

THE POLITICS OF 'PRIMARY REJECTION' IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BARTLEBY* AND HITO STEYERL'S *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN*: RACISM, (IL)LEGIBILITY, SURVEILLANCE, AND DETERMINATE NEGATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article I analyse the primary rejections depicted in Herman Melville's *Urtext* on the withdrawal of complicity, *Bartleby* (1853), and Hito Steyerl's video installation *How Not to be Seen* (2013), which experiments with a Bartleby-like withdrawal from surveillance through becoming illegible to machine vision. My focus is on the potential of primary rejection to reveal the disavowed content of racist violence foundational to the regimes (financial, sociotechnical) rejected in these texts. Adopting a hermeneutic of hauntology, my reading of *Bartleby* emphasises its publication context amid the slow struggles over the abolition of slavery in the US, to explore the connections between Bartleby's strike and the history of racist violence lingering in Melville's depiction of an oddly vacant Wall Street. Turning to Steyerl's video installation, I evaluate the techniques it proposes for becoming Bartlebys of the digital age, emphasising the complexity of Steyerl's mobilisation of mixed-footage montage to explore the dangers of legibility and invisibility in a racist internet era. Throughout, I set these two works in dialogue with leading interpretations of Bartleby, with Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation of Hegel's 'determinate negation', hauntological analyses of German and other texts, and current theories of race and surveillance to pose the question: for whom is primary rejection affordable and who, like Bartleby, will perish if they try to exit dominant schemes of legibility?

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der 'primären Ablehnung' in Herman Melvilles *Bartleby* (1853) und Hito Steyerls Videoinstallation *How Not to be Seen* (2013). Ich konzentriere mich auf das politische Potential dieser Art von Ablehnung, um die verleugnete rassistische Gewalt aufzudecken, die grundlegend für die herrschenden Systeme ist, die von diesen Texten kritisiert werden. Dafür muss 'Bartleby' vor seinem historischen Hintergrund der langsamen Abschaffung des Sklavenhandels in den USA verstanden werden. Durch die Methode der Hauntologie soll in meiner Lektüre der Zusammenhang zwischen Bartlebys Streik und dieser historischen Gegebenheit aufgezeigt werden. In Steyerls Video, das einen Rückzug aus der digitalen Überwachung versucht, erkenne ich ebenfalls eine Bartleby-Geste für die digitale Welt. Dabei betone ich die Komplexität der visuellen Experimente mit gemischten Bildmontagen, die das Video benutzt, um die Gefahren der digitalen Lesbarkeit und Unsichtbarkeit in einem rassistischen Internet-Zeitalter zu erforschen. Ich bringe diese Werke in einen Dialog mit führenden Interpretationen von Bartleby, mit Adornos und Horkheimers Lektüre der 'bestimmten Negation' bei Hegel, mit hauntologischen Analysen von deutschsprachigen und anderen Texten und mit aktuellen Theorien zu Rassismus und Überwachung, um die Frage zu stellen: Wer kann die primäre Ablehnung

erfolgreich vollziehen, und wer wird, wie *Bartleby*, bei dem Versuch, sich aus dominierenden Lesbarkeitsschemata zu entziehen, verschwinden?

THE POLITICS OF 'PRIMARY REJECTION'

In our current era of ubiquitous surveillance, withdrawal from regimes of exploitation is extremely difficult to execute successfully. Anybody who uses the internet, that locus *non plus ultra* of data profiteering, is familiar with the empty promise of the consent screen and its invitation to take back sovereignty over one's life online by 'managing cookies' or 'turning tracking off'. It is more difficult than these familiar internet tropes suggest to regain sovereignty by withdrawing complicity from computational regimes in which being online means providing data to be read and analysed for purposes of profit, propaganda and discrimination. Meanwhile, who has the power to withdraw from the global finance industry which, invisibly but inexorably, relies on exploitation for the profit of the few?

In this article, I analyse the acts of withdrawal depicted in Herman Melville's canonical short story, *Bartleby, The Scrivener* (1853), and in Munich-born media artist and theorist Hito Steyerl's video installation *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). The notion of withdrawal through illegibility unites these two works which, in different media, explore the possibility of rejecting complicity with regimes of injustice: in Melville's text, these are the intertwined economic regimes defining the US around 1850 and in Steyerl's, the biased regime of dataveillance enabled by present-day algorithmic securitisation. Moreover, both of these works depict primary rejections, the term coined in this special number to mean 'a spontaneous and often transient yet forceful refusal to behave according to normative expectations',¹ in a problematic yet productive fashion. In what follows, I link Andreas Gehrlach and Marie Kolkenbrock's notion of primary rejection to Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's reading of Hegel, in which the Frankfurt School philosophers developed the idea of a *bestimmte Negation* as a progressive manner of 'reading' for a truth independent of the oppressive logics of positivism and instrumental reason.² The primary rejections enacted in the texts by Melville and Steyerl represent determinate negations, in that they do not have any positivist alternative to propose to the regimes they critique, but they retain a productive power due to the truths they tell about their contexts. Bringing the two texts together foregrounds the problematic of illegibility present in both of them, one that I see as crucial

¹ Andreas Gehrlach and Marie Kolkenbrock, 'Introduction: The Politics and Poetics of Refusal. Towards a Theory of Primary Rejection', see above.

² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, 24th edn, Frankfurt a. M. 2019, p. 30.

to challenging regimes of discrimination and even as capable of stimulating new gestures of reading conducive to a less violent shared world.

In the first part of the article, I conduct an analysis of illegibility in Melville's *Urttext* on the withdrawal of complicity, *Bartleby*, about the eponymous legal clerk who famously 'prefers not to' carry out his work. Critics have disagreed over Bartleby's real power to undermine the system around him, but they all agree on his capacity to spread unease within it. The article expands here on canonical and recent interpretations alike as I argue that Bartleby is a disruptive force because his resistance is illegible and yet catching. His ineffable rebellion haunts his employer's first-person narrative like a curse, with Bartleby resembling a 'cadaverous' presence on 1850s Wall Street.³ As Kara Keeling writes in her new reading of queer time in 'Bartleby', '[b]ent not toward redemption but "de-creation", Bartleby is a figure who unsettles the existing social organization of things'.⁴ Indeed, Bartleby is at once an uncanny sovereign and a shape-shifting imitator whose actions cannot be read and thus unsettle the apparent order around him. Building on Keeling's analysis, I claim that Bartleby's act of radical 'de-creation', defined by its potent anti-instrumentality, is a central example of the notion of primary rejection developed in this special issue.

