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Myths of the Marble

Curated and edited
by Alex Klein and
Milena Hoegsberg

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Homay King

Myth for an Age of Lies and Marble for an Age of Walls

In the first week of the Forty-Fifth Presidency of the United States, shortly before the lunar New Year, several government Twitter accounts went rogue. The first was the National Park Service (@NatlParkService and, later, @AltNatParkSer), which had been reprimanded after distributing photographs showing that the crowd assembled for Donald Trump's inauguration was only a fraction of the size of Barack Obama's. It was followed by the Environmental Protection Agency (@ungaggedEPA) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (@RogueNASA). Rumors spread that others with the keys to government agency accounts—Badlands National Park, the National Endowment for the Arts—had joined the resistance. In response to threats of defunding and gagging by the new executive regime, these agencies began to speak passionately against the lifting of environmental protections, a proposed thousand-mile-long concrete wall along the US-Mexico border, bans on immigrants and refugees, and imminent cuts to funding for education, science, and the arts.

All but the first of these accounts were unverified, and it's not entirely

clear whether they were, in fact, created by rogue employees of government agencies. Some might even call them fake. But their galvanizing effect was very real: it was as if they were genuinely defying authority, daring the president to fire them. Hundreds of thousands followed to watch the story unfold online. It was like the moment in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1* (Lawrence, 2014) when the rebels of District 13 hijack Capitol TV and begin to transmit their own messages. It was also like the moment in Harun Farocki's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) in which Romanian revolutionaries take over the state-run television station in Bucharest and begin broadcasting directly to the people. A brief Twitter storm of dubious origins, a young-adult dystopian fiction franchise, and a historic revolution that resulted in the assassination of a head of state: many would hesitate to group these phenomena together. One of them seems to be real, the others fake and fictional. But in moments of crisis, we are forced to rethink what is real and what is not.

A classic materialist view would have it that physical action and solid things are real, and culture is merely a

kind of facade or atmosphere spread over this base. At its most cynical, this view would deem every inch of this atmosphere to be contaminated with ideology, so that even the most apparently counter-cultural force could only serve to consolidate and enrich existing centers of power: however thrilling it might be to see the National Park Service fighting back against attempts to make it into an autocratic mouth-piece, in order to see it, I must visit and therefore enrich the platform of a multi-billion-dollar company run on fiber-optic cables controlled by another multi-billion-dollar company. The post-structuralist modification to this view suggests that culture, language, and images do matter: that words and pictures shape the way we perceive our material reality and thereby determine how we interact with it and one another.

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* is a text written in this latter spirit. In it, he argues that myth is "depoliticized speech."¹ It is depoliticized because it has been made to appear natural, as fact or innate property, instead of a social construction. Among his many examples is ornamental-food preparation that attempts to "reconstitute nature" with woodsy garnishes and the like. He condemns this "openly dream-like cookery," and states that its "coatings and alibis" occlude underlying material realities: the fact that this food has been fully altered by culture, and the fact that the working classes to whom these images are circulated cannot always afford to put food on the table.² In another example, he provides a semiotic analysis of a



Fig. 1 Cover of *Paris Match* magazine
No. 326, June 25 to July 2, 1955

photograph of an African soldier in a French uniform saluting an out-of-frame flag on the cover of *Paris Match* and arrives at an indisputable conclusion: the photograph functions as a rebuke to the "detractors of colonialism"³ (fig. 1).

Barthesian mythology—the critical analysis of myths—is like a pair of glasses one may put on to reveal hidden messages and agents of control, as in John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) (fig. 2). It is like a red pill one may ingest to dispel illusions and reveal the reality of material deprivation, as in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999). We don our critical thinking caps and lo, the magazine cover no longer presents an indisputable, photographed truth; it is exposed as pro-war propaganda. Barthes's notorious distrust of lensed images in the first era of his thinking is related to the distrust of myth: images, particularly photographic ones, seem to reify their referents, to present them as evidence ready to be leveraged into specious arguments. Later in his career, though, Barthes came around



Fig. 2. *They Live*, dir. John Carpenter, 1988

to the image, with *Camera Lucida*, which would become one of his most loved and well-known books. In this text, the photographic image's closeness to its object—its ability to affirm this object's reality, its existence—becomes an asset rather than something to be suspicious of.

