Figure 278 Trevor Paglen’s Optical Reconnaissance Satellite Near Scorpio (USA 129) (Paglen, 2012)
Trying to explain the mystery, Castel suggests that our acute feeling of insecurity derives not so much from the dearth of protection as from the inescapable ‘unclarity of its scope’ (ombre portée) in the kind of social universe that, like ours, ‘has been organised around the endless pursuit of protection and a frantic search for security – thus setting ever rising, previously unthinkable standards of protection, always ahead of what is currently possible to achieve.’ It is our ‘security obsession’, and our intolerance of any minor – even the tiniest – breach in security provision which it prompts, that becomes the most prolific, self-replenishing and probably inexhaustible source of anxiety and fear.

- Zygmunt Bauman from Liquid Fear (Bauman, 2006, p. 130) \(^{105}\)

Stepping into this remix is the media artist. The accumulation of Big Data and the seemingly unregulated, mostly secretive and always invisible methodology employed for its collection, has become fertile ground for the research practitioner. Media artists and interrogators of the digital object such as Trevor Paglen, James Bridle and Thomas Ruff seek to reintroduce a distinctly human aspect into the image loop by revealing the process of data collection and the scale and the makeup of the technological apparatus which facilitates its collection. By alluding to comparisons of scale and documenting physical evidence of the human cost (Bridle), exposing the existence of the technology through its remoteness (Paglen) or pulling apart the data and the objects they create to obscure the obscured (Paglen & Ruff) such artists are attempting to make visible the unseen and contextualise the unknowable.

James Bridle is a designer, publisher and critical media commentator who created somewhat of an internet sensation at SXSW in 2012 when he lead a panel discussion on what he had been exploring on his Tumblr blog as the “new aesthetic” (Bridle, 2013b). \(^{106}\) Broadly speaking the new

\(^{105}\) Includes a quote from Robert Castel’s Social Insecurity: What Does it Mean to be Protected? 2006, Buenos Aires, El Manantial (Castel, 2006, p. 5).

\(^{106}\) See Bridle’s Tumblr blog which setup his theoretical ideas surrounding a new aesthetic and the premise of the SXSW panel, The New Aesthetic: Seeing Like Digital Devices. Also see Joanne McNeil’s discussion of her involvement on the SXSW panel. Bruce Sterling who was present at the panel, albeit in the audience, posted a critique some weeks later, An Essay on the New Aesthetic (Sterling, 2012). it can be found here and a short interview with Sterling on the new aesthetic by David Cox can be found here.
aesthetic could be defined as media design and art making with technology – or evidence of the machine in the production process. This contrasts with Lev Manovich’s description of computer mediated art making in which the presence of the machine is mostly hidden, any mechanic inflection unwanted, any discernible evidence of its operation mostly undesirable. There is also a will towards autonomous design by machines that permeates some of the discussion around the term’s legitimacy but echoes wider concerns about authorship and data driven art making. This places Bridle perfectly at the centre of the debate about both visible and invisible technologies of surveillance and autonomous warfare. Two of his most recent projects have been directly concerned with the notion of the UAV and the implications of their use:

The drone, for me, stands in part for the network itself: an invisible, inherently connected technology allowing sight and action at a distance. Us and the digital, acting together, a medium and an exchange. But the non–human components of the network are not moral actors, and the same technology that permits civilian technological wonder, the wide–eyed futurism of the New Aesthetic and the unevenly–distributed joy of living now, also produces obscurantist “security” culture, ubiquitous surveillance, and robotic killing machines (Bridle, 2012d).