I differ from Keeling, however, in seeking evidence in the story of the presence of the violent history haunting New York's finance district in the mid-nineteenth century: that of the exploitation of Black people to benefit the nation's wealthy. For Keeling, 'there is little evidence to suggest that [Melville] had slavery or its abolition [...] in mind' when he wrote the story.⁵ Slavery is an explicit plotline in *Benito Cereno*, Melville's 1855 tale of revolt on a slave ship, in which Peter Coviello accurately locates one of 'the most vengeful depictions of the racial dispensation of the New World, its specific moral horror, to be found in fiction'.⁶ In *Bartleby*, written two years earlier, slavery (which was still legal in the US's Southern states until 1865) does not appear in the plot, yet I find myself looking for evidence, in the earlier and more canonical story, of a consciousness of the racist violence that was (and is) still going on in the US. My approach is akin to Thomas Elsaesser's claims about German film after the Shoah, namely that these films neither directly acknowledge, nor can they ever *not* be haunted by, the events of Germany's immediate, atrocious past.⁷ As we will see below, *Bartleby* cannot do the reparative 'wake work' that Christina Sharpe analyses

³ Herman Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*, in *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, London 2016, pp. 17–54 (p. 32). Further references appear in the text under *Bartleby*.

⁴ Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, New York 2019, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ Peter Coviello, 'Introduction', in Melville, *Billy Budd* (note 3), pp. vii–xxvi (p. xxv).

⁷ See, for instance, Thomas Elsaesser, 'Post-conflict Cinema: Beyond Truth and Reconciliation?', in *Mediations of Disruption in Post-Conflict Cinema*, ed. Mónica Dias, Alexandra Lopes and Adriana Martins, London 2016, pp. 21–42.

in the literary work of Black writers in the post-slave trade diaspora,⁸ but I argue for reading Melville's text through a hauntological hermeneutic that holds in mind some of the worst atrocities of American history,⁹ and wonders about the way in which violence against Black people contributed to the riches of the USA in which *Bartleby* stages his mysterious rebellion, even though Melville leaves slavery out of the story's surface diegesis. In short, the text neither acknowledges the racist atrocities of slavery, nor can we read it without sensing the incalculable presence of that history in the story's unconscious. Furthermore, the racism inherent to post-abolition US law (still effective today) is more tangibly present in the text, in metaphors and asides that are as subtle but, I claim, as potent as *Bartleby's* strike itself.

In conventional historiography, the era of slavery is distinguished from the new modality of speculative finance represented by Wall Street at the time of Melville's tale, and yet the two eras overlapped precisely at the moment when Melville was writing. As Keeling notes, moreover, Ian Baucom articulates similarities and links between the financial logics of slavery and those of speculative capitalism through his reading of the *Zong* atrocity of 1781, several decades before *Bartleby*, in which 122 Africans were murdered for the sake of an insurance payout.¹⁰ Baucom argues that the atrocities of slavery are present in the 'melancholy realism' he identifies in literary, historical and philosophical texts published both before and after the abolition of slavery, including works from the late twentieth century. *Bartleby* makes no explicit references to the atrocities of slavery, and the metaphors I do find in the text recalling the Atlantic slave trade and racist post-Abolition law represent at the most only indirect signs of how that context may relate to *Bartleby's* strike. However, Baucom's 'melancholy realism' and Elsaesser's analysis of German culture after the Shoah offer models, after which we can read *Bartleby* while thinking about how slavery enriched the US, seeing its structuring absence in the financial centre from which *Bartleby* withdraws. To consider *Bartleby* this way is to lend a new power to his otherwise illegible resistance.

In the article's second part, I analyse the primary rejection represented in Hito Steyerl's video installation *How Not to be Seen*, which is concerned with how to be a *Bartleby* for our contemporary era by refusing to be legible to ubiquitous surveillance. In this .MOV file designed for gallery display, Steyerl mixes a dry mockumentary style with striking computer generated image (CGI) animations to offer a formally-innovative manifesto

⁸ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham, NC 2016, unpaginated Kindle edition.

⁹ Haunting is a theoretical metaphor here, and it is not used to suggest Black people are the 'spooks' of racist language or that people of colour should act as advocates for ethics in order to help white supremacy feel less uneasy; the problem of haunting instead stems from the actions of the racist regimes themselves and needs to be solved through the eradication of racism.

¹⁰ Keeling, *Queer Times* (note 4), pp. 23–8. See also Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Durham, NC 2005.

on the impossibility of withdrawing from surveillance after, to use her term, 'the digital revolution'.¹¹ On the surface, *How Not to be Seen* teaches its viewers to become illegible to machine vision in order to withdraw from dataveillance, like Bartleby withdraws from working for his perpetually-confused employer. The installation fruitfully experiments with mixed-footage aesthetics to draw out the few gestures of resistance still available under today's ambient surveillance systems, gestures that the installation admits through its own rough, mixed format are reliant on the same technologies they are critiquing. Therefore, I offer a close reading below of the installation as a darkly comic play with the frustratingly limited styles that exist for the aspiring digital-era Bartleby. In the last part of the article I then focus on its most provocative sequences, which invoke the practice of extraordinary rendition during the War on Terror. The analysis here draws on crucial theoretical work by Louise Amoore, Alana Lentin and Safiya Noble on the violence inherent to algorithmic securitisation, and influential studies by Simone Browne and Lisa Nakamura of the potential of artistic interventions to challenge the racist biases coded into surveillance practices today.

Steyerl's installation represents one such intervention as it prompts privileged viewers, who may be wishing for more privacy, to consider instead the impossibility of avoiding complicity with a surveillance governmentality that harms marginalised communities radically more, through making hypervisible certain subjects, for whom it can conversely also be dangerous *not* to be seen. What does it mean for the privileged few, who can try to be Bartlebys and at least partially opt out of networked surveillance, to do so while others remain unable to withdraw because they are vulnerable to social and financial exclusion,¹² and still others suffer torture and death in the secret prisons and drone strikes of today's surveillance warfare?

In considering *Bartleby*, in my view the ultimate literary example of primary rejection, alongside the withdrawal of complicity with dataveillance in Steyerl's installation, I demonstrate that both texts carry traces of racism's legacies and ongoing effects. My writing moves relatively swiftly from the US history of racist violence against Black people to global surveillance injustices carried out against other groups, including people of Islamic faith, and the particular surveillance of women plays a role in the analysis too. What these groups have in common is the experience of being rendered at once hypervisible and invisible by bias, a double-bind that is deadly for those most vulnerable to racist violence. However, differentiation is important here, and what follows is an analysis of the

¹¹ Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). HD video file.

