Hallucinating Ted Serios:[1]
the impossibility of failed performativity

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Abstract

Hallucination: the perception of an impossible image. That which can never appear suddenly does so anyways - a private world that appears only to the eye of the one imagining it... until now. Ted Serios, psychic photographer, claimed he could project images directly from his mind onto photographic film. Under the sign of the psychic photograph, "Hallucinating Ted Serios" is a theorization of the dominant forms of uncertainty that persist in postmodern evaluations of representation, interpretation and identity. The central thesis of this paper is that the imaginary and the real have collapsed into the spectral hallucination of one another, rendering impossible the rhetorical separation of hallucination from image. With the collapse of the boundary between the fictive and the real, the world of representation becomes intelligible only as an imaginary phenomenon; with the collapse between the object and the observer, interpretation is rendered deceptively magical; and, with the collapse between the self and its anonymous double, identity itself is relegated to a state of impossibility. Consequently, under the persisting signs of the imaginary, the magical and the impossible, "Hallucinating Ted Serios" asserts that in our contemporary world there no longer exists the possibility of failed performativity - psychic, imaginary or otherwise.

Keywords

Ted Serios
psychic photography
hallucination
impossibility
performance
postmodernism

Hallucination: the perception of an impossible image - that which can never appear but which does so anyway The psyche turned inside out perhaps - no longer a private subjectivity but one that has entirely lost the ability to see itself - projected instead into the world it sees. A private world, appearing only to the eyes of the one projecting it ... until now that is.

The postmodern prophet has spoken - and it was unintelligible. Projected images with psychic eyes, imagined images somehow burned into existence. The words, perhaps, came out wrong, but the images came out exactly as he imagined. For it was his imagination that made this man particular.

Ted Serios claimed he could project images from his mind directly onto photographic film; 'psychic photography', or 'thoughtography' it is called.[2] Serios would point a camera at his forehead, and take a photograph. Sometimes there was a period of intense focus or visualization involved. Sometimes there was also an excessive amount of alcohol. Sometimes

most major precedent of which is, Tomokichi Fukurai's (1931), *Clairvoyance and Thoughtography*, London: Rider.

3. In the original text these images are given only figure numbers rather than titles or numerical identifiers. The images were supposedly archived according to their date, sequence or number from the day produced, and cross-listed with a camera and film identifier. These identifying traits were not given, and have therefore not been used in this paper. All images, unless otherwise stated, were produced by Serios between 1963 and 1967, and have been taken from Jule Eisenbud's (1967), *The World of Ted Serios*.
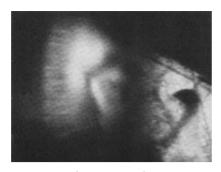

Figure 1: Ted Serios. Psychic Photograph. c.1963-67.[3]

someone else would trip the shutter of the camera, to ensure that Serios was not tampering with things. Often several dozen unsuccessful trials were needed to get a successful image, but nevertheless, these images did appear. Or so it was claimed.

Of course no one believed him. At least at first. Until a psychiatrist named Jule Eisenbud decided to take Serios seriously. It is the typical story perhaps - undiscovered psychic meets intrigued researcher - but not the typical ending. For while Serios' claim was never fully dismissed, neither was it ever proven. He was not a recognized prophet, then - but this too is fitting - for hasn't anyone who believes in the postmodern already missed the point? That it is exactly no longer about belief at all, nor about truth. Rather, perhaps, it is only now about stories, and the ways in which fictions can be seen surrounding the world - a choir of ghosts chanting 'real, real, real'.

For there is something hidden in the Serios images - not merely a message of a fantastic world, but rather also a fantastic message about the world we already live in. Bordering on the complete inverse of everything we have been led to believe, the Serios images reveal themselves, and us, as inextricably wrapped up in a story of impossibility.

A note on method

For the purposes of this paper, the Serios images have been grouped strategically into three categories. These categories do not follow the original taxonomy presented in Eisenbud's text, but instead group the photographs according to the images they represent. The first grouping deals with those images that take the form one might expect of a 'psychic' photograph - blurred imagery and ghostly forms that suggest representational elements without presenting any identifiable traits. The second grouping deals with the more successful images - those that find 'real world' correlatives in the form of recognizable architectural structures. The third grouping deals with the large body of 'failed' images in which the photographs turned out blank or represented instead the staring forehead of Serios himself in his thoughtographic attempts.

1. The imaginary world

The first group of Serios images are those that seem to stem from the imagination itself - those images that one might possibly believe to be 'real' psychic photographs, drawn from the fantasies of a mind that is not ours. These images suggest, at times, the appearance of foggy, ghostlike figures, a body, a bicycle, movement and forms of playing light. These unidentifiable images are images nonetheless - and our inability to identify any truly rec-

ognizable form constitutes more of a mythology of the thoughtograph than a disproof of Serios' claim.

But what happens when we consider these as *legitimate* images of the imaginary? Is this not, ultimately, what the images claim? It is not quite a representational claim, but rather a prophetic declaration. Through the documentary power of photography, the challenge is issued, not to disprove the image, but to dispute its reality. The challenge, ultimately, is not whether the imaginary could exist in this form, but if it could exist at all. An inevitable confrontation ensues - not between the real and the imaginary, but aimed rather at our sense that the two are distinct.

