The Archive, Memory and Media in Crisis: Jon Rafman's Poetic Disruptions of the Present

Luja Šimunović
University of Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract   The article considers three video works by artist Jon Rafman as a poetic negotiation of digitally mediated subjectivity, with the aim of showing how an artwork may engage with the present affective complexes which escape objectification and rationalization. Drawing from archival, memory and media studies the analysis will show how the works unsettle established dichotomies and open space for new temporalities and subjectivities. Traditional binaries come undone within the digital subject, whose liminal position points to cultural preconditions and limitations of objective truth and rationality – putting the works at the center of utopian thought.

Keywords   Digital media. Mediated memories. Hauntology. Cyberflâneur. Utopian imagination.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Unsettling the Archive. – 3 Slipping Through Mediated Memories. – 4 Broken Times and Spaces. – 5 A Wandering Stranger. – 6 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

Launched in 2007, Google Street View is added to the services Google Maps and Google Earth: a technology which allows the user to interact with panoramic shots from around the world. Recorded by a car mounted with nine cameras enabling a 360 view of its surroundings, up until 2017 it has covered over 80 countries around the world. These indiscriminate snapshots make up a supposedly neutral and

objective photographic record of actual times and places, protecting passerby's identities with face-blurring technology. Today, anyone can add their own image or 3D model to the service, becoming one of the biggest publicly available photographic archives of today – a site where technology explicitly shapes our collective memory. In 2008, Canadian artist Jon Rafman started developing the still ongoing project *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* in which he collects and curates snapshots from Google's service. Available online on the artist's official website, Rafman's selection ranges from poetically charged, bizarre and ridiculous, to haunting and depressing digital snapshots – empty landscapes, wildlife, house fires, prostitutes, clowns, or active crime scenes. *Nine Eyes* is a subjective interruption of an automatized and technologically mediated recording of the world, disrupting the idea of a rational, neutral eye where unexpected things appear and unforeseen events happen. From this entanglement of the subjective and objective, rational and irrational, personal and collective emerges the question of how these new technologies have impacted our memory, and, consequently, our subjectivity – the dynamic state through which our beings are constituted. Like *Nine Eyes*, the three works analyzed in this article are composed from various images, texts and audio found online with the same underlying theme of memory, questioning the ways in which digital mediation has impacted our subjectivity as the very way we experience ourselves and everyday life. *You, the World and I* (2010) takes us to Google's photographic and 3D archive of the world, combining images which are part of the *Nine Eyes* series and screen recordings from the service Google Earth. *Remember Carthage* (2013) is composed from screen recordings of PlayStation 3 games and the online multiplayer simulation Second Life, while *A Man Digging* (2013) takes place in the virtual space of neo-noir shooter game Max Payne 3 (Rockstar Games 2012), in what seems to be the aftermath of a massacre. The works are also formally interconnected by the same digitally processed voice of an anonymous narrator who tells stories of longing, wandering through virtual landscapes his search becomes more abstract. First, seeking digital traces of a long lost love (*You, the World and I*), next, a virtual space of total solitude (*Remember Carthage*), and finally to an introspective mediation on the virtual experience of our memories and our present (*A Man Digging*).

Following the thematic flows of each work as they narratively become more and more abstract, the structure of this article highlights three interrelated positions this informal trilogy puts into question, subverting traditional notions of the archive, memory and our experience of space and time. The analysis of the work *You, the World and I* opens an examination of how virtual archives have impacted the way we experience our past and the modes in which we articulate knowledge. Following an essay titled *The Reframing of Loss: Jon Rafman's*