¹² See Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*, New York 2018; and Annie Ring, 'Complicity', in *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data*, ed. Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D'Ignazio and Kristin Veel, Cambridge, MA, forthcoming.

vastly different aesthetic strategies used in the two texts to explore their shared but complex concern: how becoming illegible can be a potent but still imperfect way to withdraw complicity with unethical regimes that leave little room for escape. Finally, by reading these two works in the light of this special number's leading notion of a primary rejection, that 'compulsive need to refuse',¹³ which comes to expression without providing any manifesto for a future order to replace the one being negated – and which in this sense also recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of Hegel's *bestimmte Negation* – it becomes possible to engage the urgent questions each of these texts poses about the politics of withdrawing complicity: for whom is a primary rejection affordable and who, like Bartleby, will perish if they withdraw their participation? And what are the alternatives to living in complicity with regimes as ineluctable and as problematic as global finance or ambient, personalised dataveillance?

BARTLEBY AS URTEXT OF PRIMARY REJECTION: ILLEGIBILITY AS DISRUPTION

Melville's famous story of 1853 is inhabited by a host of agencies that are disruptive due to their illegibility. The most potent of these is Bartleby himself, clerk to a financial lawyer in a small but profitable office in New York's Chancery district. Without providing any reasoning or manifesto beyond his recurrent, insistent mantra 'I would prefer not to' (*Bartleby*, p. 25), Bartleby rejects first some, then all of his tasks at work and finally prefers to die on hunger strike in prison rather than participate in the world around him. His mantra becomes a radical statement in the face of the narrator-employer, who demands productivity from the clerk about whom he initially harboured a 'natural expectancy of instant compliance' (*Bartleby*, p. 25). Bartleby's non-compliance is surprising because it resists any specific meaning and, instead, remains a simple withdrawal of any and all complicity. Moreover, the first-person narrative perspective forces readers to dwell uneasily in the narrator's bafflement, confronting us, by extension, with our own inability to decipher Bartleby's refusal.

Bartleby is an ineffable character from the start, as he appears on the doorstep 'motionless [...] pallidly neat, exhibiting a stasis that bodes well at first' (*Bartleby*, pp. 23–4), then carries out his initial writing tasks like an automaton, 'silently, palely, mechanically' (*Bartleby*, p. 24). Illegibility also defines Bartleby's resistance as his 'cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*' (*Bartleby*, p. 32. Italics in the original) and 'perpetual occupancy' (*Bartleby*, p. 45) of the office destabilise the resolve of his employer, who feels 'unmanned' as much as confused; he recalls: 'incontinently I slunk away' (*Bartleby*, p. 32). For Keeling, '[s]quidlike, Bartleby upends Western humanism's categories',¹⁴ especially refusing any reconciliation

¹³ Gehrlach and Kolkenbrock, 'Introduction' (note 1).

¹⁴ Keeling, *Queer Times* (note 4), p. 49.

with conventional notions of time, such that he, for Keeling, 'reveals the queerness in time'.¹⁵ Indeed, the queer ineffability that *Bartleby* brings into the office succeeds in destabilising his employer's masculine confidence and also time itself by bringing recent history troublingly into the heart of his orderly office. It is telling, for instance, that Melville represents *Bartleby's* rebellion using spectral language ('cadaverous'), appropriate to the fact that the tale was published just five years after *The Communist Manifesto*, in which a certain ghost famously haunts its way around Europe. *Bartleby* brings with him other ghosts, too, ones much more local to his New York workplace.

Bartleby's 'cadaverous triumph' (*Bartleby*, p. 42) offers us the key example of primary rejection. The meaning of strike in this canonical text is constitutively difficult to grasp, in other words, the hermeneutic difficulty proves intrinsic to that strike's potency: there is no manifesto here, only a refusal to tolerate truth's subjection to ideology. This latter quality is what links *Bartleby's* resistance to the Frankfurt School notion of a *bestimmte Negation*.¹⁶ his strike refuses to submit to instrumental reason; proceeding without offering an alternative agenda, a new manifesto or any utilitarian explanation for his resistance, *Bartleby* thus insists on the value of the truth of refusal, in and of itself. Incapable of grasping truth without positive utility, the narrator does not understand *Bartleby's* rebellion, instead perceiving his errant employee as 'one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable' (*Bartleby*, p. 17). *Bartleby* remains for him an 'unaccountable scrivener' (*Bartleby*, p. 33), slippery in the face of attempts to read him. When the employer tries to decipher *Bartleby's* character, he wonders if his clerk might be 'hot and spicy' (*Bartleby*, p. 28), like the ginger nuts that make up the mainstay of his diet. But no: *Bartleby* rather performs a calm, cool conduct,¹⁷ which upsets the fragile order around him, and haunts with uncanny illegibility his Wall Street environs.

Critical and cultural theorists have repeatedly drawn inspiration from *Bartleby*, so much so that he has become a figurehead for the potential for rebellion against any systems reliant on the collaboration of their exploited subjects. For Agamben and Deleuze, *Bartleby* finds a way to leverage the 'power of no',¹⁸ a negative potentiality that challenges the principle of sovereignty operating in his employer's office. Political philosopher Nina Power, on the other hand, questions *Bartleby's* success, noting his refusal to engage in any solidarity, such that 'the collective dimension is absent'.¹⁹ Certainly, *Bartleby* opts not to build a community with, for instance, the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (note 2), p. 30.

¹⁷ By writing about 'cool conduct', I am drawing on Helmut Lethen's *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, tr. Don Reneau, Berkeley, CA 2002.

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby: La Formula della Creazione*, Macerata 1993, p. 91.

¹⁹ Nina Power, 'Potentiality or Capacity? – Agamben's Missing Subjects', *Theory & Event*, 13/1 (2010), doi:10.1353/tae.0.0121 (accessed 12 January 2020).

other scribes of Wall Street, whose training as ‘copyists’ implies they would be ready to join in and even, machine-like, to *copy* him, given enough encouragement. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Hardwick notices that Bartleby’s revolutionary refusal does have a degree of mimetic power, namely as a linguistic contagion: ‘The nipping clerks [...] begin, without sarcasm or mimicry, involuntarily, as it were, to say to the lawyer, ‘If you would prefer, Sir,’ and so on.’²⁰ The involuntary introduction of the vocabulary of ‘preference’ into the vernacular of the office, even into the employer’s own idiom (“‘Mr Nippers,’ said I, ‘I’d prefer that you would withdraw’ (*Bartleby*, p. 37)) echoes Bartleby’s mantra of radical refusal. Power’s frustration is, however, understandable. If he had worked more systematically together with others, Bartleby could have catalysed more widespread resistance – albeit resistance that, in turn, would have been easier to shut down by means of tear-gas or tabloid hatred than is Bartleby’s unreadable but unrelenting ‘no’.