Today, Barthesian mythology is an indispensable tool for exposing misleading rhetorical imagery. But, when applied too simplistically, it is hampered by its grounding in propositional logic and grafting of this

style of thinking onto visual images. A photograph is neither true nor false; only the conclusions one draws from it can be assessed for veracity. Certainly, it can be doctored or manipulated such that it appears to provide evidence for a claim, which is in turn true or false. But the image itself stubbornly shows us the same thing whether we have taken the blue pill or the red pill.

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We tend to equate the real and material with that which is solid like marble, or physical like celluloid film, and the

unreal with airy myths in the ether, or flickering bits of light. The philosopher Henri Bergson takes a very different view, and it offers a radical way out of the problems of both classic Marxist materialism and the poststructuralist rewriting thereof. According to Bergson, even the most rock-hard matter is temporalized: it is in constant motion, constantly changing states, rusting, calcifying, eroding, expanding and compressing. Most of reality is not solid; it is liquid and gaseous. We don't normally see matter this way because our minds are hell-bent on categorical thinking, which requires that we see objects as static and quasi-permanent. Ideas and concepts, too, assume petrified forms when they are, as Bergson puts it, "cast into words which society supplies in a solid form."⁴ In his treatise *Matter and Memory*, Bergson describes it thus: "To perceive means to immobilize ... We seize, in the act of perception, something which outruns perception itself, although the material universe is not essentially different or distinct from the representation which we have of it."⁵

To say that the material world is not different from the representations we have of it amounts to saying that matter and images are made of the same stuff: they are not different in kind. They are both in motion—unable to be contained for any longer than an instant by the forms and outlines in which we attempt to press them. The Empire State Building is solid not simply because it is made of steel and limestone, but because the myths and styles of perception that have been pounded into this steel and limestone

make it difficult to see it any other way. The photograph of the soldier saluting the French flag may well be real, not faked, but the notion that it therefore provides proof of African support for colonial warfare gains traction only when wishful thinking meets the inability to think beyond positivist absolutes.

The word *link* no longer designates a line of attachment between two things; it is itself a thing. To share a link with others is to exchange it on the marketplace of cultural and financial capital. The value of the transaction does not accrue to those doing the sharing, but to the information economy. This Marxist insight can also be expressed in Bergsonian terms: digital networks tend to render static and solid what is actually durational and contingent. They treat movements that take place over intervals of time as if they were objects with fixed characteristics, capable of being classified and subjected to analytics, converted into hooks on which advertisements can be hung, and finally archived for future use. To quote some of Bergson's vocabulary, these networks "cold-hammer" time-based, moving, multi-dimensional phenomena into "solid forms."⁶ They display what Bergson calls the "natural obstinacy with which we treat the living like the lifeless and think all reality, however fluid, under the form of the sharply defined solid."⁷

Advertising images attempt to make hundreds of hours of laborious arrangement of mise-en-scène and post-production look as though they were naturally and instantaneously