Virtual Archives (2013) written by Jon Rafman's mother, trauma psychiatrist Sandra Rafman, the artist's work is explored in relation to Jacques Derrida's dynamic and somewhat abstract notion of the archive. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* Derrida (1995) understands the archive not as a certain place filled with information about the past, but as a dynamic structure whose shape and materiality determines the modes in which we engage with our past, present and future. It is a structure filled with gaps and uncertainties, constantly in the process of negotiation of what may or may not belong. The analysis of *You, the World and I* will show how the work interrupts Google's machinic eye with a subjective gaze, simultaneously highlighting the nature of these virtual archives as well as providing an opportunity for new, unsettling ways of interacting with them. *Remember Carthage* also makes a case for this archival unrest, but will, building on the subjective position of the works, lead to the next segment of the analysis which concerns memory. Memory, like the archive, is not stable, but is a dynamic and subjective process through which, again, we position ourselves in relation to the world. The analysis will follow media and culture scholar José van Dijck's (2007) notion of 'mediated memories' developed in her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* as a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic way in which media and memory are mutually shaped. Like the archive, memory is bound to the structure and materiality of our experiences and knowledge – it is a way we shape our relationship to the past, how we project our expectations of the future. It is also a medium through which we negotiate the distinction between ourselves and others, the private and the public, the individual and the collective. The digital sphere transforms and unsettles these boundaries, and, as will show the analysis of the works *You, the World and I* and *Remember Carthage* – opens new mediated experiences for the contemporary subject caught between the physical and virtual, the technological and biological. *A Man Digging*, echoes these new experiences and will lead to an attempt to qualify the mediated affective conditions and set them within the context of cultural production. The unsettling of the virtual archive and the entangled modes of remembrance point to disruptions of space and time – once secure grounds for linear progress, Rafman's works show today's perspectives have shifted and expectations of the future have been dismantled. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher's (2012) notion of hauntology proposed in the text *What is Hauntology?* ties to this crisis of future-oriented imagination, showing the ways in which contemporary media grapples with these uncertainties, reflecting both a sense of broken time and space. The works will be analyzed against these ideas, and will lead to artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl's concept of vertical perspective developed in the essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective* (2011). Linear perspective is tied to a sense of stable ground – allowing for an objective, neutral view implying a

linear progress of time. Steyerl suggests that today, thanks to surveillance and targeting technologies this neutral eye has been supplanted by a vertical, all encompassing gaze. This sense of groundlessness and verticality will be analyzed in relation to Rafman's works, showing how they disrupt traditional temporalities and give way, again, to new modes of being.

You, the World and I, *Remember Carthage* and *A Man Digging* are bound by a subject wandering through digital material the artist has collected online, as well as the same digitally processed voice which is actually the artist's. The final part of the analysis will unite these narrative, formal and methodological functions through literary theoretician Robert G. Beghetto's figure of the modern stranger which he develops in the book *Monstrous Liminality: Or, The Uncanny Strangers of Secularized Modernity* (2022). This figure is found in literature from the nineteenth century onward, and, like the modernist *flâneur*, finds home at the heart of modernized, technologized, urbanized society and its contemporary advancements. A liminal figure – both inside and outside, at home nowhere and everywhere – the stranger is also a disruptive force as he points to cultural preconditions and limitations of objective truth and rationality. The stranger disturbs the dominant order of reality, which, according to Beghetto (2022), puts him at the center of utopian thought. The work's subjects and Rafman's artistic method tie to this figure – as reflective as they are disruptive to the contemporary experience. Rather than thinking of a utopian elsewhere, the utopian function will be connected to marxist theoretician Frendric Jameson's (1982) analysis of science fiction literature in the text *Progress Vs. Utopia: Or, can We Imagine the Future?*. Jameson proposes a reading of science fiction as "strategies of indirection" (152), breaking through to an otherwise evading experience of the real present. Reflected in the artist's method, the trilogy works on the very boundaries which make up the present experience, between the digital and the physical, reality and simulation, fiction and fact. Built from the very material that makes our present, this analysis aims to show how an artwork may create an active rupture engaging with the present affective complexes which escape objectification and rationalization.