These ghostly images from Serios' imagination surely must come from *somewhere*. Only they do not. They come from *nowhere*. Not images of nothingness, but hallucinations of an impossible world, given in turn an equally impossible form. These are the images in which the abstract mind, the unconscious even, can be seen at work. Like all hallucination perhaps - those instances in which we are spoken to by the imaginary - those moments where the imaginary becomes real. Not bound by worldly truths, the imagination takes its expected, ambiguous form in these images.

But the real hallucination here is not the imaginary, for that is too familiar to be noteworthy. Rather it is the inverse hallucination, our own, through which these images might be entertained or dismissed - the hallucination of possibility itself, in the end. For we too, are turned inside out in the consideration of these images, and our own private worlds are no less manifest here than Serios' own. It is not surprising perhaps to find that all worlds are hallucinatory. But certainly it is unusual to find it so explicitly stated...but perhaps this is nothing new.

Figures 2 & 3: Ted Serios. Psychic Photographs. c.1963-67.

The politics of the real

One might trace this perspective back at least as far as Walter Benjamin. For in a discussion of images, realities and the people they speak to, there is perhaps no better starting point than Benjamin's essay on 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). Immersed in a politics of his own, Benjamin sought to understand the ways in which a social dynamic was transformed by works of art whose original could not be identified. This is the case of the photograph, which boasts of no original (Benjamin 1968: 224). This 'absent' centre of photography means that the work itself is allowed to speak - or, and as Benjamin insisted, the artist is allowed to speak *through* the photograph. Always a tool of propaganda, the photographic 'document' is noteworthy less for its representational power than for the form that power takes. And yet, despite the claim that photography itself has no original, there is a concomitant claim to the effect that its message does. And it was for this reason that Benjamin felt it necessary to give an ethical imperative to the mechanically reproduced artwork. It is not enough merely to speak, once given the power of voice, one must use it for the 'proper' purpose (Benjamin 1978: 237). But ultimately all this means is that Benjamin saw the power inherent in a medium of this sort - one that presents *an image with the voice of truth*.

But there is something missing here. For paralleling the mechanical reproducibility of the image, is the consequent mechanical reproducibility of reality itself. In an environment where the two are so closely linked, it is not only a *voice of truth* that is portrayed, but a *truth of voice*. Not merely a truth of the image, but also a truth of the world - which is to say, inevitably, a reality principle.

Consequently, prior even to the reality represented in an image is a politics of representation, that which Bill Nichols (1991: 132) terms 'rhetoric'. To this end, Nichols claims that documentary film-making (and by analogy photographic documentary as well) functions more in terms of its strategy than its truth: '...rhetoric is the means by which the author attempts to convey his or her outlook *persuasively* to the viewer' (Nichols 1991: 134, emphasis added). In other words, documentary is misunderstood as merely a representational medium. Rather documentary must *construct* its truths in order for them to be convincing as such:

> The indexical bond of photochemical and electronic images to that which they represent, when formed by optical lenses that approximate the properties of the human eye, provides endless fascination and a seemingly irrefutable guarantee of authenticity....But the primary importance of this indexical quality to the photographic image is less in the unassailable authenticity of the bond between image and referent than in the impression of authenticity it conveys to a viewer.
>
> (Nichols 1991: 149-50)

And this 'indexical bond' is also an *indexical bind* for the author, artist or propagandist: it is that which must be accepted as a *condition* of convincing representation. It is not merely the appearance of reality, but the strategic approach to appearance that guarantees that the reality presented will be

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anything but. Through this method, a categorization of the real emerges, not in terms of its (actual) authenticity, but only in terms of establishing complicity with its (constructed) terms of engagement (Nichols 1991: 151).

The critical imaginary

This could be arrived at differently by looking directly at the philosophical mobilization of similar discourses of the contemporary 'constructed' (or deconstructed) real. Richard Kearney, for example, in *The Wake of the Imagination* (1998) describes a similar problem, suggesting that deconstructive philosophy (in particular) has reduced the notion of truth (and reality) to one of deferral, nonsense and parody. And, Kearney insists, under the sign of a constructed real, the imaginary is also silenced: '...if postmodernism subverts the very opposition between the imaginary and the real, to the point where each dissolves into an empty imitation of the other, can we still speak of imagination at all?' (Kearney 1998: 359).

Kearney's response is to suggest that philosophical undecidability does not relieve the need to make social and practical decisions. No longer operating under the sign of moral or representational truth, our ability to negotiate a (de)constructed real relies implicitly on our ability to 'imagine [the world, and ourselves] otherwise' (Kearney 1998: 364). No longer merely a (fictional) counterpart to the discourse of philosophical truth, the imaginary is now the tool by which deconstructed reality is itself epistemologically sustained.