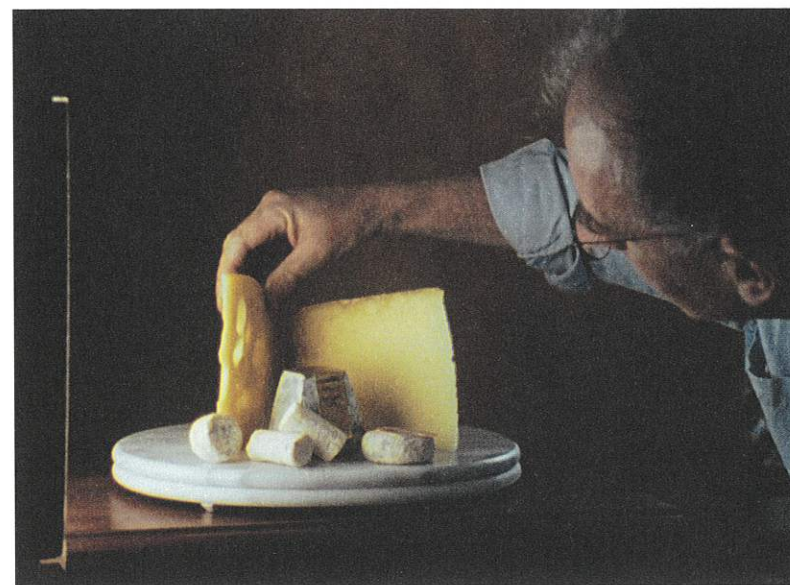


Fig. 3. *Still Life*, dir. Harun Farocki, 1997

occurring in the object on display. We see this process documented in Harun Farocki's *Still Life* (1997), an essay film in which meditations on Dutch still-life painting are intercut with footage of commercial photographers preparing cheese, beer, and a Cartier watch for the camera. Wearing white gloves, the photographers painstakingly tweak and micro-adjust the commodities with a reverence and perfectionism that almost becomes comical (fig. 3). In an earlier film, *Make-Up* (1973), Farocki also documents the making of an image. Here, he trains his camera on a make-up artist, who "covers a woman's face with masses of powder, which he then rubs deeply into the skin. Through the addition of black or red tones he produces a strong effect of plasticity." Through this process, Farocki writes, the artist "transforms flesh into marble, he fossilises female beauty."⁸

Farocki's interest in these processes was originally a Marxist one, given that they form the basis for the alienation of labor under capitalism. Commodity fetishism is the result of labor and time that have solidified into a thing, which then seizes this value for itself, as if the properties were inherent in the matter of the cheese and beer. But Farocki, perhaps without knowing it, was as much a Bergsonian as a Marxist. His films reveal an abiding fascination with how clichés lay siege to the world, and how images become routine, too solid, like worn coins we pass about without considering that their worth does not inhere in the metal.

Still Life exposes the clichés and fossilizations that take hold of the visible world, showing them to be products of labor and mythology—rather than ready-made or organic. But it also does more than this: it suggests that,

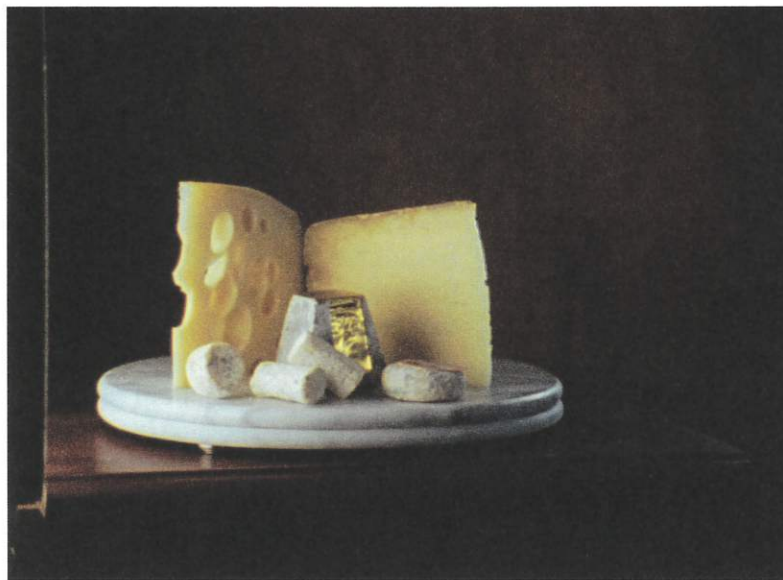


Fig. 4. *Still Life*, dir. Harun Farocki, 1997

in fact, they take centuries to produce, not just the many hours in the photography studio. And because they are the products of centuries of congealed time and collective labor, they contain buried within them a vast set of other, discrete images. Stone-like images—stereotypes, clichés, generic fetishes, and myths—are aggregates. They can be disaggregated, chipped apart, and set back into motion, which is what Farocki does to both the Dutch paintings and the modern advertisements in *Still Life* (fig. 4).

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In a famous formula from *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes that time “is not an interval that may be lengthened or shortened without the content being altered.... To contract or dilate it would be to modify [it].... The time taken up by the invention, is one with the invention itself.”⁹ For Bergson, this time of invention—the time it takes for an object, a living thing, an artwork, or political change to enter the world and develop—is inseparable from the “finished” creative act or product. We can bake a cake at twice the temperature in half the amount of time, but its texture and flavor will be different; we can genetically modify plants to grow faster, but they will not be the same plants. The amount of time it takes for something to be created cannot be algorithmically sped up or slowed down without affecting the end result. Efficiency calculations introduce changes of state and quality.