Bartleby causes problems for his boss precisely *because* the office is already receptive to his disruptive presence. For instance, another clerk, Nippers, has to grapple with his desk ‘as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him’ (*Bartleby*, pp. 22–3). Overcoming artificial agencies like this strangely active table, the lawyer comes to a good-enough arrangement with his staff until Bartleby arrives and stirs everybody up. To secure control, the employer then procures ‘a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice’ (*Bartleby*, p. 24). Even out of sight, however, Bartleby will not be prevented from exerting influence. In fact, the screen further extends his status as a surface of projectability, a status created by the famous blankness of his refusal to work. Bartleby ‘blankly decline[s]’ (*Bartleby*, p. 39) his tasks then operates behind his green screen as a projection surface for the mimetic behaviour of his colleagues and for the growing obsession of his employer, who ends the tale musing superstitiously on Bartleby’s prior employment as a sorter of dead letters, suggesting he will not, for a while, shake off Bartleby’s curse of bafflement. But what is bothering Wall Street so much that Bartleby’s inexplicable and, it must be admitted, rather useless strike can be so disruptive?

READING *BARTLEBY* HAUNTOLOGICALLY

We have seen how the agency of Bartleby’s resistance becomes potent through its anti-positivist illegibility and its combination with a readiness for disruption already existing in the office where he works. These disruptive aspects to his resistance gain even more power in concert with an uneasiness in the text’s metaphorical register that recalls slavery and

²⁰ Elizabeth Hardwick, *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*, New York 1984, p. 261.

the racist, post-Abolition laws of the mid-nineteenth-century US. Although slavery had been abolished in the Northern States, including New York, when *Bartleby* was published, it was only formally abolished in the entire country by the thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in December 1865. Thus, the text emerged in the middle of the battle to end the atrocities of slavery, and we cannot read it without remembering that history. Moreover, as Judith Levine notes, Melville published *Bartleby* only three years after the introduction of the Fugitive Slave Act, which represented a continuation of racist discrimination that has still not stopped in the US or elsewhere.²¹ Considering that Melville deals explicitly with a slave ship uprising in *Benito Cereno* (1855) two years later, we can see these post-Abolition laws as part of the context surrounding *Bartleby*, and so read the story as more than a literary account of rebellion against modern work. Indeed, I propose we read the text with active recollection of its publication date in the last years of slavery in the US, when it was not to be taken for granted that the struggle for abolition would ever be successful; that we allow ourselves to be bothered by that recollection as we read the references in the text to ships in the Atlantic, to the then-new vagrancy laws and to the ancient world that, as Marx argued, accrued wealth through hierarchies reliant on slavery. Reading this way lends more power to what can otherwise seem like Bartleby's senseless rejection of white-collar work on Wall Street.

Given its publication date, we can wonder for instance whether or not *Bartleby* exists in what Sharpe terms the 'wake' of slavery.²² For Sharpe, the sign of the slave ship haunts contemporary Black life in the diaspora, and she examines texts and artworks that succeed in doing 'wake work' through which harms can be repaired and alternatives to white supremacy imagined. *Bartleby* is not by a Black author, nor does it feature Black characters, hence it cannot do the reparative work Sharpe analyses. Alternatively, Keeling's reading of *Bartleby* acknowledges its publication context, but focuses on the story's contribution to thinking about 'the politics, possibilities, and pitfalls of opacity, incommensurability, radical refusal, and risk'.²³ I respectfully depart from Keeling to argue that, despite being a text by a white author about white-collar workers in Wall Street, *Bartleby* as a text is interested in the Atlantic slave trade, the continuation of slavery in the US and the discriminatory post-Abolition laws. In my reading, Melville's narrative returns to fundamental symbols of slavery and racist violence in the US's past as if the text does know about the harms done by slavery and post-abolition discrimination even if that was not Melville's explicit agenda in writing the story. Then, *Bartleby*'s resistance can be seen in its relation

²¹ Judith Levine, 'The Bartleby Strategy', *The Boston Review* (2017), <http://bostonreview.net/politics-literature-culture/judith-levine-bartleby-strategy> (accessed 12 January 2020).

²² Sharpe, *In the Wake* (note 8), pp. 17–22.

²³ Keeling, *Queer Times* (note 4), p. 43.

to an unfinished reckoning with the violent exploitation of Black people, exploitation underpinning the wealth of the US and hence the thriving finance industry on Wall Street against which the fictional character rebels.

Going against the grain and searching for the text's unconscious, hauntological content, this reading allows us to ponder the most unsettled aspects of the text's metaphorical register. Thus, when *Bartleby's* solitude makes him appear to his employer as '[a] bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic' (*Bartleby*, p. 39), we can read this as a reference to the importance of trans-Atlantic travel more generally in US history, *and* we can remember more specifically the forced Atlantic crossings made by slaves. Then, the image of a shipwreck brings to mind some of the most flagrant atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade, among which the *Zong* massacre in late November–December 1781 became an important example for pro-Abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. The crew of the *Zong* slave ship murdered 122 Africans by chaining them together and throwing them overboard in order to claim an insurance pay-out. The atrocity, depicted by J. M. W. Turner in his painting *The Slave Ship* (1840), and referred to in Hito Steyerl's essay on the loss of ground implied by the preponderance of a vertical perspective in contemporary warfare's optical logics,²⁴ was treated in purely technical terms by British lawmakers, who viewed the murder of more than a hundred people for the sake of financial gain as 'a routine, if legally complicated, case of maritime fraud', attributing little value to the lives of the Black people who had been killed.²⁵

Ian Baucom argues that the notorious *Zong* atrocity and the brutality of the trial that treated people as little more than goods are crucial for understanding not only the history of the transatlantic slave trade but also the broader modern system of capital:

the massacre and trials bring to light [...] an Atlantic cycle of accumulation and a long twentieth century defined at either end by the rise of finance capital and the speculative culture apposite to such an order of abstract accumulation.²⁶

Baucom's argument is that the abstract logic governing the Black Atlantic in the eighteenth century was a prior form of the speculative finance model now governing present-day capital accumulation. He traces the hidden relation between these apparently distinct economic orders as he defines a corpus of texts displaying 'melancholy realism': not only abolitionist and human-rights texts but also other writing concerned with capital and ethics, from English-language poetry, philosophy, even to the writing of

²⁴ Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin 2012, pp. 12–30 (p. 20).