Further to this see Rob Myers’ arts review, *Data-Driven Artists and Their Critics*, on the FurtherField.org site (Myers, 2013a) and the article which inspired the Myers piece, *Controversial New Project Uses Algorithm To Predict Art*, at Huffington Post’s Arts and Culture site.
Bridle’s Dronestagram project is an Instagram site to which he posts landscapes from Google Earth’s satellite service of U.S. drone strikes using the data provided by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (see Figure 279). He cites the names of towns, of houses, of intersections, of farms and of schools in Afghanistan, Somali, Pakistan and Yemen which have been targeted by drone strikes. Where possible he lists the dead – civilian, militant or combatant. This evolving patchwork is of another reality. The satellite images feature place names – Wadi al Abu Jabara, Beit al Ahan, Bulandkhel, Hurmuz, Khaider khel – towns and villages to which the all-seeing covert drones point their instruments of machine vision. “They are the names of places most of us will never see. We do not know these landscapes and we cannot visit them. What can reach them are drones, what can see them—if not entirely know them—are drones” (Bridle, 2012b). What can end them are drones. Bridle’s photographic assemblage, The Light of God (Bridle, 2012c), comments on this process of covert, distant, silent targeting. Bridle was inspired by the term after it appeared in an experimental documentary film by Omer Fast, 5000 Feet is the Best, in which a drone operator explains the Light of God phenomena (see Figure 280). Using a thermal camera to identify the target area, the operator locks the drone’s targeting system onto the site using a laser targeting marker which in turn calls in a Hellfire missile strike. “We just send out a beam of laser and when the troops put on their night vision goggles they’ll just see this light that looks like it’s coming from heaven. Right on
the spot, coming out of nowhere, from the sky. It’s quite beautiful." (Fast, 2011) This is an exquisitely gothic and harrowing image that Bridle presents in conjunction with Fast’s documentary interviews with the drone operators. The light on dark aesthetic of drawing down a missile strike, evoking the angelic light of a Christian God in a Muslim land underlines the broader complexities at work in the technocultural narrative of the new millennium. Fusing the liquid electric beams sent up by the 9/11 Anniversary Memorial, Tribute In Light (see Figure 280) with the image of the reciprocal targeting laser of The Light of God this new image juxtaposition becomes the ultimate convergent gothic high-tech object – the smashing together of science, fiction and religion. All of it frozen in that moment of machine assisted night vision – a dark euphoric luminance of imminent, absent and anonymous destruction. For Bridle the importance rests on putting that snapshot in our vision stream. His public intervention, Under the Shadow of the Drone, in Istanbul in 2012 places the concept of the drone – a surveillance take-out service used by the Turkish military on its neighbours in exchange for the U.S. military’s use of its air strips – at the feet of the pedestrian.¹⁰⁸ Bridle and his colleagues sketched out a 1:1 outline of a MQ–1 Predator UAV at the foot of a Greek Orthodox church across the road from the Istanbul Design Biennale which Bridle was attending at the time (see Figure 281). While drones cruise at an altitude of between 5000 and 50,000 feet and rarely cast a shadow that is seen, Bridle’s work places the shape and dimensions of the drone in the public thoroughfare. The point for Bridle was not only exposure – to make visible that which is unseen – but also context, “trying to get a feel for what it would be like to stand next to one. To stand before, or under, it... the ability to touch the cold metal of it, to measure oneself against it.” (Bridle, 2012d) For it is this visibility, this taking back of the unseen dimensions and machine physicality of the network’s outer limits that fosters empowerment, as Bridle observes,

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the Turkey–U.S. drone alliance see the Washington Post article, Fleet of U.S. drones now based in Turkey (Jaffe, 2011).
“those who cannot perceive the network cannot act effectively within it, and are powerless. The job, then, is to make such things visible” (Bridle in Harger, 2011).

The political and practical possibilities of drone strikes are the consequence of invisible, distancing technologies, and a technologically–disengaged media and society. Foreign wars and foreign bodies have always counted for less, but the technology that was supposed to bring us closer together is used to obscure and obfuscate. We use military technologies like GPS and Kinect for work and play; they continue to be used militarily to maim and kill, ever further away and ever less visibly (Bridle, 2012b).