2　Unsettling the Archive

You, the World and I can be understood as a contemporary reimagination of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: the narrator searches high and low for a digital record of his long lost love – able to find a single image [fig. 1], this motivates his search around the virtual globe, only to come back and to find this single image has been lost (or deleted) forever [fig. 2]. In the beginning of the video, the narrator suggestively explains:
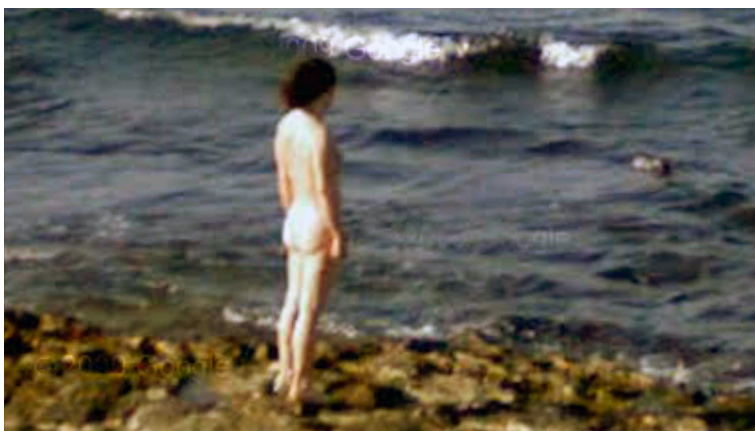
> She never let anyone take pictures of her. She said she would rather think of things the way they were in her memory. The truth is I think she believed a picture could steal your soul or something like that.

Google's vast collective archive is transformed into an unstable space of personal remembrance, a site where an intimate and emotionally charged history is transposed onto technologically mediated representations of urban spaces, historical ruins and desolate landscapes. In a text published in 2013, Rafman's mother, trauma psychiatrist Sandra Rafman, highlights the central position of the archive in his artistic practice, showing how the artist provides new methods of engaging with the pervasive digitalisation of knowledge (2013, 2). In his seminal essay *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* published in 1995, Derrida introduces a deconstructionist and psychoanalytic reading to the archive, proposing it as a site of conflicting forces: the pleasure principle turned to remembrance and preservation, and the death drive pulling to amnesia and destruction. According to Derrida, this site always works "against itself" (1995, 14), at once affirming the past, present and future while working to annihilate memory itself. Following Derrida's notion of the archive which is as much a site of remembrance as a site of loss, S. Rafman argues Rafman's work delves into these tensions, exploring both "an anxiety about the presence and absence of the past" (2013, 1).

Scholar Marlene Manoff (2004, 17) summarizes Derrida's notion of archive fever as an impulse to hold on to past material, as to grasp a history we can never fully know. Or, to quote Derrida:
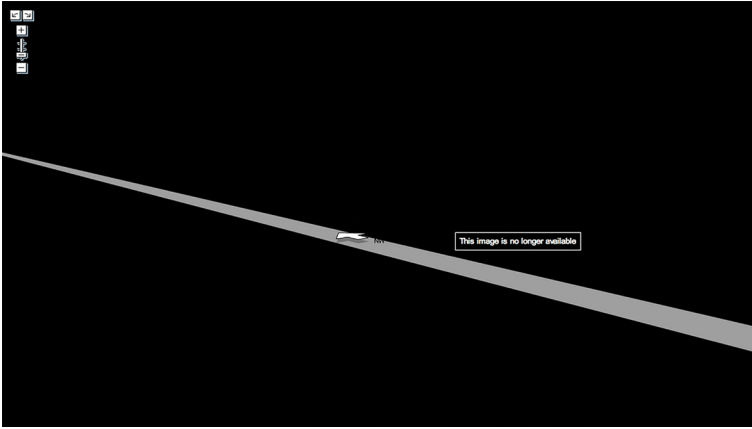
Figure 2   Jon Rafman, *You, the World and I*. 2010. Video, sound, 6'23".
© Jon Rafman, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (1995, 57)

Constantly searching for evidence of his lover, the narrator in *You, the World and I* longs for this point of origin, understood as the totality of their experience together. The only image of his lover haunts him: "That Google Street View image began to replace all other memories of her. It seemed to contain our whole relationship but yet it was so blurry". Rather than a simple amalgamation of past knowledge, Derrida (1995) points to the importance of the archive's very structure, shaped at once by political, social, as well as technical conditions. This 'archivization' is that which conditions what may or may not be archived – it "produces as much as it records the event" (1995, 17). He goes on to emphasize the contemporary shift to digital communications, specifically email as a form of correspondence which has transformed the whole of the public and private space. S. Rafman analysis reflects Derrida's positions, arguing how Rafman's works show the unsettling of traditional archives found in museums and libraries to virtual spaces which allow for different subjectivities and temporalities (2013, 5). In *You, the World and I*, the digital world is the only one which exists, a world where proof of love replaces physical