The response to a rhetoricized (constructed) real is thus not the *death* of the imagination, but the emergence of a *critical imagination*; that which sustains the subversion of truth is also that which allows for a repositioning of the self in the face of a deconstructed real. For unlike the philosophical real, the imagination does not destroy itself through deconstruction. Rather, never real to begin with, the imagination perpetuates itself precisely through this repositioning of the self in the face of an uncertain world.

Paradoxically, the critical imagination also sustains (a fiction of) the real through a traumatic inversion. And this is the mechanism through which Hal Foster proposes a 'return of the real' in contemporary art and philosophy. As that which cannot be represented, Foster suggests that the real also cannot *fail to be represented traumatically* in an ethical imaginary.

> A perfect illusion is not possible, and, even if it were possible it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object...
>
> (Foster 1996: 141)

Thus the real is always represented through precisely its inevitable failure to be represented. And this failure can be one either of deconstructive futility or of imaginative construction. Through either the failure of the real or the success of illusion, the *traumatic real* emerges, rupturing its own impossi-

bility. The inevitability of the imaginative is sustained by the equally inevitable failure of the real.

The nihilist imagination

In this conclusion there is an affinity in play with Baudrillard's notion of *impossible exchange*. The real, and the imaginary, collapsed into the traumatic perpetuation of each other, are beyond notions of structural (or philosophical) exchange. 'Thus everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation [or the imagination] is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself' (Baudrillard 1995: 23).

> We must not believe that the truth remains the truth when we strip it of its veil - thus truth has no naked existence. We must not believe that the real remains the real when its illusion has been dispelled - thus, the real has no objective reality.
>
> (Baudrillard 1999: 116)

And consequently, the imaginary has no *imaginary reality* either. In their respective impossibilities, the real and the imaginary are no longer accountable to anything at all. Not only is any attempt to prove the real impossible, but the very attempt to do so destroys the real it tries to prove (Baudrillard 2001: 25). And the real thus, answers only to nothingness. Baudrillard's conclusion to this paradoxical formulation is to suggest another inversion, a fundamental repositioning of perspective with regard to both the real and the imaginary. He suggests, for a truth that answers only to nothingness, a 'thinking that no longer obeys the truth principle, and even accepts the impossibility of verification' (Baudrillard 2001: 19).

In this suggestion there is an imperative in play, for a *nihilist imagination*. For a thinking that accepts its own impossibility is a nihilist thinking in which one no longer thinks (or conceives) of the world. This is no longer a philosophical world, but an imaginary (illusory) one - one that accepts, indeed embraces, the suggestion that '[thought] destroys the object it thinks' (Baudrillard 2001: 17). For it is the nature of thought to return its object to nothingness. And thought given form (which is to say imagined) is to make the imagination inevitably the tool through which the world is allowed to annihilate us for good.

Don Quixote de Chicago

Ted Serios: photographer of the imaginary. He through whom the imaginary world documents itself. If the world answers only to its impossible underside, then there is more method here than madness - channelling the imaginary world in a documentary séance - a pragmatist's nightmare and a dreamer's paradise. Yet one can choose to dream, consider oneself a dreamer even, and yet still maintain one's dreams at arms length. And the same is, of course, true for philosophy. One might call this the humanizing of thought, or of the imagination. Or it's failure. In either instance there is a paradoxical limit where philosophy (or dreams) end and life begins.

But there are examples of a more extreme (serious) position as well. The best one is not even true: the story of Don Quixote,[4] the delirious landowner who believed himself a gallant knight, and journeyed the countryside seeking adventure. It is only from the outside that there is anything incongruous to the story of Don Quixote - from his perspective everything made sense. His reality was encompassing. And what makes this story so charming is precisely the confrontation with all those around him who did not understand that his world was distinct ... and that theirs was too.

Ted Serios: the Don Quixote of Chicago, pursuing a foolish dream, a nonsensical dream - realizing and even representing precisely that imaginary world that no one believed possible. A world where the imagination can be documented? We resist, but who among us has tried? Are we not, too, operating on faith in our own non-imaginary reality? In the end, this is precisely how Don Quixote managed to sway at least a few. Indeed more than a few repented alongside Don Quixote when he realized his 'folly'. Only their repentance was the inverse of his - for with the disappearance of Don Quixote's madness vanished also the dream of a sustainable imaginary.

Or perhaps it is the opposite? Perhaps there never was an imaginary in the story of Don Quixote, and much less in the story of Ted Serios. Perhaps the hoax was not the madness itself, but its confusion with the imagined: the tragedy of Don Quixote reveals the same tragedy for Serios. Neither the real nor the imaginary is exchangeable or representable. A failed imaginary sustains the real, and the failures of reality sustain the imaginary. One such failure of the real (to resist the manifestation of the imagined) is in play in the Serios images. The impossible transition, the impossible hallucination of the real, and the consequent reality then, of the imaginary world itself.

2. The magical image

The second group of Serios' images are those that provide a modicum of recognizable form - psychic photographs of impossible worlds that are (paradoxically) representationally verifiable. There is a nuance here however, for Serios' imaginings were not always accurate - and strangely, the inaccuracy is noticeable due purely to the otherwise identifiable imagery. A disorienting uncertainty about the status of such images emerges, due only in part to their psychic claim - the other part due to the impossibility of falsifying such apparently already falsified representations.

