated by images (increasingly backlit and carried intimately about the body, my own included) my thoughts returned to Pliny—and his account of the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The latter had acquired such wealth that he wore his own name embroidered in gold upon his clothes, was quite confident that he was the greatest painter in the land. (Natural History, Chapter 36)

> "The contemporaries and rivals of Zeuxis were Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompus, and Parrhasius. (10.) This last, it is said, entered into a pictorial contest with Zeuxis, who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candor he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist."

One of the many reasons that Pliny's description of the picture contest between rival painters resonates is that it shows both the difference between the human and other animals, who continue to be fascinated with the grapes long after he realizes that they are



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mere depictions of grapes, as well as the intoxicating power of the image, which transforms experts into haughty dupes. Believing that they are not looking at an illusion constructed by careful labor, they persist, against all evidence to the contrary, that the illusion has yet to be revealed.

How does this quality of a constructedness—which attains the illusion of having never been constructed—resonates, positively or negatively, with the experience of being a subject or citizen in our era? Does mimicry, for example explain the overwhelming power of conformism to one's surroundings, the "lure of space" as Caillois so compellingly described it? Or does mimicry name that process by which the person—jubilantly, aggressively—must assume life as an image, in the clamor for recognition that Lacan describes. And what does it mean to resist that clamor for recognition (with its illusions of unity, coherence, and mastery), to insist upon the right to opacity, for instance, as Édouard Glissant does? Is my gender a masquerade, as Joan Rivière asserts? Or what does it mean to use the constructedness of the self based on an external model—imposed from without in the histories of colonialism—as the stage upon which the brutality and irrationality of those models could find themselves exposed? And if not exposed, de-naturalized, as Bhabha, or Taussig, insist. And, if we owe our very existence to mimicry, as Adorno asserts in the passage from *Minima Moralia* to which we gave our sustained attention in the seminar—"the human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings"—does this necessarily also mean that our most intimate being is a reflection of what is outside: standardized productions, algorithmic approximations, and the property relations that maintain them for the economic order? As Barbara Johnson would remark, after the legal decision to afford the rights of individual persons to economic entities, "Theories of rationality, naturalness, and the 'good,' presumed to be grounded in the nature of 'man,' may in reality be taking their notions of human essence not from 'natural man' but from business corporations."

CM: I presume there is a reflexive relationship between your animation and 3-D modeling work and your interest in mimicry. Could you map some of those connections for us?

JS: Computer generated imaging is quickly becoming the model of representation to which we are encouraged, and in some ways, required, to adapt. In so many advertisements, for example, the products that promise to complete you (make you feel "balanced," "whole," "desirable," or "prestigious") are manually constructed depictions of objects that have not yet made it through the manufacturing process. They are imitations of photographs of products that do not yet exist, to which psychic economy has already reacted. Even "hating" the Apple Watch depicted in the entire year before it was released, drew us into relation with phantom hands at the base of which this future time-piece sits, with its ever-changing faces. Watch out, "Prends garde," Caillois warns in the epigraph to his famous article on mimicry in *Minotaure*, "à jouer au fantôme, on le devient." ["if you play ghost, you become one"]

One promising feature of computer-generated imaging is the fact that commerce has not yet fully adapted to this mode of representation (so the mimetic residue of art, with its theatrical gestures and painterly effects, still glimmers between the imitations of photographic process. Just as in the early decades of photography and cinematography, moreover, the possibility of a radical reimagining of the social relation is present here, and possibly even more present. Because computer-generated imaging still relies so heavily on the manual construction of the image (3D artists, for example, use a stylus and tablet, tools much more similar to those of Zueixis and Parrhasius than the mouse or trackpad, or, before that, the camera) the possibility in each image of a tableaux in which alternate subjectivities might be rehearsed is possible. Saying this, I might sound naive, as if unaware of how mimicry has already been enlisted in the Conquest of Ubiquity, the Culture Industry, or the Society of the Spectacle. To speak more specifically to how a modern theory of mimicry relates to the process of making an image on the computer, I will cite this passage by Caillois that we discussed (and at which I still marvel) in the seminar:

> Morphological mimicry could then be, after the fashion of chromatic mimicry, an actual photography, but of the form and the relief, a photography on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or better *teleplasty*, if one strips the word of any metapsychical content.[1]

Modeled from a distance or a once-remove, might be one way to translate the two greek words that make up "teleplasty." Combined with the idea of a sculpture-photography, which results from this modeling-at-a-remove, rather than with hands on plasticine or clay, offers a definition of mimicry in the era of the computer. Here the stylus and a keyboard build detailed figures and construct elaborate tableaux on the other side of screen, attaching painted or photographic textures to meshes modeled from millions of connected polygons or triangles.

CM: What is the role of the mimetic in your work?

JS: Like the theory of mimicry itself, computer-based modeling, animation, and rendering operates at more than one level. It occupies that site where the social relation reproduces itself in a technologically accelerated fashion, through which the person is beckoned by their surroundings to conform, as if to nature. But it also emphasizes the fact that things, subjectivities, the built environment, and even what we experience as nature, are *made and remade*—as second nature—and can therefore be made differently. "That which does not wish to whither," writes Adorno (a fierce critic of Caillois), "must take upon itself the stigma of the inauthentic."