²⁵ Trevor Burnard, 'A New Look at the *Zong* Case of 1783', *Revue de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, 76 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.1808> (accessed 26 February 2020).

²⁶ Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (note 10), p. 32.

twentieth-century cultural theorists from Benjamin to Derrida. 'Melancholy realism', which evinces a consciousness of the atrocities of slavery as still folded within the newer model of speculative finance, is a mode of writing in which we can include *Bartleby* as a story that contains within it the history of slavery even as it appears on the plot level to dwell only in the later era of finance capitalism. It is as if Melville's story performatively blanks or screens out the exploitation that enabled the US to amass its vast wealth in the decades around its diegesis.

The preponderance of surveillance against people of colour in the new laws written in the era around abolition makes a more explicit appearance in Melville's story than does the easily overlooked metaphor of a wreck in the Atlantic. Late in the tale, the employer ponders how Bartleby could potentially be removed from the scene and committed to jail: 'a vagrant, is he?' (*Bartleby*, p. 46), an idea that recalls the discriminatory laws that were primarily used to imprison Black people and sentence them to hard labour after slavery was abolished in the Northern States. Bartleby's refusal is not a conscious resistance against slavery, nor is Melville equating Bartleby with former slaves, rather the text is haunted by the history of slavery as invisible in, and yet endemic to, the new financial system represented by Wall Street. Here, Marisa Parham's notion of haunting, as the willingness to feel uneasy through empathy with 'someone else's funk',²⁷ from her influential work on African American literature, is helpful. We can read *Bartleby* with uneasiness about the history which pushes through the surface of the text in subtle asides reminding readers of the violence belied by Chancery's improbably calm streets. In the words of Eve Tuck and C. Ree, the story is visited by 'specters that collapse time, rendering empire's foundational past impossible to erase from the national present [...] a source of persistent unease'.²⁸ Reading in the light of these hauntological approaches by Parham, Tuck and Ree, and with Elsaesser's above-mentioned approach from German film studies in mind, we can trace the presence of the slave trade and the racist, post-abolition vagrancy laws in what the text knows but does not name. They maintain a presence amid the text's blank spaces which themselves seem to register the memory of the Black people's lives lost in the history of wealth in the US.

The blankness and silence of the New York finance district Bartleby inhabits betray an unease in the text's psychotopography about the history of slavery as an unacknowledged presence on Wall Street. If we approach the story as haunted in this way, the narrator-employer's mild ponderings about a wrecked ship and Bartleby's 'vagrant' status can explain the strange atmosphere he notices in the New York streets, describing them as 'the

²⁷ Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*, New York 2009, p. 2.

²⁸ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, 'A Glossary of Haunting', in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holman Jones *et al.*, Walnut Creek, CA 2013, pp. 639–58 (p. 654).

ruins of Carthage' (*Bartleby*, p. 34), and so referring to an ancient world which, as Marx pointed out, built up wealth by dividing its society into groups supported by the slaves it exploited and traded.²⁹ Presiding over a Wall Street that resembles a ruined ancient city, there is Bartleby, and Wall Street appears under his spell as a rich trading power bereft of its people: 'deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness' (*Bartleby*, p. 33). The building in which Bartleby refuses to work, in turn, 'echoes with sheer vacancy' (*Bartleby*, p. 46). At night, the office building and the empty streets around it voice the finance industry's disassociation from the violence that enabled its wealth; their excessive emptiness meanwhile imbues the space with a visual premonition of ruin. Finally, there is a more explicit presence of slavery in the description of the prison yard, which to the narrator recalls Egypt, an important symbol of captivity in nineteenth-century abolitionist thought. As he meets Bartleby for the last time, '[t]he Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom' (*Bartleby*, p. 53), so that the employer is beset by melancholy, suggesting momentary awareness of the violence that builds great cities, pyramids and skyscrapers, even if he soon moves on to enjoying the sensation of the grass underfoot. Unease is here, speaking into the empty and echoing spaces of the tale and explaining why Bartleby's strike has been so powerful for readers and critics alike.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BECOMING ILLEGIBLE TO DATAVEILLANCE: HITO
STEYERL'S *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN* (2013)

There are echoes of Bartleby's illegible qualities as a character and of the text's haunting presences in Hito Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), both in the installation's play with styles of illegibility to surveillance and in its sensitivity to racist violence. This mixed-footage video installation combines staged live action and CGI footage with a theoretical yet playfully 'didactic' voiceover. The piece opens as a tongue-in-cheek lesson in how to withdraw from surveillance, advocating playful forms of illegibility that resist current regimes of algorithmic securitisation. But it rapidly reveals its more salient lesson, namely that becoming invisible to surveillance is a privileged wish indeed when those murdered during the War on Terror could not choose to withdraw into the sphere of privacy, a sphere that, as Wendy Chun points out, has been 'defined in relation to a white femininity',³⁰ the subject-position construed as especially vulnerable to attack so needful of a private

²⁹ Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, ed. Sálvio M. Soares, eBook 2008, p. 33, https://www.ibiblio.org/ml/libri/e/EngelsFMarxKH_ManifestKommunistischen_s.pdf (accessed 29 July 2020).

³⁰ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, Cambridge, MA 2016, p. 147.

sphere. Steyerl's installation thus turns towards the complex and multiple vulnerabilities laid bare by new surveillance regimes in order to interrogate the politics of refusing to engage with them.

A large part of Steyerl's *oeuvre* to date has been concerned with how to make visible the ubiquitous technologies that enable large swathes of data to be gathered, analysed and misused by big data companies who are only committed to profit. Meanwhile, many of Steyerl's videos made for live, gallery and web installation, such as *Lovely Andrea* (2007), *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) and *Factory of the Sun* (2015), reconstruct found footage from feature film to car crash tapes in mixed formats, and Steyerl's techniques of repurposing and citing mixed footage enable her to investigate how economic and political regimes secure complicity with phenomena as invidious as surveillance. Most impressively, Steyerl analyses this securing of complicity not in spite of, but actually through her deployment of the digital image-making techniques also employed by governments and corporations for surveillance.

Steyerl made *How Not to be Seen* proceeding from the simple question: can I be invisible to surveillance? Is it possible, like Bartleby, and to borrow Keeling's verb, to 'de-create' current surveillance regimes simply by 'preferring not to' be seen? In a characteristic citational style, Steyerl borrowed the title from a Monty Python sketch of the same name from 1970, which comically purports to deliver government advice on how to disappear. Appropriately, the piece provides a mock-didactic narrative claiming to train viewers in how to become illegible to surveillance. Ultimately however the video's montage, especially Steyerl's own performances in it, remind spectators of how difficult and problematic it is to wish to withdraw from sight.