What happens when we dream we are dreaming - to wake up only to not wake up at all - to find the world, the same, only different? This is the case of the second body of Serios' images. Images of hallucinated worlds, or did the camera simply make a mistake? Like with Serios' thoughtograph of the RCMP building in Ottawa, Canada (Fig. 4). Here the building itself is entirely recognizable, with the one difference that Serios' image misspells Canadian.[5] This time, the image does come from somewhere, or at least so it would seem. At the very least it points somewhere, to a recognizable structure. But an unease persists - we are not sure if we should distrust the

4. Cervantes, Miguel de. (2000), *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* (trans. J. Rutherford), London: Penguin.

5. The first of these images is one identified as a building belonging to the RCMP. Strangely, the one major difference when compared to the 'real' building is the mis-spelling of Canadian (as Cainadain) in the photograph (Eisenbud 1967: 208).

image or distrust ourselves. Something in the order of magic seems to be at work here, and the image no longer convinces us of the truth that we see - for we precisely do not see a truth, but two.

These are not merely magical images, but ones that alienate themselves from that which they represent. Doubling it in the process ... and doubling us. The magic here is not just that there are two truths - two realities in the real and the mistaken - but that both appear to us. It is a magical play that is more than simple sleight of hand. Is the magic that one of these worlds is imaginary, or that one of them is real?

Figure 4: Ted Serios. Psychic Photograph. c.1963-67.

The domestication of disappearance

It is perhaps appropriate to resume with Baudrillard and the question of the nihilist imagination. But it is not quite so simple, in the end. For even an imaginary world finds a way to translate itself into image - provoking the paradoxical encounter with an image-world where this is already the norm. A world of multifaceted imagined form, where even the real refuses the nothingness to which it is accountable.

Figures 5 & 6: Serios image (left) and the Opera House in Central City, Colorado (right).

> Photography comes from elsewhere and must remain there. It is part of another, timeless tradition which is not, properly speaking, aesthetic, and which is the tradition of trompe l'oeil....Trompe-l'oeil is linked to the self-evidence of the world, and to such a minutely detailed resemblance that it's only apparently realistic (it is, in fact, magical).
>
> (Baudrillard 1999: 90)

And consequently, the possibility that an imaginary world can be doubled by the photograph is perhaps not an argument against either the real or the imagined. For isn't this the same mechanism of deception through which Baudrillard first theorized Disneyland - not strictly in terms of its affiliation with the magical, but rather its propagation of an illusory real? The deceptive quality of Disneyland was what fascinated Baudrillard - it's ability to *conceal* the fact that the real had disappeared by providing an apparently true imaginary (Baudrillard 1995: 12-13).

It is, consequently, an inverted sleight of hand that is at play here - not the magical image as artifact of the disappeared body, but a concealing of all that is not constituted as such. In this way the image becomes integral to sustaining the identity of the self, and the world: 'Man, fascinated with himself, constructs his double, his intelligent specter, and entrusts the keeping of his knowledge to a reflection' (Virilio 1991: 46).

This has consequences. If the image is now the basis for the realities it (re)presents, and those realities in turn are sustained by the manifestation of image, it means no longer is it the task of the image (or the author through an image) to construct a rhetoric of conviction, but the other way around. For, as the image belongs to that which is unaccountable to anything but nothingness, so too does it situate itself in a position beyond possible judgment. Beyond possible appearance, it is no longer the world that forever fails to be represented. Now it is the image too, which conceals the fact that it was never there by providing a convenient scapegoat in the form of the *something it represents*.

This is what Paul Virilio calls 'sightless vision': '...the reproduction of an intense blindness that will become the latest and last form of industrialization: the industrialization of the non-gaze' (Virilio 1994: 73). In other words, this is no longer merely a process of sleight of hand through which perception is deceived into seeing what is not there (or not seeing what is). Rather now we face a paradoxical *sleight of mind* through which consciousness is restructured in order to maintain its blindness - its perception of nothingness. This is not merely the automation of perception[6] but a turning inside out of the very relationship between perceiving and experiencing. This is not a concealing of appearance, but a domestication of disappearance as that which is required to sustain the myth of the image. The automation of perception forms a structural and strategic world (and image) now *hallucinating on our behalf*.

The erotics of hallucination

Let there be no mistake about what this means. There is no longer a sustainable fantasy of representation. Now it is a question of technologies and

rhetoric that see with someone else's eyes - for subjects themselves no longer see. Only objects see, or spectacles - those things that have the unique ability to construct themselves *as* hallucinations, which is to say as tokens of disappearance.