This too is what drives the drone sleuth–like behaviour of geographer and media artist Trevor Paglen who uses camera and imaging technology to pull back the veil on the drone network and the communication and surveillance systems of the U.S. Military and the U.S. National Security Agency. He watches those who watch us. His Untitled (Drones) (Paglen, 2010b) photographic series of UAVs in U.S. airspace for his 2011 exhibition Unhuman in San Francisco accentuates the secretive properties of the drone by deliberately making them an obscure blip on the canvas. But it is essentially about how Paglen the photographer sees the drone that helps us understand what seeing the technology in situ actually means. “I’m extremely interested in what
seeing is, and what seeing means in the contemporary moment. Of course, this has everything to do with machines, which in turn has everything to do with time” (Curcio & Paglen, 2011). In the freeze frame of the captured still image the drone becomes a seemingly innocuous object against the vastness of the beguiling skylines they inhabit (see Figure 282). These constructions of the digital network could be the medium itself, evidence of its processes and technical limitations: dead pixels in an LCD monitor, chromatic aberrations in the perfection of the high-def simulation, ink spots on a canvas, air bubbles on a geologist’s slide. But what they are in fact is a record of a digital object that for all intended purposes actually isn’t there, it’s off the record, incognito – the secret training drill, the cyborg top gun rehearsing for the kill. Paglen sees the irony here, but also the convergence between the technological modes of photographic image production and the technological modes of surveillance and targeted killing.

I think they’re part of what we might call the spatio-ethical dimension of the images’ conditions of production, rather than
the aesthetic part of them. Sometimes the ‘entangledness’ of the photograph can arise from these complex relations of seeing and counter-seeing in my work (i.e. photographing spy satellites or Predator drones photographing me), but not always. Sometimes the relational dimension can arise from the very fact of taking a photograph of something that, for political purposes, ‘isn’t there’ (Curcio & Paglen, 2011).

Paglen’s studies are as much related to air space and the spatiality of the screen as they are about distance of camera to object – or in this case lens to lens – as well as notions of time, specifically the exposure of what we can’t see that time permits. Like a drone that hovers evaluating a target Paglen lurks in the foothills of Nevada and Arizona hunting the source, tracking the trackers. His long lens photography brings the drone closer yet keeps it at a menacing blurry distance. Like the filter on an Instagram image, or the flecks of magnetic interference on a VHS tape, the drone becomes more real for the image’s lack of clarity as the technology of domestic – i.e. earth-bound camera technology – strives to see where it should not see (see Figure 283). Paglen’s studies, They Watch the Moon (Paglen, 2010a) and The Other Night Sky (Paglen, 2007) employ long exposure photography to reveal that which lurks in the dark. These are mysterious images of an unsettling technofuturist space dreaming. Here before us is the military apparatus – the satellites, the ground based radar, the electromagnetic perimeter – that make remote death and domestic surveillance such a precise and totalising business. But somehow these images are also absorbed into the broader cultural narrative, their science fiction properties becoming obvious over time as Paglen’s framing and scenic compositions echo the geography of both the fabled mountain in Close Encounters of the 3rd Kind (Spielberg, 1977), and the planetary bases embedded in the original Star Wars universe (Lucas et al., 1977-1983) (see Figures 284 & 286). The compositions are evocative digital objects, the physicality of their location and the art direction of their composition embellish the sci-fi dreamscape but also the evolving narrative of Millenialmodernity’s most bold expositional tricks – the abstract simulation. For me the aesthetic touchstone of Paglen’s work is The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas) (Paglen, 2013) which is compositionally evocative of my Dark Euphoria series (Goodwin, 2011b) of images (see pages 34, 159-161 & 196). Both works seek to expose the production process of capturing light and interrogate the fabric of the digital image itself in its printed form. Paglen’s work is produced from analysing the microwave frequencies of a powerful radar system surrounding the United States. The end result is an exploration of the limits of photography in much the same way that the Abstract Impressionists explored the texture and form of the painting process, the properties of oil and acrylic paint becoming as important as the emotional forms they helped to communicate. Essentially, The Fence is captured by making normally invisible light frequencies visible and thereby capturing the unseen and expressing this in vivid rich
chromatic textures. The subject, as Paglen explains, is an “electromagnetic border that extends far into space from transmitters in Alaska, California, Texas, Massachusetts, Greenland, and the United Kingdom. The Fence is designed to track spacecraft overflying the United States and to serve as an early warning system to detect ballistic missile launches” (Paglen, 2013). This is a constant permanent structure of virtuality, a network of immense size and of immense data processing capabilities, but essentially invisible. Paglen is attempting to describe what the skies above us contain, and to point out that we are essentially contained within that sky. His images hint at what the devices that populate our orbit are rehearsing for. By looking up at those who look down he is subverting the dominant perspective. What Paglen and Bridle are essentially attempting to do is to avert a complete disconnection. As Julian Oliver has warned, “Our inability to describe and understand reduces our critical reach, leaving us both disempowered and, quite often, vulnerable” (Huff & Oliver, 2012). The promise of an unhuman autonomous robotic future is a troubling place to be, we grow distrustful of the sky, the networks we communicate on and the geography of the land we walk on. As Peter Sloterdijk