Early in the film, the filmmaker teaches the viewer make-up disguises, which seek to confuse machine vision and so prevent artificial intelligence recognising a face as a face – something these machines often fail at when it comes to the faces of people of colour, as Joy Buolamwini demonstrates in her excellent video installation *The Coded Gaze* (2016).³¹ Steyerl's mode of disguise appears as at once extremely tactile as the spectator watches the artist vigorously rubbing her face while computer-generated patterns appear as 'make-up' to obstruct machines from 'reading' data from her face beneath (see Figure 1). This absorbingly tactile performance has a serious side: it interrogates the paradox of (il)legibility, wherein to be legible means to count as a subject, and so as a citizen needing protection from harm; but legibility also means a risk of being read as a harmful, 'terrorist' subject and possibly annihilated through the algorithmically-calculated decision that leads to a drone strike. As Louise Amoore argues, machine-learning algorithms do harm by reducing the multiplicity of possible

³¹ Joy Buolamwini, *The Coded Gaze*, video, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=162VzSzzoPs> (accessed 16 June 2019).



Figure 1. Techniques of illegibility in Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV FILE* (2013, video, 14 min.). Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

political futures for humanity by calculating risk based on simplistic and discriminatory attributes, leading to destructive sovereign actions such as drone strikes, exclusions at borders, and decisions about whether somebody should be treated by systems of justice as a terrorist or a citizen.³² Thus refusing to be legible to machines means resisting reduction to the calculability through which all the data people generate, as we move around both the real and virtual worlds, become available to harmful use by algorithmic security regimes.

Yet there is a more comic layer of critique at work here too. As if mocking calls for privacy that come from a privileged anti-surveillance standpoint, the filmmaker is clearly recognisable as herself in the opening disguise sequences. Viewers quickly realise the installation cannot teach anybody how to be illegible, instead, with comic understatement, it underlines the impossibility of not being seen, not being read by machines, in the present day. However, the video also signals a potential for change through certain images Steyerl deploys to explore the possibilities for becoming illegible to surveillance. She does so, for instance, through her use of a green screen. While in Melville's story, *Bartleby* was installed behind a green screen, out of sight but still under the command of his master's voice, Steyerl updates

³² Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others*, Durham, NC 2020, p. 4.



Figure 2. Steyerl stands beside the green screen, the condition of possibility for digital legibility, in Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen*. Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

the technique of hiding in a digital age by placing her character to the side of the green screen (Figure 2). The screen is in Chroma Key green, a surface colour against which images are most visible for computational representation. This green background is one onto which any colour and movement can be projected, suggesting potentiality, rather than a fixed destiny, for the images that may be viewed on it. In this way, the green screen signifies hope for new optic regimes to come.

What kind of hope can there be, however, if surveillance in the digital era can never be avoided? Daniela Agostinho demonstrates through her work on race and recognisability how the critical use of Chroma Key in contemporary artist Sondra Perry's video works 'shows that there is no such thing as a blank slate, and that subjects become recognisable through the operations of norms that structure the scene of recognition'.³³ Indeed, when read in the context of algorithmic racism, this blank-slate green screen represents not possibility but ultimately the limitations on who can be seen, or, in other words, which subjects of surveillance will be recognised and which will be erased by acts of remote warfare. That is why Steyerl stands recalcitrantly away, off-screen, rejecting the green screen that permits computational visibility.

³³ Daniela Agostinho, 'Chroma Key Dreams: Algorithmic Visibility, Fleshy Images and Scenes of Recognition', *Philosophy of Photography*, 9/2 (2018), 131–55 (139).



Figure 3. The earth pushes up through the remains of an analogue resolution chart, in Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen*. Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

In its second chapter, the installation's initially playful tone sobers as it switches from the disguise sequence to a documentary-style history of how surveillance images are made and thus how particular subjects come to appear or disappear in their matrix. Steyerl offers a history of aerial surveillance, the computer-generated voiceover stating that the cracked stripes of white paint on concrete in Figure 3 are the remains of a resolution chart used in the dying days of analogue photography to calibrate aerial images for military navigation. In *Bartleby's* prison yard, grass grew between the masonry of the walls as if seeds had been 'dropped by birds' flying over a pyramid built by slaves (*Bartleby*, p. 53); in this shot, the earth pushes up through the analogue pixel chart, breaking apart the clean lines that were meant to orient early aerial machine vision. Is this a reminder that certain histories have been painted over, whitewashed by high-tech capitalism? Next, Steyerl shows a pixel-based resolution chart, the likes of which have come into use with the inception of digital photography (see Figure 4) and now enable machine vision more accurately to map the earth from above for visual capture and military conquest. In this sequence, Steyerl takes the viewer behind the scenes of machine vision, uncovering the techniques of satellite surveillance photography which permit a world of aerial images, from remote global warfare to the GPS mapping my journey home through the city, to be constructed.



Figure 4. Enabling new regimes of seeing, a pixel-based resolution chart, in Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen*. Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

In contrast to the documentary-style passage, with its explanatory voiceover and sober tone, the installation's third chapter adopts a carnivalesque aesthetic of roughly mixed footage and rousing pop music to further analyse the impact of surveillance on our divided world. The message of the video's final montage shifts to how surveillance after the digital revolution has caused harm to marginalised groups, and yet is too immersive for anybody to decide, like *Bartleby* does, that we 'prefer not to' participate in it. The mix of footage in this part of Steyerl's installation invokes what Pepita Hesselberth sees as one of the 'structuring paradoxes' of asserting the 'right to disconnect':³⁴ the tendency of discourses and even practices around disconnection to be communicated in the very media they are advocating disconnecting from. The tone is riotous, as Steyerl mixes CGI animation with live-action footage in a fast-paced montage that generates a feeling of excitement. That excitement effect combines jarringly with this final part of the installation's analysis of the racist violence disavowed in any idealistic, high-definition visions of the high-tech present.

³⁴ Pepita Hesselberth, 'Discourses on Disconnectivity and the Right to Disconnect', *New Media and Society*, 20/5 (2017), 1–17 (1).