intimacy, a space through which the protagonist forms his relationship to the world. The archive produces knowledge, and through that its subjects: and here, we are met with an archive that differs from the traditional one – unstable, constantly in translation, recombination, reconfiguration. Derrida's archive also has an important future-oriented position, as what constitutes an archive also determines the way in which we may live and experience the world (1995, 18): it is a "pledge" or "token" of the future, a "question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (27). Recalling this "pledge to the future", Sandra Rafman suggests a new quality to this digital archive as a place through which we form new, collective or individual stories (2013, 3). *You, the World and I* replaces all material reality by digital images: not as perfect representations of the physical world, but something that strongly affects our experiences. The narrator's world is defined by this new archival reality, his experience defined by the blurring of traditional dichotomies: the virtual and the real, factual and fictional, subjective and objective, personal and collective, private and public, while his relationship to material reality is a site of constant negotiation.

3 Slipping Through Mediated Memories

In *Remember Carthage*, the same digitally processed voice opens to a simulation of the famous Las Vegas strip:

> I had moved to Vegas in the hopes that I had finally found a place that suited me, that did not pretend to be anything other than its surface, but the people ruined it for me.

The narrator looks for a space of solitude, one that may be understood as a site of pure simulation. His search begins in Las Vegas, but this is not enough, so he moves on, to a place he has read about online – a fictional, abandoned Uqbar Resort, the 'Las Vegas of Sahara'. He obsessively searches online for its location, which takes him to a ship that leads him to Tunisia, to the city of Tataouine. From there he goes on into the desert **[fig. 3]**, but each time he finds himself back where he started. While the protagonist in *You, the World and I* longs for a totalizing recollection of his past experience, in *Remember Carthage* this longing transforms to a total erasure of personal history and an overwhelming desire to negate any kind of experience of the material world. These two works may be understood as the opposite faces of the same coin, in Derrida's (1995) terms, one enacting the pleasure principle's aim for recollection, and the other the death drive's draw to annihilation. In both, the protagonist's desires are unfulfilled – these desires which are ultimately bound to the condition of

Figure 3   Jon Rafman, *Remember Carthage*. 2013. Single channel video, 13'43" min.
© Jon Rafman, Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

the digital space they occupy. While the notion of the archive has helped situate this space's structure, the question of memory as an active and subjective process of the mind remains to be explored as the central theme of the trilogy.

In her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007), media and culture scholar José van Dijck proposes 'mediated memories' as a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic way in which media and memory are mutually shaped. Broadly speaking, remembering is essential to our well-being: it allows for a sense of continuity between the past and the future, as well as a sense of continuity between others and ourselves (van Dijck 2007, 3). van Dijck rejects the idea of a sharp distinction between public and private, individual and collective memories, as the way they are shaped involves an interaction of individual acts and cultural norms, it is "a tension we can trace in both the activity of remembering and in the object of memory" (2007, 3). The concept of 'mediated memories' reflects these positions, also rejecting the distinction between media – as an external tool – and memory – as an internal psychological capacity (2007, 15). The concept thus involves an entanglement of memory and media, which together forms dynamic relationships on two axis: the first, relational, involves a negotiation between self and others, private and public, individual and collective, while the second axis articulating time negotiates the relationship between the past and the future. 'Mediated memories' are, according to van Dijck, "manifestations of a complex interaction between brain, material objects and the cultural matrix from

which they arise" (2007, 29), wherein digital technologies more than ever foreground the question of how they are "embodied, enabled, and embedded" (29). What van Dijck asks is how the changing materiality of our world changed how we remember – how the fact that digital media can be reproduced, stored and manipulated changes the way we negotiate relations and times. According to her, digitization, multimedialization and googleization are the three major types of transformation which have integrated how we "store, retrieve, and adjust memories in the course of living" (2007, 150). A creative play between fact and fantasy has always been an essential part of memory retrieval, as the human brain is not equipped to memorize everything. The body makes mistakes a computer wouldn't make: the machine does not forget, it can copy, superimpose or relocate data at an instant. The very same media can exist at different places and in different contexts, it can be an exact copy or it can be manipulated – creating a new fiction altogether.