Figure 286 Mos Eisley, Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (Lucas, 1977).

Figure 287 Trevor Paglen’s long exposure image They Watch the Moon (Paglen, 2010a). A classified “listening station”, part of the U.S. National Security Agency’s project ECHelon network.

Figure 288 Trevor Paglen’s The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas) (Paglen, 2013).
writes, “We remain immanent to that which is suspect. We are condemned to being-in, even if the containers and atmospheres in which we are forced to surround ourselves can no longer be taken for granted as being good in nature” (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 108).

German photographer Thomas Ruff, works with a range of experimental photographic forms and techniques, and much like his contemporaries Peter Mann and Corinne Vionnet, the appropriation of images from a variety of public venues including the internet. For Ruff and co the human experience is contained in the images which constitute our mediated atmosphere. For Ruff the process of signal compression in the exchange of visual information on the network presents an opportunity to expose its technical deficiencies by close examination of the image file’s structure. His *Jpegs* series is a confronting sequence of images which exploits the artefacts left behind in a digital image from the process involved in compressing the image for display on screens and publication on the web and mobile. Ruff exposes the fabric of the digital object through enlarging the image to an extreme size and then printing that image onto large canvases (2.5 by 1.8 meters) to further accentuate its inherent flaws. “It creates a nice effect,” Ruff notes, “when you see it from about 10 or 15 metres away, you think you are looking at a precise photograph, but if you go closer, to within about five metres, you recognise the image for what it is. Then if you go really close, you can’t recognise anything at all: you’re just standing in front of thousands of pixels” (Ruff, 2009).
In this sense the networked image is vulnerable to the ultimate form of corruption and mistreatment – enlargement. The algorithmic compression fabricates what it cannot see creating colour and shape that is an approximation the image’s version of reality. This is the inverse of the Geo-Eye satellite in which clarity and resolution is the yardstick of truth and where the absence of the artefacts of compression – the lack of image corruption – renders the simulation real. Here in the Jpegs series the truth emerges from the approximations made by algorithms, the distortion becomes the memory. This is something that film maker and academic Hito Steyerl writing in e-Flux identifies when she describes the degradation of a digital object in the network as a “bad image” (Steyerl, 2009). In an era of high definition display and ever increasing resolutions of digital photography Ruff’s series is emblematic of what constitutes a bad image. And while Ruff is playing with the fatalism of the digital form – after all there is only so much resolution one can attain from the available data, the pixels have only so far to fall – in the travails of the network it is a but “a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution” (Steyerl, 2009).