STEYERL'S MIXED-FOOTAGE MONTAGE AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

While the spoof disguise sequences analysed above were concerned with becoming illegible to machines, the final chapter of Steyerl's installation invokes the erasure of certain subjects in the digital age, the becoming totally invisible of marginalised groups, as a risk that renders problematic the wish to withdraw from surveillance. It is here that the installation has the highest impact, as it addresses the violence experienced by people of colour, especially those of Islamic faith, under conditions of surveillance after 9/11. Steyerl's commentary on the video in an interview with Tate highlights the problem of invisibility amidst dataveillance: '[n]ot being seen can be deadly'.³⁵ Challengingly, the closing passage reminds any viewers who are longing for privacy that invisibility amid the surveillance practices of global warfare can mean annihilation for some. All the while, Steyerl never glosses over the limits of wanting to make images without complicity with technologies of oppression. She resorts instead to a deliberately rough, post-Brechtian videographic style involving the pasting of cut-out live-action footage onto a high-gloss CGI scene that, as a result, looks at once violently immediate and provocatively unreal.

As early as 2007, Lisa Nakamura wrote about the new interfaces through which users were interacting with the virtual spaces of the internet, interfaces at which race and ethnicity were being re-constituted along discriminatory lines just as in pre-internet times.³⁶ Since then, the rise of algorithmic securitisation has only increased the degree of discrimination endemic to technological practices; as Alana Lentin writes, 'because algorithms are essentially shaped by commercial interests and operationalised within racist societies, racism is in fact integral to how the Internet works'.³⁷ The emergence of big data sets as today's central method of organising information has meant an entrenchment of racial hierarchies through what Safiya Noble aptly calls 'new modes of racial profiling',³⁸ in which discrimination against people of colour continues in the way data are now deployed in areas as vexed as policing and housing.

Nakamura was interested in 2007 in how user-generated internet content could challenge the continuation of racial prejudice in virtual spaces and surveillance practices. More recently, surveillance theorist Simone Browne writes that 'with certain acts of cultural production we can find performances of freedom and suggestions of alternatives to ways of living under a routinized surveillance'.³⁹ She looks for instance at the narrative of Lawrence Hill's 2007 novel *The Book of Negroes*, which tells the story of

³⁵ Hito Steyerl, 'Being invisible can be deadly', <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/hito-steyerl-22462/hito-steyerl-being-invisible-can-be-deadly> (accessed 20 June 2018).

³⁶ Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Minneapolis 2007.

³⁷ Alana Lentin, 'Algorithmic Racism', in Thylstrup *et al.* (eds), *Uncertain Archives* (note 12).

³⁸ Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York 2018, p. 10.

³⁹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Durham, NC and London 2015, p. 8.

fictional figure Aminata Diallo's capture and transport to the US as a slave, journey to Manhattan and final escape to become a bookkeeper. Browne argues that Hill's novelistic 'renarration' of the story of a woman's journey out of enslavement offers an 'alternative imagining of the events' and so reveals 'the stakes of surveillance, emancipation, and freedom'.⁴⁰ The novel does so, according to Browne, through its manner of retelling Diallo's life from her own point of view and of shedding light on the complicity between the US and the British in betraying people trying to flee slavery, which undermines dominant historical narratives about abolition.

How Not to be Seen was made by a German filmmaker with Japanese heritage about the War on Terror, and it does not seek to perform a 'renarration' of a life story such as Browne celebrates in Hill's work. However, the video still succeeds in drawing awareness to 'the stakes of surveillance, emancipation, and freedom',⁴¹ as it emphasises the geopolitical violence surveillance regimes have done, often invisibly. The end of the installation insists, moreover, on the need for new narratives about the stakes of surveillance now, doing so through its experimental form. In the final chapter, entitled 'Lesson 4: How to be invisible by disappearing', the viewer is guided around an eerily picture-perfect CGI landscape inhabited by pale silhouettes. Richard Dyer demonstrated persuasively in 1997 that whiteness is invisible because in white supremacist ways of seeing, it is constructed simply as representing humanness itself; more recently, Nirmal Puwar has written about bodies that do not fit the 'somatic norm', especially non-white bodies, which are subject to 'super-surveillance', a burden of excessive representation in racist regimes that frame people of colour (and, in Puwar's analysis, women) as taking up space, or of challenging institutional norms excessively.⁴² Redolent of the eerily echoing streets of Melville's Wall Street, Steyerl's installation depicts a model environment, made to advertise new homes. In it, featureless CGI silhouettes move around in a leisurely fashion, blissfully unaware of the experience of people of colour on a different plane of the same landscape.

This CGI landscape is the installation's equivalent to Melville's Chancery-as-Carthage; it may look pretty, and wealth certainly resides there, but it is also rendered uneasy by the violence hidden from its idealised spaces. We also see a potential for Bartleby-like resistance as Steyerl layers live-action footage onto the CGI scene, producing a post-Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Superimposed onto the CGI image is cut-out footage of live actors dressed in long green garments reminiscent of burqas and bent in submissive positions, refusing to fit in with the calm of the glossy landscape (see Figure 5). The figures in the burqa-like garments appear

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, London and New York 1997, pp. 1–40; Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, London and Oxford 2004, p. 11.



Figure 5. Live action cutout figures rotate against a CGI background that swipes slowly from right to left, in Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen*. Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

androgynous, although the garment is considered a marker of Muslim femininity. The sequence thus sets in motion a slippage between visibility and legibility, as we recall how women in Islamic dress are regularly made hypervisible by Islamophobic discourses and visual regimes. The figures in burqa-like costumes stand out as visibly 'other' to the crisp silhouettes lounging around the model landscape. At the same time, we are reminded that they are subject to the danger of disappearance in post-9/11 regimes of seeing, as the computerised voiceover states, 'in the decades of the digital revolution 170,000 people disappear.'⁴³ Together, the image- and soundtracks invoke the paradoxical relations of hypervisibility and disappearance Islamophobia has so damagingly created.

By referring to the practice of extraordinary rendition, the voiceover guides the viewer to read the actors' submissive postures as representing the torture that characterised the War on Terror, as well as the more everyday forms of disappearance defining the techniques and aesthetics of our digital world, such as the fragmentation and divorce from meaning that happen to digital images and other data when they become waste.⁴⁴ In Steyerl's sequence, these figures appear, and they refuse to disappear as so

⁴³ Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen* (note 11).

⁴⁴ See Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, 'Data Out of Place: Toxic Traces and the Politics of Recycling', *Big Data & Society*, July/December 2019, 1–9.