CM: Mimesis can be tied to the crafting of representation and as a result often discussed, at least in the nomenclature, as part of the production side of things. One of the reasons I wanted to chat with you in the first place was regarding the role of what lies across the office from production: reception and distribution. The "human needs" of this side of the coin are consistently answered in business practice. Once can think of the role of product or service optimization…and it is easy to visualize the normativity of the relevance of distribution in business with an example like the growth of Amazon. More so, such forms of profit engineering are so widespread as to create commonly held values that seep into the field of art. One need only throw a rock to hit someone who is deeply impressed or even obsessed with the cash and prizes promised in the fine arts. However, individual aesthetic practice can at times demand other needs to be met when it comes to reception and distribution. I'm very curious what "your needs" are for the distribution of your work?

JS: For one of my contributions to Made in L.A. I have produced medium format transparencies on Fuji Provia for projection with the Hasselblad PCP 80, a slide projector from the 1980s that is much higher resolution than any contemporary digital projector. These slides were recorded to film in a laboratory from 3D renders at 18,000 by 18,000 pixels. I made the renders from scenes I modeled of two forms of the mimetic Papilio clytia, based on scientific journals describing their relaxed behavior while drinking small droplets of water along the banks of a river in Kerala, India. They drink to replenish nutrients lost in coitus, the initial act in the process of sexual reproduction. I made this entirely during the government mandated quarantine with a computer I built in a pool house rented in Pasadena, at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, thinking about the algorithm that defines photo-realistic rendering that was written within walking distance, at CalTech. The Rendering Equation, first presented at Siggraph in 1988, was written by James Kajiya and adapts the Monte Carlo algorithm to simulate the radiance of light around geometrically defined objects. Each day of the quarantine that passed, the unreality of the simulated images felt less theoretical, and more affectively present in our daily lives, which had become entirely mediated by the computer screen. Just over the border, in San Marino, The Huntington Botanical Gardens and Library, represents an older simulation of nature, a kind of artificial paradise replete with reconstructed follies, faux bois, studied reproductions of English rose gardens, and Japanese pavilions.

As to my own needs, or libidinal investment in the work, I think these come into focus with the persistence of the cinematographic in the computer-generated animation. I have been fascinated by cinematographers whose careers started working with film on major motion pictures, such as Roger Deakins or Arthur Jafa, and then apply their knowledge of photographed movement to the computer-generated image. Because the focal length of the lens could be any length, the perspective created by the simulated lens Deakins chooses for Pixar is conceptually intensified, almost rhetorical, rather than practical. From another perspective, the hallucinatory preponderance of associations that computer-generated textures can create on moving bodies adds, for Jafa, adds a layer of complexity that occurs over or alongside the to-ing and fro-ing of bodies, be they astral, liquid, or human.

Because I make my minor motion pictures from elaborately constructed tableaux, modeled with as much detail as I can muster (in terms of both morphology and texture), they take an order of magnitude more time to produce than a "captured" or "filmed" motion picture. The fact that I make them on my own (at the scale of a single person) certainly does not speed them up. The result of this way of working, is a meditative space where careful looking, or even prayerful attention, might emerge, in observance of details that may seem insignificant, or resist signification altogether.

The camera in my films is always animated, sometimes very subtly, sometimes moving in a more dramatic way that could only be achieved with monstrously expensive rigging in a major motion picture. It pulls focus, or stops down the aperture, to highlight, or ultimately obscure, this detail, or that relationship. In this way I see computer-generated imaging as continuous with what cinematography has always been, a *record of looking*, despite the technologically estranged contours in which it now operates. This *record of looking* beckons the viewer to join me in the charged space of the moving



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image which bears witness to the artificial nature of contemporary life. To not feel alone, or even to sense some emergence of a collective response to what is hardened and alienated within that "nature," may not bring satisfaction, but certainly a temporary absence of fear.

CM: Must that absence be spatialized in the black box that cinema has historically been partial to?
JS: We've seen so many different forms of the production and distribution of moving images in the last decade alone that I would simply be swimming with the current to say that "the movies" as we once knew them are no longer confined to that closed theater with seats arrayed in the dark. The commerce of images has maneuvered to fasten its audience to increasingly private and domestic settings, which, in many ways, is antithetical to the aspirations of the earliest days of motion pictures, especially when one recalls the Lumière brothers' first film, which shows the workers from the Lumiere factory leaving their workplace *en masse*. Not feeling the co-presence of other bodies certainly alters the manifestly collective experience of watching movies. Benjamin called this co-presence the image-body space, which artworks abandon at their peril. From this perspective we could say that the "streaming platforms" represent the dystopian de-realization of the aspirations of the ciné-clubs of the 1920s. However, even as we have been separated from each other, currently in a state of panic about each other's supposedly pathological bodies—I wonder if another kind of collectivity is imaginable?

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This conversation was conducted in August 2020