While Ruff is exploring notions of disruption in the distribution and reception of digital images on the network – an unseen invisible process – he is also bringing the fragile memory of catastrophe and notions of the imagined apocalypse together in a provocative convergence. The pixelated squares of the manipulated jpeg images become the building blocks of a reconstituted past and a plausible future. It is as if these machine images have been reclaimed by human intervention, stripped of their clarity when viewed up close they become personal constructions – abstract things of discovery, messy human constructions. And yet they become clearer and therefore more real the further we are away from them reminding us that most of our memories are images made stored and distributed by someone else’s machine at a distance. To see then, is to understand.

Figure 290 From Thomas Ruff’s Jpegs series, jpeg co01 (Ruff, 2004).
This was my first experience at Ground Zero. The return to the accident as media archetype – the image loop personified. The site that constitutes the ultimate looking down – the gaze of the machine – peering back into the belly of the 20th century. To be there in that place at that time, March 25 2013, was my second chance. Six months earlier I was evacuated from New York City, when during a preview screening of a pre-release cut of *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), hosted by Mr Spielberg himself, to my surprise I began coughing up spots of blood. Back at the hotel it got worse, it was thick and dark and reeked of rotten meat. It was nearing midnight on the U.S. East Coast but it was only 8am in Australia, the office wouldn’t open for another half an hour. Plans needed to be made and flights needed to be booked. My feverish *Webjet* searches turned up the most economical option, a Cathay Pacific flight from JFK to Melbourne via Singapore. It left at lunchtime in New York, a hellish 32 hour ordeal. The flight’s departure time roughly correlated with the time I had booked my tour of Ground Zero. Instead I bought a face mask, a box of tissues, and some nasal spray to keep the airways moist. I left the *AirBnB* apartment with a few more days still on the clock and dragged my arse to the sidewalk. Sinking into the back of a yellow taxi I swallowed hard. 32 hours spitting into a stainless sink at 30,000 feet. Fuck.

I wouldn’t be certain of my health for almost another year. A left lower lobectomy, would put me right. But in the meantime, I wrangled the funding to return to America and to make the pilgrimage to Ground Zero. It was totally unsurprising the sense of absence the site engendered. It is after all a thing of absence. No images, no billboards, no holographic tour guides, no expository video kiosks to detail the history. Which is an odd thing. Vincent Mosco, in his text *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace*, makes the link between Castells and the symbolic significance of the original World Trade Centre: “The World Trade Center and especially its twin towers was a first attempt to create a hub for what Manuel Castells has called the Informational City, a space of flows or portal that simultaneously produces, manages and distributes data, messages, and ideas. People began to call New York a Global City to describe its ability to command and control the international production and distribution of resources, particularly information.” And then this: “It would indeed provide the first genuinely utopian space of the information age” (Mosco, 2004, p. 144).

Peering down at the solid black granite blocks, swollen walls of crystalline water endlessly gushing over them and into the pit below, it is hard to imagine such a thing now. The site is so very

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109 What was in abundance however was security, and lots of it. For a solid granite and steel memorial the queues, bag checks and body scans seemed excessive and was very unsettling. For a media artist committed to documenting the site it was also problematic. I had a Crumpler backpack stuffed to the gills with tech: a DSLR camera, mini-tripod, 28mm and 50mm lenses, a Zoom audio recorder, shotgun and lapel microphones and a Mac Book Pro. This is my kit. This also caused me no end of suspicion and interrogation. I was ghosted throughout my time at the memorial by two of New York City’s finest. “I am here to capture the atmosphere” I said, “to remember but also to create.” It was a difficult couple of hours.
Figure 291 Ground Zero (Goodwin, 2013)
masculine and ancient and modern in the same instance. Rock from the bowels of the earth, from some geologically violent time have been cut by machines to create the smooth hard lines of the modern memorial. Granite: forever, time unbroken, memory bounded by the history of the earth’s cosmic birth. A weighty assumption, but the right one, to be in this place is to feel the weight of a moment that shifted the collective consciousness of four billion people. The universe could barely weigh as much. Dark matter surrounds me; constituting the galactic network supporting everything else. The absence of evidence that constitutes Ground Zero, is the rock upon which the dark euphoric moment was most certainly first written.