In *You, the World and I* and *Remember Carthage*, historical places and historical events intertwine with fiction, in the digital sphere where the past, present and future intertwine. *You, the World and I* engaged with one of the largest publicly available archives of today, injecting an intimate position of the yearning narrator. While the work exposed this virtual archive as a space of instability, it also put – as Sandra Rafman notes (2013, 3) – the human gaze at the center. The narrator's memories define his experience of the past relationship and these memories are now located in a sprawling network of images which belong to everybody. This subjective position is held in both works as the narrator occupies simulations of real or imagined spaces. Time loops, overlaps or simply stops. Subjectivity forms thorough memory, and as van Dijck has shown, splits and slips between the personless voice and digital found footage. The trilogy shows how the concept of 'mediated memories' affects a subject, exploring a new kind of subjectivity which emerges with the proliferation of digital technologies – one, like the very media that makes our memories – that can be constantly recombined and reconfigured, that unbinds traditional dichotomies.

The way in which these new media technologies have impacted our memory has also been explored by scholar in the field of memory studies, Alison Landsberg (2000) who develops the concept of 'prosthetic memories'. These are memories that do not emerge from actual, lived experience, but are in some way implanted – unsettling the distinction between reality and simulation, as well as subverting the boundary of our body and any sense of subjective autonomy (2000, 175). Memory, as van Dijck has also stated, validates our experience of the world, it positions us not only by relaying the past but understanding our present and future. Mass media, Landsberg argues, has brought "the texture and contours of prosthetic memory

into dramatic relief" (2000, 176) – creating experiences, imprinting memories which were never actually lived. She connects this to Jean Baudrillard's (Landsberg 2000, 176) critique of postmodernity as a total lack of authentic experience, and the notion that all lived experience has become so mediated we live in a state of hyperreality. Landsberg (2000, 176) rejects Baudrillard's notion of a loss of reality and real experience, provoking the reader to ask if there ever even was a reality to begin with. Setting aside the idea of the death of the real, she (2000, 186) posits that today we are living in a time obsessed with the experience of the real. What matters, ultimately, is not if the memories were lived, but that we experience them: memory, media and our bodies together form the ground for actually experiencing the world (2000, 187).

4 Broken Times and Spaces

"But I know that memory is not a tool for exploring the past, but a medium. It is the medium of my experience, just like the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried" concludes the nameless voice in the final video of the trilogy, *A Man Digging*, echoing Landsberg's argument. Waiting rooms, corridors and other transit areas prevail – at times empty **[fig. 4]**, at times littered with dead NPC's (Non-Playable Character) **[fig. 5]**. The narrative framework is loose, the familiar processed voice of the narrator leads us while a meditative, electronic piece plays in the background. "One afternoon, I traveled back to the edge of my memory. Images of the past, layered with nostalgia, obstructed my enjoyment of present beauty." – the narrator introspectively digs through the meaning of time, memory, experience and subjectivity. While we have seen the way in which memory mediates the digital experience, at this point we may be more precise in articulating the affective conditions of digitally mediated reality – what this experience feels like. Here, time and space are completely broken: there is no ground as there is no past or future, states we may have glimpsed at with the two other works.

Subsequently, two spatio-temporal conditions may help in revealing these affective qualities, while simultaneously positioning the works within a broader context of cultural production: first, that of broken time, and second, that of groundlessness. Broken time relates to cultural theorist Mark Fisher's (2012) notion of hauntology. Originally a neologism developed by Derrida (1993) in his book *Spectres of Marx*, Fisher applies the notion to the contemporary cultural condition. Hauntology refers to a sense of "failure of the future" – a haunting of "all the lost futures that the 20th century taught us to anticipate" (Fisher 2012, 16). According to Fisher, this has brought on a failure of social imagination and a cultural position

Figure 4   Jon Rafman, *Remember Carthage*. 2013. Single channel video, 13'43".
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Figure 5   Jon Rafman, *A Man Digging*. 2013. Video, sound, 8'21".
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in which it is impossible to imagine radically different futures. Music, film and other media from the 1990s and later nostalgically reverberate familiar aesthetics, mourning the loss of any kind of effective future different from our current times. In the same year of Fisher's article, Jon Rafman states in an interview:

> In the past we relied on dystopian and utopian views of the future. The future was thought of as fundamentally different from the present. Today, there is a sense that the future is going to be a lot more banal, that we are already living in the future […], that the future is going to be more of the same… more apps and technologies that are designed to mediate and 'improve' our experience of reality. It is essentially a more Facebook-like future. (Feustel 2012, n.p.)