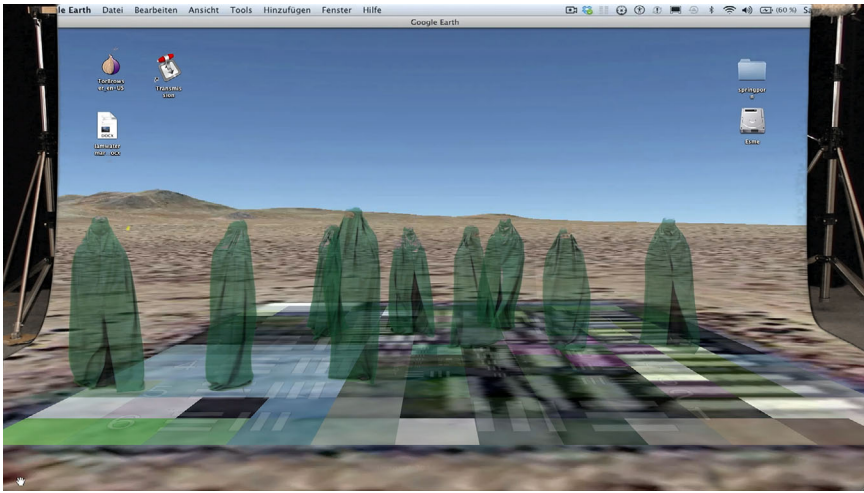


Figure 6. Figures in burqa-like garments rotate on a different plane to the static desktop background, in Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen*. Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl.

many people from the Middle East did into secret military prisons around the world. The figures are therefore very different from Bartleby in his bid for illegibility, in which he dies and only remains to haunt his employer through the latter's obsessive thoughts about his prior work in the dead letter office. Steyerl's live-action figures rather insist on presence, refusing to disappear and continuing to interrupt the kinetic norm of the panning CGI landscape with their turning choreography.

Later in the installation, Steyerl superimposes footage of similarly rotating figures onto a pixel-based resolution chart (see Figure 6). The background is taken from Steyerl's computer desktop, a further post-Brechtian gesture of defamiliarisation. The reappearance of the cut-out figures here invokes rebellion: not consenting to disappear, in both sequences, the figures insistently remain in view, even as they inhabit a resistant aesthetic dimension. They rotate on a circular axis, which contrasts with the flat desert background of Steyerl's desktop screen and the swiping horizontal plane across which the white CGI silhouettes glide. In that way, the figures' turning movement resembles that of the analogue film reel; they rotate with, perhaps, a recalcitrant nostalgia against the CGI background. It is not that Steyerl is nostalgic for celluloid as a format, rather she mobilises the figures to call to mind the motion of celluloid film such that the figures contrast remarkably with the inhuman, swiping glide of the CGI landscape, redolent of scrolling advertising screens and of the swipe

gesture with which smartphone users can wipe irrelevant content out of their sight. If we try to swipe these figures away, their motion suggests, then they will merely turn on a stubbornly static axis and so stay clearly in view.

The end of the installation poignantly revisits the idea of a *Bartleby*-like rebellion against surveillance, as a clip is pasted into part of the frame showing The Three Degrees singing the pop-song ‘When Will I See You Again?’ while surtitles tell the story of an underground group of pixels seizing control: ‘pixels hijack camera crane’ [...] ‘shoot this background for real’ [...] ‘gif loop!’,⁴⁵ these joyful instructions telling the story of an unfilmed revolution. Like *Bartleby*, and after Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of *bestimmte Negation*, this closing sequence has no clearly-legible function but again insists on a refusal to comply, as faceless figures in green gimp suits kick and punch the pixel chart, symbol of global aerial surveillance, until the screen fades to black. When shown in a gallery, the video then loops to begin again, in a circular structure that itself indicates the connections the installation makes between the everyday dataveillance that technology users may wish to escape from, and the harm done by surveillance, through drone strikes and extraordinary rendition, within recent frameworks of ‘terrorism’ and in the latest forms of algorithmic governmentality.

AFTER PRIMARY REJECTION: NEW RELATIONS OF LEGIBILITY

I have brought together the two texts analysed above around their shared theme, namely, the political potential of illegibility. Primary rejection figures in both works as a refusal to be legible to dominant terms of address, whether those terms come from modern capitalism, or from the ever-developing technologies of surveillance. The term ‘primary rejection’, coined in this special number, aptly describes *Bartleby*’s resistance as the strange sovereign over a silent and uneasy financial district, who does not propose any new political model but rather refuses any alliance with the haunted regime of modern finance in which he is employed. This refusal to provide a solution recalls the post-Hegelian, Frankfurt School notion of *bestimmte Negation*, the rejection of an instrumental agenda that defines Steyerl’s installation too, as an artwork that raises more questions than it answers about the possibilities of resisting surveillance in its more violent and discriminatory guises, and indeed about making artworks free of complicity with the same image-making (and hence world-making) technologies they wish to critique.

There are, nevertheless, important differences between the examples of primary rejection or *bestimmte Negation* I have explored here. *Bartleby*’s act of rebellion happens in a famously gradual way, albeit one that powerfully

⁴⁵ Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen* (note 11).

reveals the instability of the regime he resists through the eruptions of the financial district's unease with itself and, as my reading suggests, its disavowed debt to the wealth accrued by slavery that can be read in among the blank, silent spaces of Melville's tale of Wall Street. Bartleby then chooses to die and to end his primary rejection by exiting totally. His resistance therefore remains a limited model if the one carrying out the primary rejection wishes to stay alive. More communitarian and hence hopeful modes of resistance are indicated by the aesthetic strategies deployed in Steyerl's piece. A resistant togetherness is invoked by the group of figures on the pixel chart that turn in nostalgically rotating motion against the swiping backdrop of a white-washed CGI world. These figures demand not to withdraw from surveillance; instead, they insist on being seen. Furthermore, by representing these insistently visible figures in burqa-like costumes and bowed postures, Steyerl produces a tangible image for the harm surveillance invisibly continues to do through the transfer of racial bias into the coding of algorithms implicated in extrajudicial violence in the present day.

The deeper question underpinning my work here is whether or not progressive works of modernism, like that of Melville in his age of slow abolition, and Steyerl in our turbulent time, are powerful enough to move their audiences to reject the complicity characterising financial regimes reliant on exploitation and technology use that perpetuates inequality, as theorists of surveillance, race and art, such as Nakamura and Browne, have hoped. Certainly, both works draw attention effectively to the disavowed violence underpinning seemingly everyday acts of compliance: participating in marketplaces built on violence and injustice or giving up one's data for the privilege of using the internet in a time of algorithmic racism. Freedom from such compliance must begin with awareness of what is truly happening. If audiences read the texts with sensitivity to the violence they critique, these works could even provoke new primary rejections in the form of our own withdrawal of participation from particular financial or digital practices, even if any reader considering primary rejection will need to be daring, since we do not yet know what the manifesto for a less complicit future will be. The outcome remains unclear, but both of these texts make the urgent case for daring to experiment with alternative relations of reading, and of seeing one another, compared to those that have governed dominant economic and technical regimes until now.