

Mediating the Real

Misha Kavka & Rosemary Overell

Our contemporary moment is fixated on articulating and arbitrating 'realness'. Against the spectre of buzzwords like 'fake news' and 'post-truth', we find ourselves scrambling to locate or fix some sort of universal, immovable 'real' beneath what are positioned as 'fake' articulations and discourses. No one has privileged access to this borderzone, yet often the arbitration of 'reality' falls on those who are most likely to circulate it reflexively: media producers and, to a lesser degree, academics. The task of arbitration seems pressing, since to be literate and savvy is to be able to ascertain the real from the fake. But, as any number of theorists who continue to be influenced by Jacques Lacan have pointed out, this is also an impossible assignation. Thus, media, rather like academia, is simultaneously blamed as producing the apparent retreat from the very realness that is so desperately sought.

It is with this context in mind that we have developed the theme for this special issue. 'Mediating the Real' arises from a conference held at the University of Otago in August 2016, sponsored by the Performance of the Real research theme and the Department of Media, Film and Communication. While many at the conference, and in this issue, tackle the 'post-truth' zeitgeist, the contributors also tackle critical, aesthetic and subjective understandings of the Real.

In this issue, we do not claim that the concern with 'realness' is somehow new; rather, we are focused on how notions of the Real are taken up, mediated, and made to work in particular ways that operate in accordance with hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic understandings. This dialogue asks how reality is brandished symbolically or produced through discourse and representation to constitute and engage with specific modalities of power. But, following Lacan, it also asks how the desire for the Real – as a discomfiting guarantor of a bedrock or universal 'truth' – is affective and works beyond the Symbolic to

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produce fantasies of bearable, cognisant spaces in which the election of Trump, the ubiquity of reality television and the ongoing preoccupation with realness in television and film all 'make sense'. In particular, this special issue enters into dialogue with Lacanian and Baudrillardian constitutions of, and engagements with, the Real.

Of course, Lacan's and Baudrillard's understandings of the 'Real' differ, but they both share a concern with accounting for how we live, work and find pleasure in the world. More importantly for our contemporary moment of violent debate and radical fissuring, they both think of the Real as something sticky, unwieldy and not quite within the neat reach of symbolic or discursive accounts. Following this, the special issue poses questions about what we mean by the Real. How do we talk about the Real? And why such a concern with the Real in the first place? These questions are particularly urgent for media studies, as the media in various guises constitutes the key place for discussion of these issues amidst the ever-churning feed of our social networking sites, the complex layering of (dis)information and fantasy in factual media, and the negotiations of subjectivity in film, television and other pop cultural spaces.

Lacan would of course say that there is no escaping the Real – that it is always there 'stuck to the sole of your shoe' (2001, 17). For Lacan, the Real is both banal and horrifying in its ability to resist being pressed into the Symbolic. That horror, though, is also activating, even generative; it drives us on the endless circuit for the elusive *objet petit a*, that ultimate object which (we imagine) will stop the gap in our fantasies of plenitude. In a way, we could say the thing that most upsets us about Trump and these other flashpoints – what drives the #hottakes and hashtags – is his apparent 'realness', which, as Thomas Owen points out in this issue, is a manifestation of his excessive over-identification with the stop-gap that secures plenitude. This is of course part of Trump's rhetoric: he keeps it real, produces #realtalk, and remains disturbingly true to the reality star brand, itself aligned with the familiar proclamation of 'keeping it real' all over reality television. But he is also that thing which sticks to the sole of our shoes, that thing which returns and cannot be explained; he is the bit for which the signifier cannot account, both horrifying and obscene. To the precise degree that he does not make sense, that is, that he exceeds the Symbolic, this is matched by a relentless barrage of 'real news' producing reams of symbolic discourse that do little to pin down or counter his power. Trump's seeming transparency – his 'lack of filter' when talking, not to mention tweeting, about pussy-grabbing, North Korea, or domestic race politics – all function, according to Žižek, as a

'transparent' mode of writing [that] allows the underlying ideological fantasies to be staged at their embarrassingly desublimated purest. (2008, 53)

No doubt, Trump's obscenity, a.k.a. his 'realness', also produces him as a *petit autre* which works to shore up the big Other of capital, neoliberalism and patriarchy. He is imperfect,

ridiculous and ‘just a regular joe’ (don’t forget the alibi of ‘ordinary locker room talk’ for the pussy-grabbing incident) who promises to ‘drain the swamp’ of the democratic institution at the same time as he swamps the Symbolic with perverse manifestations of capital-made-Real.

We find the Real horrifying – and responses to Trump as Real indicate this. The Lacanian Real, however, is also the site of *jouissance*. After all, we gain great enjoyment and pleasure from revealing and arbitrating transgressions of ‘realness’ and diagnosing fakeness in our everyday, mediated lives. We also, it must be said, gain perverse pleasure from tracing the near-daily eruptions and transgressions of Trump. We try again and again to tame the terror of the Real by pressing it into the service of the Symbolic – just follow the #fakenews or #trump hashtags to see the reams of articulations – yet it is the very enjoyment of these attempts that continues to bind us to the Real.