In the not-so-distant past, the same was true for photographs. The length of time devoted to exposure, development, and printing drastically

altered the finished product. Jeff Wall relates this duration to what he calls the “liquid” aspects of photography. Writing in 1989, Wall attributes a philosophical sense to these liquid aspects—the “washing, bleaching, dissolving” associated with darkroom chemicals and the processing and development of analog film.¹⁰ He notes that in the darkroom, “water has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined.” The alchemical potency of darkroom liquids evokes something primal and archaic that “connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way,” and that Wall associates with a “sense of immersion in the incalculable.”¹¹ He notes that the liquid aspects are precisely the parts of the photographic process that have been reduced in the shift to digital photography and film. Along with them, the connection to the past, to durational time, to matter, and to the appearance of the unpredictable and the unexpected has also been partly severed.

Writing in the same spirit as Wall, Victor Burgin associates digital photography with the medium’s “dry” aspects. In an interview with David Company, he remarked, “I see no difference in kind between the virtual camera and the lump of metal with ‘Nikon’ or ‘Canon’ stamped on it, but rather see them as different implementations of the same geometrical and optical knowledge.”¹² This geometrical system encodes that which it captures into a preexisting perspectival system with a particular optical bias. All

lensed imagery, according to this view, is both petrified and mythified by “dry” optics.

The dry aspects of photography are designed to implement an optical regime that subscribes to a Cartesian fantasy: that space can be captured in a flawless geometric abstraction, that time can be frozen, and that we, as sovereign subjects, are stationed at a spatio-temporal command center above and outside the whole mess. But—like darkroom chemicals—the lump of metal, curved lens, and thin slats of the shutter are made of matter. Even the tiny light-emitting diodes, circuits, and micro-thin silicon wafers rely for their existence on a miniature geological quarry of semi-conductive materials. Burgin’s claim can be expanded from its other side. If it is true that an old-fashioned Nikon is already dealing in the virtual, insofar as it implements a fictive kind of optical knowledge, then it is also true that computer-generated imagery deals in the material. A glass panel activated by skin, a cryptic string of characters left by a rampant household pet, the hot whirl of an overused machine and its slow chill when shut down ... all of these tactile and sensuous experiences are not only familiar; they are constant refrains of life in the information age, in spite of the fact that the Cartesian fantasy would have us bracket them out in favor of the optical and practical results they are meant to achieve.

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To return to Wall’s query: How does an image become reliquified (fig. 5)? How does it tap back into its potential

to reveal something that could not be calculated in advance? Bergson might suggest that it is through the faculty of intuition, which he opposes to the intellect. Whereas the intellect thinks in abstractions and “tends to solidify everything it touches,” intuition allows these encrusted ideas “to melt and mix.”¹³ Intuition asks us to “strain the meaning of a word, to mould it to the thought,” rather than the other way around, force-fitting the thought to our preexisting vocabulary. Bergson suggests that intuition is the faculty that allows the artist to create an image, as if following a hunch or instinct: it “precedes the image, which virtually contains it, and is to a certain extent its cause.” Finally, Bergson says that intuition, when it resolidifies into fresh ideas that are inflected by the emotions, is the source of social change: it is “capable of crystallizing into representations and even into an ethical doctrine.”

Intuition is also strongly associated with the virtual for Bergson. Today, the virtual has become a synonym for the computer-generated, but this is not its original meaning.¹⁴ The virtual is not the same as the false or the simulated: it is a potential on the brink of becoming actual, an image of a near future that may or may not come to pass. It is not a separate, parallel reality; it is continuous with our own reality. It is connected to our own world and made of the same stuff, but it reaches for something slightly beyond this world, like a darkroom chemical seeping past its proper time and place to reveal an unanticipated exposure.



Fig. 5. Jeff Wall, *The Flooded Grave*, 1998–2000
Transparency in lightbox, 228.6 × 282 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