This is, of course, a problem very similar to that which Roland Barthes analyzed in The 'Death of the Author '(1977). For in text, like in image, there is nothing 'behind' the hallucination. Such is the paradoxical nature of hallucination. A nothingness, whose first form is that of Barthes' 'text' - 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (Barthes 1977: 146). And a text, like an image, and indeed like the real itself, is always that which will fail to be represented, precisely through the attempt to constitute it. The magic here is that, even without an authorial voice, it (the text or image) sustains the illusion of a spectator, of an author, or of a reader (Barthes 1977: 148). But Barthes went further, disavowing premeditated content in either text or image:

> Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely...
>
> (Barthes 1977: 146)

And perhaps what goes for the author of a text also goes for the reader. An inscription of inevitable disappearance occurs at this point - that which cannot be intended or even properly interpreted - that which resists not only the personification of an author, but also that of the viewer.

Susan Sontag takes up this line of thinking in *Against Interpretation* (1966), and *On Photography* (1977), constructing an imperative for precisely the resistance to content that Barthes suggests: 'A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence' (Sontag 1977: 16). But whereas, traditionally, the examination of images (at least in art) has focused on the 'content' of the work (its 'pseudo-presence'), Sontag calls for an 'erotics of art', based not on the content of an image, but its form, which is to say its *absence* (Sontag 1961: 14).

There can no longer be a binding magical 'rhetoric' of disappearance through which the self is hallucinated, for now hallucination resists even the perception of itself as hallucinatory. If 'it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art' (Sontag 1961: 5), then the inverse must also be true. And the habit of approaching a personified world sustains the authorial (and subjective) fantasy that there is more to the world than what we see.

Through Sontag's critique of interpretation, an *erotics of hallucination* emerges, built in opposition to (yet paradoxically also in support of) a contemporary 'contempt for appearances' (Sontag 1961: 6). And this is how Sontag can say both that photography has a genuinely magical basis (Sontag 1977: 155) and that our goal when faced with art (and all images by consequence) should be to make them, and our own experiences 'more,

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rather than less, real to us' (Sontag 1961: 14). For from this perspective, the erotics of hallucination deals no longer with a quest for knowledge or understanding, but only with that which embraces what is in any case inevitable. The contempt for appearances finds its corollary in the magical basis of the hallucination, as that which abandons contempt in favour of a magic without centre or causality, and one that, like the image, grows out of nothingness.

There is a term for this sort of magical language - xenoglossia: a language one speaks without knowing how, and without understanding what one says. Often found in cases of religious trance or possession, the xenoglossic claims that someone (or something) else might understand the words spoken, even though he or she does not (Goodman 1972: 149). This is consequently a language that is fully in touch with Sontag's erotics, for it is a language that, when spoken, has no (explicit or intentional) content. Claiming abstract verifiability, though only in form, xenoglossia is the fundamental language of the magical.

A poetics of failure

Based on those trajectories already in play here, might we not also suggest that xenoglossia is not simply an isolated way of approaching the world, but once again the general rule? The message of the xenoglossic is that the magical nothingness of the world and the image are not as irreducible as they seem to be. Rather these can be further reduced to the absent, magical self.

Something of an example for this can be found in Catherine Russell's discussion of the video documentary of possession rituals (see Russell 1999: Chapter 8). For it is here, in the example of the xenoglossic in action, that the self, represents itself as a hallucinatory spectacle:

> Participants in the rituals enter another reality, another body, but the spectator of the film of possession sees only a document of a hallucination, a mise en abyme of realities in which the filmic reality is wanting, lacking the ecstatic potential of the ritual.
>
> (Russell 1999: 199)

In other words, in possession, there is no longer anything *to* represent. There is only the hallucination of vacuity spawned by the spectacle of an ecstatic self, not merely speaking in a language it does not understand, but performing it - being performed *through*. Arguably, the possession ritual itself is a doubled spectacle, where what draws one's attention is precisely the awareness that one is not seeing what is occurring '...there is no way of knowing the authenticity of the trance. It thus poses a real challenge to anthropological epistemology, providing an ethnographic spectacle that is ultimately unintelligible' (Russell 1999: 198).

No longer a traumatic real, this constitutes a hallucinatory inaccessibility, a deferral of experience that always accompanies the magical - signalled by the subjective failure of the witness to understand his or her own language

of interpretation in face of the unintelligible. The mechanism by which participation in the world occurs is the experiential failure of the subject, and it is not just the possessed body that becomes xenoglossic, but the witnessing body as well. Witnessing a language it does not comprehend, but also witnessing *in* a language that is fundamentally inaccessible to it.

This is the magic of the xenoglossic, that which always (by nature) fails to understand itself. *It is the unavoidable necessity of not experiencing that which is being manifested, precisely in order to experience it.* In the end, it is the failure even to fail. Sustained by its unsustainability, the magical and the xenoglossic are fundamentally nihilistic - not a nihilism of absence however, but a failed nihilism, a magical nihilism of unintelligible doubling.

The ghost of Cervantes

This makes of Ted Serios, no longer simply a Don Quixote, but a Miguel de Cervantes as well - the magical scribe of the imaginary. Not only manifesting the imagination, but giving it a distinct and recognizable form - magically doubling the world. And while neither the real nor the imaginary is sustainable, it is precisely both that are sustained through the magical failure of each other. Serios is not immediately recognizable for what he is perhaps, but that is as much our own fault as anything else. For it is not just the imaginary that is inscribed through Serios, but we who are also written *as* imaginary. The inevitability of our interpretive failure when confronting these images, makes each of us into our own Quixote, represented through the images themselves. We are inscribed and codified to be sure, but the real magic is the sustaining of this script - an ongoing sleight-of-hand, an ongoing Disneyland, rendering us in excess of ourselves, which is to say magically annihilated by the very imagination that forms us.