In the whole of the trilogy temporalities are dismantled and any kind of cyberutopian future is played back through low quality virtual simulations. Hauntology, Fisher argues, does not only concern time – but also space. He recalls Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard whose writings on hyperreality have shown how these new technologies have collapsed both space and time (Fisher 2012, 19). The proliferation of "non-places" – airports, chain stores, retail parks, malls – intensifies this "erosion of spatiality" (19). These non-places are everywhere in Rafmans's works, and ultimately the place the narrator seeks refuge in *Remember Carthage* is a resort. Hauntology encompasses both a loss of space, as that of time, something which *A Man Digging* puts into full view: time is suspended, as the protagonist moves through dead transit areas contemplating the meaning of our digitally mediated experience. Interestingly, Fisher concludes, hauntology also confronts us with this overarching stagnation, perhaps pushing us towards genuine modes of creativity (2012, 19).

Groundlessness, according to artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl, may be understood as the condition of the present moment: a loss of stable ground in relation to any kinds of "metaphysical claims or foundational political myths" (2011). In the essay published on the platform e-flux, Steyerl proposes we are experiencing a new type of visuality: from the linear perspective which dominated through to the Enlightenment, towards a vertical perspective developed with the rise of new technologies of surveillance and targeting. Although a fiction, linear perspective implied a natural, objective and scientific position held by a single, static spectator. Linearity also implied linear time, progress, as well as a "calculable future" (Steyerl 2011). New technologies opened new times and spaces: multiple and simultaneous perspectives, all-encompassing aerial or God's eye views. While linear perspective safely ratified colonialist objectives, the new vertical norm has coded, according to Steyerl, "a new subjectivity safely folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction"

(2011). This has, she continues, enabled a detached, mobile and mechanized gaze – both militaristically and pornographically intrusive. Rafman's trilogy obviously plays into this verticality: multiple visual perspectives play a great part, while surveillance technologies are arguably the very foundation of the works. While the first two works seem to still hold on to a sense of ground – grasping, albeit unsurely, to times and places – *A Man Digging* is in a continuous state of free fall. Not the speeding kind of free fall towards a stable ground, but one which has lost any kind of relation between the past, present and future, as well as the delineation between what is real and what is not. Like Fisher, Steyerl concludes with a perspectival shift, an opportunity for a formation of different kinds of subjectivities:

> Finally, the perspective of free fall teaches us to consider a social and political dreamscape of radicalized class war from above, one that throws jaw-dropping social inequalities into sharp focus. But falling does not only mean falling apart, it can also mean a new certainty falling into place. [...] It promises no community, but a shifting formation. (2011)

5 A Wandering Stranger

In a number of interviews from this time, Rafman identifies with the role of the 'cyberflâneur', a contemporary counterpart to the modernist wanderer of busy urban streets, "trying to draw a historical line between a classical, modern, or romantic quest for fullness in a world that is completely fragmented" (Kholeif 2014, 195). In the *Painter of Modern Life* published in 1863, poet Charles Baudelaire draws out the role of this new figure who rises out of the accelerated urbanization, modernisation and industrialisation of everyday life. The *flâneur* is a "passionate spectator" (Baudelaire 1863, 9) one with the crowd, for him "it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, and the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (9). He is at home nowhere and everywhere, at the same time hidden and at its very center – "a mirror as vast as the crowd itself" (9). Equipped with a brush or a pen, the goal of this elusive figure is to find the essential quality of the new modern era. The 'cyberflâneur' thus dwells in much the same way online, roaming through forums, life simulations and other media sharing services trying to understand the essence of our digitally mediated reality. Online we find new kinds of anonymous crowds, new landscapes and new ways to connect.