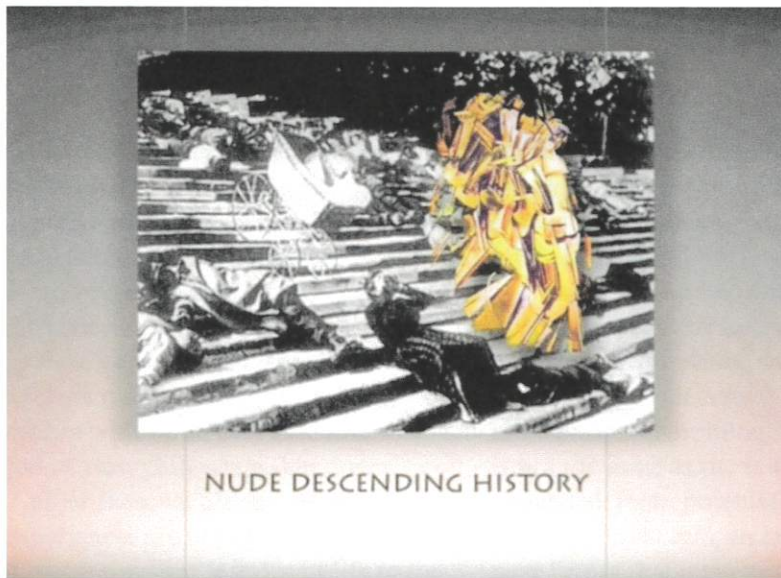


Fig. 6. *Ouvroir, the Movie*, dir. Chris Marker, 2010

Wall's darkroom is a sensuous metaphor, that is, one that is literal and figurative at the same time. Chris Marker provides another such metaphor in his film *Sans Soleil* (1983). His narrator speaks of a certain photograph of children in Iceland, and says that it is the very image of happiness. The photograph appears at key moments in the film, followed by a black screen. Wondering if the photograph will transmit this emotion to viewers, the narrator says, "They may not see the happiness, but at least they'll see the black." The black screen is to film what the white page was to poetry for Mallarmé, the blue screen to analog video, and the green screen to digital video: a blank space of pure receptivity. The lightless, timeless world, a world *sans soleil*, is like the world inside Plato's cave, or the world of the video game arcade, the time spent in front of one's computer, or in a windowless darkroom. It is a space of the imagination, the virtual and potentiality.

In Marker's *Ouvroir* (2010), we are taken on a tour of a museum built in the online virtual world *Second Life* (fig. 6). Our guide is Guillaume, Marker's orange cat avatar, and the museum houses several of his works, including his History of Art postcards, which are mash-ups of pairs of artworks. They include *Landscape with the Fall of Challenger*, which takes Breugel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and substitutes the destroyed Challenger space shuttle for the mythological figure; *Nude Descending History*, in which Marker inserts Duchamp's nude into the "Odessa Steps" sequence from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*;



Fig. 7. Chris Marker, *Owl People*, 1995

and *Milda*, the Milo Venus in the guise of the femme fatale Gilda from Charles Vidor's film. At one point in the video, we briefly hear a refrain from the soundtrack to Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) by composer Trevor Duncan. The reference is apropos: Marker's composite works collage two distinct historical moments into the same image, or sometimes more, as in the 1962 film, where time moves in a spiral, not a straight line.

La Jetée was anticipated by Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*, and Marker's "pre-makes" are also on display in the virtual museum. They are posters for imaginary films of the silent era that, in Marker's fictive history, are antecedents of films that are to come. We see an advertisement for *Owl People* by Jacques Tourneur, starring Louise Brooks (fig. 7), a film that he would remake as *Cat People* in 1942, and that would be remade a second time by Paul Schrader in 1982; another for a 1921 version of *Breathless* directed by Raoul Walsh; and another for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* starring Greta Garbo

and Sessue Hayakawa, a film that the poster declares to be “thirty years ahead of its time.” These “what if?” posters and postcards are displayed in the rotunda-shaped virtual exhibition space alongside Marker’s photographs from May 1968, portraits of fellow filmmakers, and other images that would seem to fall under the category of factual documentary. And indeed, this *Second Life* museum is the correct place for them, and for the mixture of the two modes, since it is like the darkroom, or the blue or green screen: a space where the hard nuts of old categories become liquified.

Certain works of art, like Marker’s, have found privileged connections to the virtual. And like *Ouvroir*, there are works made of digital media that commune with the earthbound and with what already exists in the world, with durational time and history, and finally, in Wall’s words, with the incalculable: the elastic, slippery matter and images that belong to the world rather than the dry, abstract outlines into which it is pressed by the myth of dry optics. The fiction of digital media as being out of this world may strangely be the most petrifying of all.

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“The Decay of Lying,” a satirical dialogue by Oscar Wilde, is presented as though it were a defense of falsehood. In fact, Wilde’s text is a critique of naturalism in art, and a plea for artifice to take its place. Wilde wants art to embrace its capacity to reveal things heretofore unseen in the world. The magic wand that effects this disclosure, surprisingly, is not ever-more-accurate photo-realism, but rather, a kind of

distortion. Art is revelatory not when it aims for accuracy, nor when it continues to speak in the same forms and clichés that have already been established, but when it engages in a kind of deformation that is nevertheless continuous with what exists in the moving, atmospheric matter of the world. Here is a passage from the essay that bears quoting at length:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? ... Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.... At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them.¹⁵

The English language has a certain expression: “cold, hard facts,” or along similar lines, “hard truths.” Fog expresses an opposite sentiment, a vaporous blur that might not exist. Wilde’s example of fog is not gratuitous or arbitrary; it is a sensuous metaphor for that which is difficult to grasp until it is stilled into an image (fig. 8).