This is the magic no longer only of making things seem as they are not, but of actually making them so. And in our participation in the discourse of these images, we lose ourselves - sustained not by its cognitive possibility, but rather only by our experiential inaccessibility. Not doubled by the imaginary, but artificially doubling our imaginary selves. And yet to be subsumed by magical excess none-the-less is to reveal precisely that mechanism of failure through which the self and the image have always been generated.

And isn't this the story of Cervantes - he who created a quixotic double to satisfy his need to participate deliriously in the world around him? Yet, ultimately, he was subsumed by the very story he created. For without Quixote, Cervantes would surely not be remembered as he is now. And without Serios, our own artificial doublings would never have been noticed to begin with. Ghosts of a narcissistic delirium, Cervantes failure is the price that must be paid for Quixote's hallucination - and Serios' magical success is the hallucinatory doubling which inscribes each of us as experiential xenoglossics. Possessed by the world, played by the magical impossibility of his thoughtographic images.

3. The impossible self

The third group of Serios images are those that fail, those images in which

no identifiably psychic imagery emerges to support the claims of those who would believe. These images are failures because they are 'only' images and nothing else - the staring forehead of Serios, failing to have deferred its presence to those images of the imaginary that were the thoughtographic goal.

Figure 7: Ted Serios. Psychic Photograph. c.1963-67.

But not quite. For if we have learned anything so far, it is that perspective is always in play in such questions. It is no surprise, of course, that in taking a picture of his forehead we should get an image of a forehead. The question is whether or not this is properly Serios' head - or that of his imaginary double, working its own magic behind the scenes. And there is an impossibility here in precisely our ability to decide which side of this fence Serios is on. A more subtly chosen subject for his psychic photographs, to be sure: this time he is *imagining himself*.

And if these images are failures, they are ones that sustain the hallucination of themselves, not by separating the image from its object, but by deliriously fusing the two. These photographs are not questionable as images, in whichever capacity we take them. As failures they succeed, and as successes they fail - an impossible position. But it is also one that paradoxically sustains its hallucination in a way the others did not. We need no proof for any opinion we may have about the truth of these images. Both the proof and the disproof are self-evident. We are short circuited then, as our decision too is made so easy as to be hardly a decision at all. And the question that remains here is only that of the self-looking at these images, and of what this impossible placement means. No longer accountable to itself, the self here is already given form - paradoxically the form of whatever it would have chosen anyways, had it only had the chance.

In defense of anonymity

What is the self in face of the impossible? Not mere hallucination, for even hallucination always takes a form. And if the imaginary is not accountable to the world, and the magical not accountable to the image, perhaps the self too is not to be confused with the impossibility that pretends to give it form. Perhaps the impossible, not accountable to nothingness, sustains itself despite the forms created around it.

Figure 8: Ted Serios. Psychic Photograph. c.1963-67

The inverse of identity is not disappearance but the anonymous.

This is a consequence of the erotics of hallucination that replaced the aesthetics of disappearance. A self cannot quite constitute itself as disappeared. Rather, there is the inevitability of experiential failure that results from the disappeared self engaging (or failing to engage) in the world around it, and consequently constituting an appearance in the process. Though hallucination this constituted appearance defies the structure of nothingness (and of disappearance) in the same way as the image. Again the xenoglossic, again the general rule of identity rather than an isolated instance.

Can the anonymous be given form? This is one of the questions that Jean-Ernest Joos asks in the exploration of authorship and anonymity in the visual arts. Joos examines the question of masked identities, the 'concealed identity' that paradoxically does not render the wearer anonymous, but only bestows a different (though equally identifiable) identity upon them. A 'hidden', impossible, subjectivity emerges, one that is frustrated by the mask itself.

> In order to be anonymous, or to believe oneself to be or to become anonymous, doesn't there have to be an original and true self that conceals itself - an invisible individuality, an interiority that demands recognition?
>
> (Joos 2003: 73)

In making this 'demand', Joos argues that the anonymous self is sustained less to itself (for it is exactly its lack of anonymity that sustains the concealed as hidden) and more in *relation* to the world around it. In other words, a masked identity is not anonymous at all, for it makes a point of emphasizing its (hidden) identity. Rather, anonymity involves a distinct failure to constitute a relational identity with the world (Joos 2003: 78), an unremarkableness, or the ability to be easily and quickly forgotten - a failure to make a mark or leave an impression - an unidentifiability that must itself remain unidentifiable as such in order to be sustained.

