Final Research Paper: *'Self', 'Other' and the Technological Sublime*

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Course: FINE 691, Graduate Seminar

Winter, 2012

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The contemporary, technological 'self' is often described as being fragmented, overly self-aware, and disillusioned with reality. What does this mean and how can this perspective be substantiated? I will position our notion of 'self'—both in our individual 'self-awareness' and in a convergence of a multiplicity of 'selves'—in relation to an ever changing notion 'other' and examine how these ideas have changed from the Modern, to the Postmodern and the Contemporary. I hope to outline a logical narrative in the development of 'self' to gain insight into the question posed above and to propose new ways of looking at the concept of 'reality' in a virtual technological environment. Historically, it is in encountering the sublime that the awareness of 'self' has come into sharp focus. I will look into whether or not these instances of heightened experience are still a possibility in our manufactured techno-reality. I will conclude this search—for the elusive technological sublime—in the virtual world of "Second Life" (SL), a Massive Multi-player On-line Role Playing Game (MMORPG), and with the artist, Gazira Babeli. Babeli embodies the concept of contemporary 'self', and through the portal of her performances, her viewers and participants are able to catch a glimpse of the technological sublime.

The Romantic Sublime: 'self' and nature

I will examine 'self', first, as 'contextualized being'. For the 'self' to exist, it needs to be placed into a relationship within a time and space continuum. I define time, as a determined unit of measurement that delineates our experience: "in our time", "all in good time", "my time has come", etc.. Time is connected to the 'self' in that we exist within a finite experience of it. It is recorded as historic narrative and we define ourselves through and in it. Space, on the other hand, can be considered 'other', as it is *perceived*, *sensed* or *experienced* as "outside" of the body, separated from it by degrees of subjectivity. In an over-simplification and use of clichéd

reductionism, we can see this in the mind and body divide, (also defined as the divide between spirit and matter, and reason and empiricism) that is intrinsically embedded in how we experience and sense the world. In this dualistic model of 'self' (mind existing within linear time), in opposition to an 'other' (separated by space), we see a number of scenarios play out, as power shifts between them.

We encounter in this dynamic, the 'self' as hero. A heroic 'self' is master over his universe; everything is experienced from the central pillar of the 'I'. But we can also find a more diminutive 'self': in the encounter with the magnificent power of nature. This 'self' must endure to survive. The stoic 'self' can be found in the sublime experience explored by the political philosopher Edmund Burke in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Burke provides us with the quintessential model of the 'self' posited against the 'other' of nature. This duality defines the poetics of Romanticism. Burke writes, in the chapter "On Sublime", in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas On the Sublime and Beautiful*, "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment; and astonishment is the state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (41). The experience of the sublime brings about an apprehension, or a 'little death', in the soul of the 'self'. For a brief moment, the individual loses his sense of control and becomes powerless. Burke continues, "Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on an irresistible course" (42). We see in Burke's nature a power so great that it seemingly 'thinks first', 'anticipating' our thoughts, and enslaving our reasoning powers. We succumb to its sway, pull, and directive and are swept up in the moment in a determined manner. Burke also points to the terror we experience in the prospect of facing our own death, (the end of our time), in the experience of the

sublime. Burke states, "ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have" (48). We all face the inevitable finality of our 'selves' and Burke believes that the sublime is "an idea belonging to self-preservation" (72). In foreseeing our own death we are confronted with the inconceivable notion of nothingness. We receive a shock because we are unable to conceive what this is. Space is no longer definable and linear time has stopped.

In the idea of self-preservation, we see another side to Burke's experience of the sublime, one that fortifies rather than diminishes 'self'. We put up a fight not to succumb to darkness and the void. Burke notes that through the challenge of facing this natural 'other' we are able to strengthen and transform ourselves. The heroic 'self' that is born out of conflict, is described below by the epistemologist David Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*,

> It is a quality very observable in human nature, that any opposition, which does not entirely discourage and intimidate us, has rather a contrary effect, and inspires us with a more than ordinary grandeur and magnanimity. In collecting our force to overcome the opposition we invigorate the soul, and give it an elevation with which otherwise it would never have been acquainted. (qtd. in Kirwan 9)

This 'opposition' is inhabited in the idea of the 'other'. This concept is also beautifully illustrated in Will Slocombe's book *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*. Slocombe discusses Emmanuel Levinas's idea of *mauvaise conscience*:

> *Mauvaise conscience* is a mode of Being that realizes it exists only because of the Other, that the diacritic relation between itself and the Other is such that should the Other cease to exist, so will it cease to exist. This arises by the face-to-face relation because the face

of the Other brings us to the awareness of who we are and forces us into responsibility

towards it. (Slocombe 62)

In relation to the 'self' and 'nature' dichotomy evidenced in Burke, we see here an interchange—

a playing-off each other—in that one cannot exist without the other. 'Self' and 'other' define

one another. In Levinas's *mauvaise conscience* we also find an implied ethics: a 'do onto

others…' or 'love and protect thy neighbour' rule. Ethics are also at play in the Kantian sublime.

Modernism to Postmodernism: 'self', the supersensible, and the differend in Kant and Lyotard

The ethical sphere is present in a traditional reading of Kant and linked to a supersensible

Idea that prescribes moral laws to guide reason *a prior* (without conscious willing or thought).

We are 'shocked' into conscious awareness of the heightened 'moral' sphere in the moment of

the sublime where reason and imagination are caught in a battle of speculation. Both (reason and

imagination), are trying to perceive and conceive that which is beyond perception and

conceptualization (Lyotard 25). To understand what is meant by this, is it useful to examine how

Kant outlines other forms of reflection or 'reflexive judgement'—those dealing with taste and

notions of the good, the esteemed and the beautiful. These notions of taste cause states or

sensations that we deem pleasurable or unpleasureable.   In reflexive judgement, imagination—

the faculty of presentation—works in opposition to the faculty of understanding—the ability to

build concepts—in the experiencing of forms (Lyotard 18). When these faculties are in a state of

equilibrium, we experience pleasure. However, in the sublime moment, "the content of forms is

weak", understanding is unable to conceptualize what is being sensed and, thus, replaces it with

something that is beyond experience (Lyotard 184). It is here that intrinsic reason takes over for

understanding in the balance with imagination. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* writes, "The sublime is a thought that is felt on the occasion of an absence of the object's form. But this absence is only due to the thought of another object by means of a concept, the Idea of absolute causality and magnitude" (231).

Christine Battersby's analysis of Kant's sublime is particularly helpful in understanding how the "I" is strengthened by the supersensible link, through the faculty of reason, in the sublime moment:

> Reason is involved from the start; but this is 'reason' used in the technical Kantian sense of something excessive to understanding, and involves the three Ideas—of freedom, God and immortality—that are 'beyond' or 'other' to the space time framework that is supplied by the senses and organized into a unity via the understanding. (32)

Battersby continues,

> Thus, there is in Kant a double, in some ways paradoxical, move whereby the paradigm 'I' seems to deprive itself of its imaginative powers but, at the same time, also experiences itself as strengthened through surrendering itself to reason and to a purposiveness that seems 'other' to its own empirical concerns. (34)

Battersby takes on Kant with a feminist stance. She finds in Kant the substantiation of a modern—conforming to rules and order—'manly man' that finds connection, through reason, with a higher order. This higher order ordains and gives to the thinking "I" a certain power and, as Battersby notes, "a purposiveness" (34). For Kant this 'purpose' is linked to morality, in that we instinctively want to be 'good' and to do 'good'. Substantiation of the "I" happens through the 'intellectual' cognition of the 'self' as a moral, thinking being.

The external force we saw in Burke has thus been transferred to a force that exists in the mind of the 'self' in Kant. Lyotard quotes Kant in his *Lessons* while discussing the role that subjective reflection takes in elevating the terminology of the beautiful to that of the sublime: "The existence of the object remains indifferent to us, as it is seen only as the occasion [die Veranlassung] for our becoming aware of the store of talents [Talente] within us [in uns inne zu warden] that elevate us [erhabenen] above the mere animal level" (qtd. in Lyotard 236). We see, in Kant, a mode of experience that is more egocentric—an experience that begins and ends in the 'self' and is touched by the supersensible—rather than one where the more 'definable' nature holds sway, as in the Burkean sublime.