And yet what is most striking about being at the edge of the memorial’s hulking interior – leaning self-consciously, and perhaps somewhat disrespectfully against the names laser etched into the ledge overlooking the watery abyss – is that there is no sight of the bottom. The water feature becomes an echo chamber of unprecedented depth, endlessness and repetition the most explicit of signifiers of what one might imagine a millennium to represent. We must presume that as long as the water flows, that the mechanisms of the long now, will outlast the video loop and the media archive. This place you could imagine will one day swallow all data.

September 11 provided an insignificant yet much vaunted death toll and a gruesome if not thrillingly voyeuristic assemblage of the end times. As the death toll grew, visualisations of flight paths emerged and sketched identikits of the ‘known assailants’ flashed across the world’s screens, the true trauma of the last great television event of the 20th century was lost in repetition and rapid machine translation. Gothic high-tech personified. It haunts the web as all great contemporary paradoxical stories do but it remains largely hidden from the mainstream venues of cultural production except for the gaudy exaggerated simulations. Mogadishu, Iraq, Aceh, Darfur, Mumbai and Haiti represent complex human concepts – injustice, racism, greed, fear, alienation – yet they rapidly become mechanically exposed image sequences, crude pixel renderings from DV cameras, mobile phones and hotel webcams. The previous centuries’ mono cultural television event has been transformed into a content on demand disaster portal. The depth of our understanding of these events is at once embellished by image frequency and dulled by over exposure. This is not just the media itself, but the mix of that media, the blend of content – opinion, hysteria, hype and paranoia (other fairly notable human concepts) – which constitute not just the web experience but the mass media’s interpretation of what the mix looks like. This complex layering of content and associated streams of meaning (data) presents a contemporary audience with a difficult translation. How do we define that which is in front of us? Are we experiencing the apocalypse or its simulation? Are we holding it in our hand or walking through its evolving catastrophe? Technoculture has become an intricate totalising narrative: the medium, the message and the meme. In this space of flows sight
has become mechanised, space militarised – time meaning and reality collapsed into a digital simulation. Nation states dissolve into wikis, faith into terror cells, race into genetic code, humanity repackaged as a distributable sequence of digital objects. The speed of this transformation – the acceleration of the global contraction and the fatalism of its digital authorship – inhibits our conceptualisation of the final image. It becomes dark – blank - a dead link like the black granite pixels of Ground Zero.

In the post 9/11 world, the romance of Armageddon is being replaced by the spectre of inevitable destruction, albeit on a smaller scale. Piece by piece, city by city, landmark by landmark, the delicate balance of post–World War II nuclear politics has given way to a new war, in which atomic bombs, capable of decimating an entire metropolis in just one blast, fit in suitcases. The global apocalypse depicted by Stanley Kubrick in 1964’s Dr Strangelove now seems simultaneously remote and infinitely more tangible. (Dixon, 2009, p. 156)

Echoing Virilio, Wheeler Dixon suggests that while we have gained a profound ability to conceptualise the end times we have lost the ability to see beyond the apocalypse: to see without going there, to see. To perceive without really being there. We have brought Žižek’s moment of endlessness upon ourselves via the creation of systems of machines that do our bidding somewhere between a thought, its expression and its eventual remediation. We have unwittingly co–opted the magic of the technology marketeers into the media of our socialisation and the language of our most rudimentary chores. The shaman-like mastery of the Futurist narrative has penetrated the socio–political space while far more nefarious technological agendas have snuck in behind them. Meanwhile the iUser examines the black mirror with a seriousness reserved only for it, dutifully swiping and tapping at its surface submitting to the interface parameters of the machine hive. From the stars to the ground beneath our feet we reconfigure the control room to plug directly into the simulation. We keep our devices close, the screen’s radiant warmth our enduring companion. The cameras dutifully record, the satellites ping us from above. Without looking, and while never knowing, we pin our hopes on the invisible. These things, these digital objects, these robots in the garden.