This is merely to suggest that both a constitution and a deconstitution of the self (through identity or through disappearance) gives it an impossible form. A form that will always and forever remain accountable to another. This is the next stage of the death of the author, in the *inevitability of being constituted* by those around us and an accountability to the constitutions which one is socially given. This is the topic of Kate Glazer's article 'Speaking in Tongues':

> Meaning comes not directly from us, from the place where it is spoken, but must await the judgment of another, conceived not merely as another signifier, but as another place where our meaning will be decided for us, sent back to us in inverse form.
>
> (Glazer 1994: 71)

And yet, there is something missing here. For if the self cannot be anonymous in face of the world, this is only because it is most certainly already anonymous to itself. Always constituted by the world around it, the self is

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inevitably rendered a *function* of its relationship to the world. A slate to be written on (or by) the world around it, the self does not fail to be consti-tuted (rather its constitution is inevitable), but rather fails to recognize itself in this constitution - for it is precisely constituted by that which it was not already (Glazer 1994: 82). Recognition of oneself, under these signs, is not only unlikely but actually *impossible*.

What sustains the xenoglossic self is precisely its anonymity - its failure to leave a mark *on itself*, the inevitability of its being someone else. And yet even this 'someone else' is not a mark. For it is precisely this 'someone else' that conceals the magical fact that behind the masks given to us by the world, there is nothing.

Incanting absence

And it is an impossible mediation that occurs here, concealing the absent centre of subjectivity by overwhelming it with reflected distortions - an his-torical hall of mirrors which Joan Scott calls the 'fantasy echo' (2001: 285). The fusion of fantasy (as that which allows an imaginative abstraction from historical specificity) and echo (the inevitably delayed and often distorted repetition), allows for the understanding of identity as an instance of dis-torted generalization. 'The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined' (Scott 2001: 287).

And so, another doubling into the establishment of a model for both group and individual identity (Scott 2001: 289), but also one which finally places identity outside of the language used to articulate it. This is identity that resists even its constitution through reflection, one that has no recourse to the xenoglossic fantasy that 'someone else' will understand it or reflect it back in translation. The self remains anonymous to itself, unable to prove or dismiss its impossibility, structurally resistant, in the end, even to a reflected constitution.

At this point the anonymous self confronts itself *as* anonymous without being able, even then, to break the spell. The frustrated desire to name oneself is the inevitable nihilistic drive to dispel the hallucination of anonymity - the desire to annihilate oneself by giving form to one's illusion. The desire thus to 'act' and to perform, and of course its concomitant inevitability as well. Any part will do as long as it identifiable as such. And yet the only part that the self can convincingly play is that precisely of what it already is. This is its magic and its impossibility. It can never be what it is, nor can it be otherwise.

Or can it? For Antonin Artaud the reinvention of theatre was possible through precisely an embracing of impossibility.[7] And as that which can indeed sustain itself without destroying itself, the impossible has perhaps a unique relevance to identity as well. Playing the part of one's absent (anony-mous) self. Thus pretending to be anonymous, for the sole reason of main-taining the illusion that one might 'be' anything. Maintaining the lie of anonymity to oneself, for the magical purpose of also maintaining an impossible truth. It is, in the end, not to accept the anonymous as the con-dition of self, and instead to play (act) oneself as anonymous, simply to

7. 'In theatre, as in the plague, there is a kind of strange sun, an unusually bright light by which the difficult, even the impossible suddenly appears to be our natural medium' (Artaud 1970: 21).

8. Active metaphysics is Artaud's prescription for the mechanism by which a theatre of cruelty might be implemented, but also paradoxically enough, the mechanism precisely which makes theatre 'real'.

double the impossibility. It is, in the end, simply to take one's anonymity seriously, along the lines of Artaud's active metaphysics:[8]

> To make metaphysics out of spoken language is to make language convey what it does not normally convey. That is to use it in a new, exceptional and unusual way, to give it its full, physical shock potential, to split it up and distribute it actively in space, to treat inflexions in a completely tangible manner and restore their shattering power and really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one might almost say alimentary, sources, against its origins as a hunted beast, and finally to consider language in the form of *Incantation*.
>
> (Artaud 1970: 35)

Incanting the multiple, the impossible doubles that substitute, supplement and sustain the xenoglossic anonymity of the self. A xenoglossic self in a hall of mirrors, as each fractured reflection responds in imitation or inversion, itself doubling the impossibility of there ever being one. And the self is not then the stable (xenoglossic) non-centre of anonymity, but also the destabilized centre of its own impossibility. For it is not just the self that is destabilized in a hall of mirrors, but the world too. And with each social reflection, themselves now operating also through incantation, not only is the self tenuously constituted, but the world too is re-constituted as it encounters its own reflection in the distorted face of the anonymous self.

Anesthetic nihilism

All of this is to say not that the anonymous and the impossible have collapsed into one another, but rather that they have doubled, each sustaining the inverted magical fantasy of the other. They are not inaccessible to each other however. For unlike the opposition between the real and the imaginary, there is no spectral condition to either the anonymous or the impossible. The anonymous does not require a failure to be constituted by the world around it, for it is precisely this constitution that allows it to sustain the impossible fantasy of its own anonymity. And the impossible does not depend on its sustenance beyond possibility for qualification either, for it is the anonymity of the world that sustains the inevitability of the impossible.