Literary and cultural theoretician Robert G. Beghetto (2022, 9) explains that for Baudelaire, the idea of modernity was tied to an ephemeral or fleeting experience of modern life: constantly in flux

with the unchangeable and eternal, "this sensation had a profound effect on the relationship between past, present and future". Not only characterized by new industries, technologies and rational discourse, modernity facilitated for Baudelaire a sense of freedom and free investigation. Beghetto ties Baudelaire's *flâneur* to a figure of the modern stranger – a simultaneously anti-modern figure, immersed as well as critical to the paradoxes of modernity. These paradoxes are, for Beghetto, related to modernity's project of secularization and its ambiguous position towards the sacral. A stranger, according to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1999, 79), is, like the *flâneur*, "an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever arriving". His in-between position challenges the worldview of natives – as it renders visible the particular mode of life which is "effective only in as far as it stays transparent, invisible, codified" (79). A stranger thus puts into question the very structures of a community and its ideology, turning everyday life to a contested, insecure and problematic site (79). Expanding on this notion, for Beghetto the modern stranger challenges the objective truths and rationality of modernity, also finding ways to "uncannily resacralize itself within the liminality of secularized modernity" (2022, 14).

The digital sphere becomes an important liminal site for the modern stranger, continues Beghetto (127), as one which has blurred the boundaries between physical and virtual reality, ourselves and others, the private and the public. Absent and distant, the Internet as an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient site reflects the sacral notion of God, but in actuality it is more akin to Frankenstein's creature – a liminal entity reflecting "the fractured human existence" (127). Rafman, as we have seen, explicitly addresses this contemporary fragmentation, looking to the modern stranger in order to find the lost stability and fullness. In *You, the World and I*, this modern stranger interjects emotionally charged histories to a disinterested, machinic and anonymizing site – in *Remember Carthage* he embraces this cold virtuality which is usually hidden and in *A Man Digging* he looks for the meaning of experience in virtual massacres. The modern stranger of Rafman's trilogy wanders through these everyday digital spaces, exposing the ways in which they affect us and our experience of the world. This motion is reflected in the method of the artist whose practice at the time was very much based on an almost compulsive method of browsing and collecting material online. The material from which the trilogy is composed is, to a degree, real – at least as real as anything can be in a virtual setting. Once again, the boundary between fact and fiction comes into play, complicated by the fact that the anonymous, digitally processed voice is actually the artist's. This fact does not intend to suggest an autobiographical reading, but should highlight – once again – the ambiguous materiality of digital media and its shaky relationship to traditional dichotomies. The

artist-Jon Rafman and the protagonists of his works may thus be understood as modern strangers, resacralizing, in Beghetto's terms, the cold, distant and disinterested network streams they flow through.

The modern stranger may aimlessly wander, but he is no passive figure. By dangerously questioning existing structures and reflecting the way they operate, Beghetto proposes we may think of the stranger as a key figure in utopian thought (2022, 15). According to Beghetto, the very fact of the stranger's 'undecidability' can be understood as a form of resacralization and thus, a potential insight to social change. Utopia, for Beghetto (2022, 15), following Ernst Bloch, is to be understood as a dynamic, dialectic process – not an abstract 'elsewhere' but a present potential for change. Through his analysis of cyberpunk literature, Beghetto shows how, like Rafman's protagonists, these cybernetic modern strangers embrace alienation and fragmentation as a "continuous process of becoming," powerless in the physical world, digital spaces become sites of potential power and control – "a liminal space where one can challenge both the boundaries and authority of the overshadowing culture" (2022, 137). That this utopian quality does not belong to some distant future, as it does not belong to some other space, shows marxist literary theoretician Fredric Jameson (1982) in his analysis of science fiction literature. Science fiction, in its basis, may be understood as having the social function to accustom the reader to the rapid changes and progress brought about by capitalism. In this sense, Baudelaire's works provided a "shock-absorbing mechanism" (151) for the reader first visiting this new, modernized environment. For Jameson, this function is more complex: rather than a future-oriented vision of the world, here he recognizes processes of restructuring and defamiliarization of our own, actual present (152). The present is essentially unavailable to the human subject as s/he is habituated and numb to its effects, thus making these works "elaborate strategies of indirection" (152) – as ones which are able to break through "our monadic insulation" and to "experience, for the first real time, this 'present'" (152). What these strategies show is thus not a future, but precisely "dramatize our incapacity to imagine" (Jameson 1982, 152) it. For Jameson this means Utopia cannot be imagined, as it posits a radical difference and otherness to a present of which we are all prisoners. While this failure of utopian imagination permeates Rafman's works, as its connection to Fisher's notion of hauntology has precisely shown, as a 'strategy of indirection' it manages to break through the numbing ways in which we interact with digital media. Just as the trilogy searches for meaning in this new experience, so it exposes this experience to the viewer on a direct, affective, sensious level. Just as the formal and narrative structure of the trilogy, so the artistic method points to this experience. Composed of actual found footage and using the artist's voice, the present permeates Rafman's work,