One might think that in an age of alternative facts, the urgent task of the artist would be to insist on reflecting



Fig. 8. Claude Monet, *The Houses of Parliament (Effect of Fog)*, 1903–04
Oil on canvas 32 × 36 3/8 inches. (81.3 × 92.4 cm)

reality accurately. It may seem right to put aside the pleasure of foggy myths in favor of hard truths, to revert to naturalism, or to embrace didacticism, research, and information. But to say that art should simply depict truth is like saying that fiction should be factual. It consigns art to showing what is already visible. Wilde understood that art is artifice, invention, by definition. Perhaps we can take his “Decay of Lying” as a nineteenth-century prelude for our age.

Sometimes we sit around waiting for things that have already happened, or are still happening, only we have missed them. We didn’t see them for what they were, because no poets or painters warned us of their coming—or taught the mysterious loveliness of their effects. Monsters and legends walk the earth in human form;

marvelous aliens on mother ships are trying to land on shore; computers are already intelligent. On the other hand, we sometimes accept as *faits accomplis* things that new developments could render reversible. The impossible does happen from time to time, and the things we expect often elude us because we were looking for them in the wrong places. We need to inject more myth—more openness, virtuality, unreality, and imagination—into situations that have become too wall-like, that appear impervious to change and movement. And we need to inject more solidity, more believability and verisimilitude, into quixotic visions of change and resistance that cynics might dismiss as impossible fantasies.

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 142.
- 2 Ibid., 36–38.
- 3 Ibid., 116.
- 4 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 46.
- 5 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 208.
- 6 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 46.
- 7 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 174.
- 8 Harun Farocki, "Written Trailers," *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010).
- 9 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306.
- 10 Jeff Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 109.
- 11 Ibid., 109–110.
- 12 Victor Burgin and David Company, "Victor Burgin/David Company in Conversation," in *Projective: Essays about the Work of Victor Burgin* (Geneva: MAMCO, 2014), 149.
- 13 Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 46–47.
- 14 For an elaboration of this alternate definition of the virtual and its relationship to contemporary art, see my *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 15 Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (New York: Brentano, 1905), 42. victorianweb.org/victorian/authors/wilde/decay.html

Tom Holert

Meshed Space: On Navigating the Virtual

The Property of the Virtual and
the Ubiquity of the Navigational

Addressing practices such as cartography and montage, this essay attempts to conceptualize the virtual and the navigational by weaving together issues of property, cybernetics, robotics, algorithmic world-building, and the destabilization of subjectivity. A through line of the heterogeneous material offered in the following is the notion of a dichotomy of abstraction and immanence as theorized most pertinently by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The (ontological) concern with where orientation takes place—from without or within the pre-digital and digital fields of intensity, confusion, unknowingness, and anxiety—will organize the stream of thought, even as it risks contributing to the overwhelming sense of disorientation and entrapment endemic to contemporary virtualized settings, which are inventoried and staged by the exhibition *Myths of the Marble*. Toward the end of the essay I will look for help from filmmaker and writer Harun Farocki's quest for an understanding of the post-montage spaces of computer games as paradigmatic

contemporary life-worlds that may be defined by an abyssal constructionism, the agency of which is a cause of ongoing struggle and contestation.

To begin, let me ask if the "virtual" should be considered first and foremost as a question of ownership. This question seems odd at first. Doesn't the conceptualization of the virtual as something that falls under the rubric of property run against the common assumption that the virtual is essentially out of reach for agencies and interests of ownership? Eluding and transcending any proprietary grasp, the virtual is considered to be of an ontological order that precludes purchase. The virtual, as opposed to the actual, as a trans-individual co-presence of times in the now, is what carries and organizes reality. But it lacks an address; in its philosophical conceptualization it cannot be located, fixed, marked in terms of ownership. In order to become a matter of ownership, the meaning of "virtual" thus has to be changed.

Critic and filmmaker Jean-Louis Comolli raised the question of property as virtual in the context of a discussion about the potential role of documentary filmmaking under the