Battersby's reading of Kant is modern. Using Slocombe's definition, the modern adheres to "rules and regulations" and fits within the linear narrative of history (11). Looking to Kant from this perspective, 'order, law, and reason' are controlling factors on the imagination. They mold man into a heroic and heightened 'self', capable of touching Idea through self-awareness. This, using the words of artist Fred Tomaselli, can be seen as the "utopian struggle" of modernism (220). Lyotard, on the other hand, finds in Kant the *post*modern. Lyotard highlights that Kant's focus is not on the strengthening of the 'self', but in the irreconcilable 'differend' between the faculties. The great unknowable—the paradox of the thinking 'self' not being able to arrive at a concrete definition or purpose for its existence—is implied in Kant for Lyotard. Lyotard writes, "The sublime feeling is neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization but is, rather, the destruction of one by the other in the violence of their differend. This differend cannot demand, even subjectively, to be communicated to all thought" (239). For Lyotard, the sublime is a conflicted state that is "Violent, divided against itself, it is simultaneously fascination, horror, and elevation" (231). This concept is key for understanding the postmodern

condition. Slocombe discusses the postmodern in relation to Lyotard's Analysis, "Here the postmodernism is defined in terms of the sublime, as 'that which puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself.' (…) [T]o discuss the sublime as merely some component of postmodern thought is to miss the point that the postmodern, in Lyotard's definition, is itself sublime" (57).

In quoting the artist Barnett Newman and his work, and examining Lyotard's reading of it, Slocombe highlights the "presence of absence" in the work, and "that they 'make use' of nothingness" (qtd. in Slocombe 65). The viewer is in the situation of being "'here' observing the painting, but the 'self' is an almost 'minimal occurrence'" (65). Slocombe continues, that for Newman, "creation is not an act performed by someone; it is what happens (this) in the midst of the indeterminate" (65). In the postmodern, we witness the loss of the 'heroic self'. The hero is replaced by the indeterminate, undefinable, free, yet hyper self-conscious 'self'. Free, in the sense that the self has freed itself from the linear narrative of history and cultural expectation. I would argue, however, that Newman also embodies a paradox to this idea. Through his grandiose attempts at touching the sublime and beyond, he further sanctifies the artist as spiritual 'messenger', rather than erasing the artist from the work. This violent swing between intention and inevitable objectification is what art endures in the postmodern.

Move to the Edge: liminal space and the technological sublime

In Kant's moment of the sublime, when reason is posited in agency with imagination, they spin off each other and an abyss is created. This abyss embodies the inability to present a representation of the sublime; it is filled with indeterminacy (Lyotard 24). A different reading of the space between, or 'at the edge' of the abyss, is found in the idea of the liminal. George Quasha and Charles Stein, in an essay examining the work of Gary Hill, define liminal as being

the place at the edge, threshold or margin from where we are able to "perceive totality", allowing for reflection on reality. They write, "Liminality could be described as the state in which reality questions itself, inquires into what it is to be itself" (215). Self-awareness and contextualizing of the 'self' within totality creates a leveling-out of power. This happens as the individualized power of 'self' is shared between all the factors that together create the network necessary for 'being'. These factors include amongst others, a community and social relationships, an environment (physical, political and cultural), temporality, and an economic structure. These elements, within the 'whole of reality', constitute a contextualized, contingent and convergent experience. This self-realisation within an extended 'space and time' takes away the centrality of the individual ego. In other words, through focusing on the indeterminate in the postmodern, the "self" has been taken out of the centre of the universe. Instead, it can be found sitting on its edge peering in at the 'whole'. From this liminal locale, we are granted more of an over-all, all-encompassing view—from the outside in—as opposed that limited to the inside-out. This has split the 'self' in two: the 'self' as observer and 'self-observed'.

'Reality': in the machine

As seen by Quash and Stein, the liminal view also brings the idea of 'reality' into the center of our consciousness and, thus, 'reality' becomes a major theme in thinking about the technological sublime. What do we mean by the 'real' and 'reality'? Can the manufactured 'nothingness' and infinity of the virtual world create the same frisson that is experienced in the vastness of 'real' physical space and being? Tomaselli, in an interview with Siri Hustvedt, writes: "Our culture of escapism has irrevocably shaped our world. It has helped elect our leaders, and is also one of our dominant commodities. Under these circumstances, the 'real' is the strangest thing there is" (221). Looking around at our highly commoditized and

manufactured reality, it really is difficult to distill the 'real'. In his introduction to the survey of

texts on the Sublime, Simon Morley defines the Technological sublime:

> *Nature* turns us back to the roots of much contemporary art in notions of romantic
>
> sublimity, identifying the natural world as a primary source of such experiences, while
>
> *Technology* looks at how to a large extent it is now the man-made world of machines that
>
> produces in us many of the kinds of emotional states once associated with nature. (20)

To further examine the question whether or not 'man-made' or technological realities can be

experienced as 'real' we will look to the research of several media and technology theorists,

working in this field.