affirming that utopia cannot be imagined, as individual and collective pasts and imagined futures become undone within the slipping subjects. Settled firmly in the present, the trilogy also shows its limitations and proposes how we may engage with the pervasiveness of digital media in new, creative, unsettling ways.

6 Conclusion

In 2020, Google announced their photo sharing and storage service Google Photos had in five years accumulated over 4 trillion photos and videos, growing every day by approximately 28 billion new uploads. As read in the official statement, it was launched in 2015 with "the mission of being the home for your memories," as "a place to reflect on meaningful moments in your life" (Ben-Yair 2020, n.p). Personal memories created through digital devices, fed on a digital cloud belonging to a sprawling network of instantly available private and public flows of information. In 2019, Paris's Notre Dame cathedral was heavily damaged due to a fire, and rumor was the developers of the action-adventure video game *Assassins Creed: Unity* (Ubisoft 2014) could help in its ensuing reconstruction. Famous for its life-like accuracy of actual, historical places, the developers had done extensive 3D scanning of the monument. In the game, you can sprint through the church, swing from its towers and, of course, assassinate your enemies. While the rumor ended up being exactly that – a rumor – it bears witness not only to the slippage of the virtual into the physical, but also to a new kind of experience of history and lost times. How we remember depends on our experiences, on the context and medium, and ever more often this medium is the virtual sphere.

This article has aimed to trace these growing transformations by engaging with three of Rafman's video works which are formally, narratively and methodologically interconnected in different, important ways. Made up from Google's Street View archive, *You, the World and I* unraveled the insecurities we face when dealing with digital databases as holders of knowledge. By injecting a subjective gaze to the automated motion of a technological eye, the work exposed how the ways we engage with virtual archives blurs traditional dichotomies and allows for new temporalities and subjectivities. Set in various virtual simulations of real and imagined places, *Remember Carthage* reverberated these new losses and gains, while the work's analysis opened to the question of memory as a subjective process of the mind. Memory was to be understood as a dynamic process which actively joined with media to negotiate relations between ourselves and others, the personal and collective, private and public, as well as the past and the future. Again,

both works have shown how the digital sphere perturbs these distinctions and how memory – and, consequently, our subjective beings – have been shaped by the ways in which we engage our past and present. For Rafman's subjects, there is no outside to the virtual and the technological. Their beings, their sense of self reflects the flows of networks in which they reside. Experience in these subject's worlds may be digital or not at all. Again, *A Man Digging* reflects both this new archive and mode of remembrance, and has led to the point of the analysis which has, on one hand, aimed to qualify these new experiences and, on the other hand, aimed to position the works in the context of broader cultural and visual production. The shifts of time, place and perspective came into play as phenomena the digital sphere and technological progress have dismantled, towards a world of broken futures and slipping grounds. Non-places and temporal confusions imbue the three works as their subject's experiences slip between what is real and what is not, what has been or may be. Horizons are broken, as the subjects flutter above and between digital scraps longing for an escape of their fractured existence. As they wander through these splintered sites where reality – whatever it may have been – is lost, the artist's method reflects this by his process of collecting and recording found digital material. His own voice is that of these lost subjects, shifting the works from a position of representation towards actual presence. These wanderers are strangers, pointing to the present, mediated conditions they also pose a danger to the world as they disrupt the order we have grown accustomed to. In a sense these strangers give way to utopian imagination – but not one which belongs to another place or time – it is here and now, strategically breaking down the numbness of everyday life towards some sense of truth. This truth is ambiguous, fleeting and affecting, revealing itself only momentarily as we lull back to the overwhelming networked flow.

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