Vincent Mosco highlights this techno-cultural myth making that has perpetuated this transition from star gazers to screen savers: “The thorny questions arising from all the limitations that make us human were once addressed by myths that featured gods, goddesses, and the variety of beings and rituals that for many provide satisfactory answers. Today, it is the spiritual machines

\cite{Virilio2005}

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Paul Virilio from *The Accident of Art* (Virilio & Lotringer, 2005, p. 8).
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and their world of cyberspace that hold out the hope of overcoming life's limitations” (Mosco, 2004, p. 78). The simulation, the virtuality of the Cyber City, becomes our new techno-cultural frame of reference, a mimetic machine discourse of augmented objectivity and cautious ecstasy. Thereby feeding the anxious gothic tone of the contemporary condition both within the society it watches and archives and within its artistic expression of trauma and detachment. As Virilio cautions, this detachment risks reducing our capacity to comprehended notions of truth, our perceptive engagement diminished “in the face of a common reality that not only outstrips us in a tyrannical fashion, but literally outpaces all objective evaluation and thereby all understanding” as we stand perilously on the ledge overlooking the incomprehensible endlessness of our time (Virilio, 2005, p9).

This situation creates a distinct boundary around our corporeal self that also encompasses the devices and screens through which the iUser interprets and interacts with the vectors of the mediated world. This isolation defines the simulation as much as it co–opts its construction within our social and psychological perimeter. Daniel Miller citing Guy Debord in his essay On the Post–City writes: “In the age of the world picture, the ‘great Outside’ is screened out; individuals become sealed inside segregated realities, fed by wire pipes of specifically calibrated information. Everyone at the centre of their own virtual universe. Every bastard a king” (Miller, 2009).

And so the dark euphoric moment is here. 2014. Each of us masters of the universe, as Stewart Brand claims, in the introduction to the first 1968 Whole Earth Catalog, if “we are as Gods, we might as well get good at it” (Brand & Brockman, 2009). Yet we are also specimens in a much larger experiment, of domination and analysis. The manifestos of a century of techno-futurism that embolden the cyborgian promise of interconnectivity and man–machine symbiosis is not the streamlined liberation we had expected. Instead, the image loop of horror upon horror spirits away our willingness to see and to engage.

Meanwhile the rain falls with an acidic pang, the river breeds blood red algae and the unfed masses melt into the landscape. Billions of dollars are spent constructing the dystopian landscape of the future and billions more are spent accessing its dark visage, but in a mouse-click the full catastrophe of life is only a URL away. And yet we do not go there – not often. Sometimes we sit there, in the dark like the Mark Zuckerberg character at the end of David Fincher’s The Social Network (Fincher, 2010), dutifully hitting the refresh button, waiting for a sign, a signal, a gesture, something. As Peter Sloterdijk observes:

So, in the age of atmospheric toxins, strategies, and hidden agendas all such quasi–religious consenting to place one’s trust in one’s primary surroundings – be in nature, the cosmos, creation, homeland, situation, etc – takes on the guise of an invitation to self–harm. Advancing explication not only forces a semantic change in the meaning of naivety, it means that it becomes increasingly in–your–
face, and even objectionable; the naïve, nowadays, is that which encourages sleepwalking in the midst of present danger (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 108).

The colour palette of the techno-cultural narrative which began with the chromatic colour experiments of the Futurists and continued a century later with the electronic manufacturers of the millennial fire sale has darkened, not just on the surface but deep into the wire mesh. And as we fall, as we absorb these objects of our techno–cultural genesis, as we look down at the future hurtling up towards us, the present seems awash with data and light of an uncertain origin. But we shall never really feel the crush of the fall, the velocity of the impact. That, it would seem, is happening elsewhere.