The imaginary, the magical and the impossible are those aspects of nothingness that do not dissolve through their constitution. Instead they are doubled, multiplied through failure, possession and anonymity. And the paradox that this sets in motion is a familiar one, the problem of the inaccessible or unconscious that is only really a problem because it is formulated as such through psychoanalysis:

> ...psychoanalysis, far from being a confessionary mode of discourse, entails the acceptance and admission that all our discursive formations are forever haunted by some 'indivisible remainder', by some traumatic spectral 'rest' that resists 'confession', that is, integration into the symbolic universe...
>
> (Žižek 2000: 98)

But this perhaps is backwards too, for could we not just as easily say that the impossibility of (coherent) discursive formation is itself haunted by a constituted divisibility, in this case that between the self and its double? And the result is not then a self that is haunted, but a self rather that haunts the very anonymity of its double. For if psychoanalysis points to a hidden self behind the trauma - a 'subject' that has been traumatized or repressed (Žižek 2000: 72) - could we not suggest the trauma itself as the constitution of an impossible self *out of nothingness*? The inverse double of the unconscious is not in this case the conscious at all, but only the ghost of impossibility: the spectral double of psychoanalytic reasoning.

And the double side to this is that not one or the other is true, but again it is this doubling interplay that is the fantasy of each. And consequently if the goal of psychoanalysis is the acceptance of the fact that 'there is a dimension of our being which forever resists redemption-deliverance' (Žižek 2000: 98), this itself is only possible because there is also a dimension that is forever being redeemed and delivered. And indeed an impossible doubling is in play here, a Rorschach test made flesh, in which all doubles co-exist and do not, appear singly, doubly and multiply alongside an equally impossible world.

The folly of Pierre Menard

Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a fable of Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote.[9] A character patterned after Cervantes himself, only more so. One who, knowing the story of Cervantes and Quixote, sought to re-write it, word for word, without copying even one line of text. To *become* Cervantes then, in order to re-enact the writing of the Quixote. To duplicate the conditions under which 1000 monkeys on 1000 typewriters could write the world's greatest book, not once, but twice. And to become Quixote then as well, as befits such an impossible task. Not merely to write what has been written, but to write himself into the doubling of the story. A project, ultimately of incantation to be sure. The willful generation of an absurd double, an impossible double. And the nihilistic sacrifice of himself to this process. For one does not become Quixote and retain the ability to differentiate between the worlds. One loses oneself in the becoming.

And this is the fate of Ted Serios as well. He whose claim to fame comes at precisely the expense of the self. For if the 'successful' Serios images throw doubt on the reality of the world, it is the 'failures' that ultimately cast suspicion on the man himself. Not through the possibility that they might be fake. Rather precisely through the possibility that they, too, might be real. This would mean of course, that Serios himself was subsumed by the impossibility he sought to inscribe, inscribing himself in the process. Serios literally out-did himself, un-did himself even, casting doubt upon even the most obvious of failed images.

In other words, it is not that trauma reveals the invisible presence of a self who sustained it, but the other way around. The self only comes into existence in those moments of trauma that constitute it. Collapsed into the reversibilities of failure and incantation, the self takes on a new form of sus-

9. Borges, J. L. (1962), 'Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote', in D. Yates & J. Irby (eds.), *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, New York: New Directions.

Figure 9: Ted Serios. Psychic Photograph. c.1963-67

tainable nihilism. Neither the world, the imaginary, nor the impossible answers to anything but itself - this is why Menard could embark on a project doomed from the start. And Serios too. A deferred presence that is sustained only by its immediate failure - moments of failure that do not, in the end, prove the existence of an invisible self, but rather create it, incant it, so that they themselves might be personified. Each of them pictures of an imaginary forehead, imagining itself in turn, projecting into oblivion.

Conclusion

To theorize hallucination is to disregard the trauma of impossibility. Moreover, it is to embrace it as that which sustains the imaginative rein- vention of the doubled world, the magical reinvention of the doubled image and the anonymous reinvention of the doubled self. 'Only a bad actor loses himself in his role' says Baudrillard (1999: 112). And yet, in the end, we are all lost in our roles, seduced by the magic of our own incantations. Bad acting - the fatal conclusion of self-authorship, the vital illusion of identity. And maybe the consequence of this is that there can never be good acting. Separated, from both philosophy and aesthetics from the start. The halluci- nation of hallucination itself. Hallucinating the invisible, which is to say the nothingness that was always the world around us.

But this time its different. And it is exactly on the question of Ted Serios that this becomes evident. For it is he that is hallucinated by us, but also the inverse. His world, given form through our deceiving eyes. And then reflected back. Until all that remains is the question of Serios himself. And not a question of meaning. For to ask for meaning from the Serios images is to misunderstand their nature. And not just the nature of the image, but of the world and the self too. For it is precisely in our hallucinations of Ted Serios that impossibility itself emerges and disappears.

But perhaps this is the real lesson of the impossible. That which demands nothing from us. And which plays us by making everything we see, just a little too easy. No more acting at all. Instead, only the enacting of psychic nihilism. Instead, only the anesthetizing of impossibility.

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