This collection tackles both the lay and theoretical understandings of the Real and its intersection with contemporary media. The issue opens with Brett Nicholls’ engagement with Baudrillard in a ‘post-truth’ context, where he grapples with how notions of reality might go some way toward accounting for, and critiquing, Trump. Nicholls rightly shifts debate from a binarised concern with what is designated as the Real and the unreal (or fake) to argue that Trump in fact works in terms *surplus reality*, or, in Baudrillard’s terms, in the field of integral reality. The theme is then taken up by Thomas Owen, who in the spirit of negative ontology melds Lacan’s concept of the inaccessibility of the Real with Ernesto Laclau’s notion that ‘society is impossible’, in order to reframe the ideology of free trade agreements and their paradoxical relationship to intellectual property rights. Arguing that contemporary ‘IPA-laden FTAs’, not to mention the very notion of free trade, are impossible in both Lacan’s and Laclau’s sense of the term, Owen builds up to an examination of Trump’s removal of the US from the TPPA, and concludes by interrogating the commitment of journalism to realism in the face of ‘post-factual’ political discourse.

Bernardine Lynch shifts the perspective from Trump to the genre that spawned his celebrity – namely, reality TV – but with a focus on culinary television and its claims to a ‘real life’ via natural food movements. Focusing on the Australian series *Gourmet Farmer*, which follows the relocation of urban chef Matthew Evans onto a rural farm where he intends to grow and sell his own food, Lynch argues that the show’s presentation of alternative modes of consumption is closely linked with discourses of authenticity that assert an ethical, sustainable and ultimately nostalgic relation to food. In the process, the real is mobilised as a brand of and for consumption itself, replete with taste and class hierarchies that reconstitute an agrarian relation to food for those who can afford to be ‘real’.

Laura Stephenson’s article considers the significance of the mirror to what she dubs the ‘aesthetic professions’ (dancing, acting, modelling etcetera). Through a formal analysis of

Black Swan (Aronofsky 2010), she argues that for ballerinas such as the film's protagonist the 'mirror' has special significance. Though Stephenson's article is anchored in a Lacanian analysis, she builds on his 'mirror phase' thesis to discuss the impact of the mirror on 'aesthetic professionals' who, at least in the case of *Black Swan*, may be significantly hindered by the ever-ready imago the mirror offers in their everyday working spaces, such as ballet studios. Focusing on the protagonist's encounter with the Real, mediated by the mirror, Stephenson argues that such an encounter inevitably leads to a psychotic, rather than a neurotic, break.

Expanding on Lacanian analysis through an engagement with Žižek, Scott Wilson's analysis of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) takes up the film as a kind of allegory for psychoanalytic engagements with cinema studies. He particularly focuses on how the register of the Real irrupts in the closing scene of the film, where the protagonist takes a mutated gun (which appeared from a vaginal-like slit on his abdomen) and shoots himself in the head saying 'long live the new flesh'.. Wilson accounts, too, for the revival and revision of Lacanian cinema studies in recent years, largely through the work of McGowan (2007) and Žižek (e.g., 1991), which challenges the now-clichéd application of a psychoanalysis focused on spectatorial subjectivity. Wilson sees this as a new ontology which can be read through and onto the seeming suicide of the protagonist of *Videodrome*, an ontology ensconced in the closing line of 'long live the new flesh'.

Rory Jeffs and Gemma Blackwood apply a Lacanian reading to HBO's reboot of *Westworld*. In particular, the authors present a close reading of four characters in terms of Lacan's *Seminar II*. Here, they are concerned with the impossibility of symbolising trauma, and how this impossibility opens onto Lacan's early understanding of the Real as that which lies beyond the Symbolic. This is represented, quite literally, in the various clinics or therapy scenes compounded in the programme. *Westworld* is a compelling example, argue Blackwood and Jeffs, because it tackles the question of whether Lacan's three registers work with AI robots, which is to say that it directly questions the extent to which these registers rely on a Freudian psyche always imagined as human. Building on Žižek's (1993) analysis of *Blade Runner*, the authors tease out a nuanced understanding of the (im)possibilities of subjectivity and the Lacanian Real.

Turning from robotic futures to the long history of tangata whenua, John Farnsworth addresses the pressing question of whether Lacanian insights about the Real can be said to hold for a universal unconscious. Working from Vincent Ward's *Rain of the Children*, a film that mobilises a double framework by addressing postcolonial trauma through the suffering caused by a mākutū (curse) laid on Tūhoe subjects Niki and her son Puhi, Farnsworth investigates the limits of 'symmetrical thinking about the unconscious'. With reference to post-Lacanian frameworks that are sensitive to the limits of such symmetry, he examines the

possibilities of an ethnographic unconscious in order to argue that the film functions as visual ethnopschoanalysis.

The turn to an asymmetry of the unconscious may seem, on the face of it, to deconstruct the Lacanian frameworks that subtend the thinking about media in this special issue. And yet, in the place that we are writing from, the move is an important reminder that the strength of psychoanalytic theory is precisely to allow the co-existence of contradictory configurations: it is just as possible to claim that ‘suffering remains suffering’ in the case of trauma (Farnsworth, in this volume) as it is to say that the social context and conditions of trauma are bound to a changeable yet iterable Symbolic. What stays the same, for better or worse, is the inaccessibility of the Real to which we are ineluctably drawn.

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