The Media Equation, by Reeves and Nass, is a study, supported by a series of controlled

experiments, looking at how people interact with and respond to media. The author's

proposition is that people treat computers and media like they do 'real' people and events, even

when there are only minimal "personality" cues present and when the user is *consciously*

interacting with a "machine". Reeves and Nass conclude that: "People's responses to media are

fundamentally social and natural" (251). This conclusion is evidence that fabricated realities, and

simulated virtual games garner similar social responses as do 'real' situations with 'real' people.

This is interesting if we adopt these finding of the idea of 'self'. The psychological determinism

of one's technological 'self', or avatar, must then echo that of our other social 'selves' that we

present in everyday reality.

Our relationship to media, and the role it has in shaping who we are, is also explored by

Nicholas Carr in his book: *The Shallows.* Relying on testimony and predictions given by

philosophers, academics and media researchers, as well as on evidence gathered from

neurological testing and imaging, and from personal experience, Carr makes a convincing

argument that our brains are shaped by media. This is seen not only in how we act socially, but

in the actual physical, neurological structure of the brain—its neuroplasticity. Over time, brain

patterns change through the use of media. Being immersed in virtual spaces affects behaviour in

the same way real social interactions do. Our brains are even capable of producing 'realities'

where none exist. Carr quotes Jason Mitchell, the head of Harvard's Social Cognition and

Affective Neuroscience Laboratory when he writes,

> 'chronic over-activity of those brain regions implicated in social thought can,' writes
>
> Mitchell, 'lead us to perceive minds where no minds exist, even in 'inanimate objects.'
>
> There's growing evidence, moreover, that our brains naturally mimic the states of the other
>
> minds we interact with, whether those minds are real or imagined.' (213)

Mitchell believes that our nervous systems sympathize and "merge" (213) with computers

because we have instinctual social processes that tell us we have to get along with other 'social

beings' to increase our chances of survival –humans survive by working together. This supports

the assumption that if something exists only in our imagination or is experienced in a virtual

space it still exists as a very 'real' personally constructed, social 'reality'.

If we are unable to differentiate 'real life' experience from those constructed by both

technology and by our imaginations, the line between the 'real' and the 'other' in the

technological sublime is invariably vague and thin. In *The Shallows,* Carr quotes the media

theorist Marshal McLuhan: "Even as our technologies become extensions of ourselves, we

become extensions of our technologies. […] The more we use it, the more we mold ourselves to

its form and function" (209), and that, "Whenever we use a tool to exert greater control over the

outside world, we change our relationship with that world" (212). McLuhan believes that all of our technologies are extensions of our 'selves'. For example, the wheel is an extension of the foot, the telephone is an extension of the ear, etc. As a result of these 'extensions', there is a resulting 'amputation' or 'numbing' of that actual sense or function. McLuhan equates this idea with the story of Narcissus. Narcissus became 'numb' to all other sensation when he fell in love with the externalized image of himself—his own reflection in a pool of water. He was not aware, however, that he was looking at an image of himself (McLuhan 51). In the same narcissistic manner, we are not aware that our technologies are extensions of our 'selves' and we often fall into a blind obsession with them. Electricity, and the resulting technological reality, is, in McLuhan's view, the externalization of the nervous system. Because the nervous system functions as the centre of our being, this externalization is the final step in a complete numbing of our bodies and our 'selves'. The result is similar to the liminal view already presented. When we 'externalize' our awareness and consciousness we can see ourselves from the outside-in and we become aware of our place within a broader network. This results in a fragmentation or dissipation of our centralized power. The following paragraph, paraphrased here, provides a clarification of some of these concepts:

> The principle of numbness comes into play with electric technology as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy. But it is strikingly the age of consciousness of the unconscious, (…) the electric age gave us the means of instant, total field-awareness. With such awareness, the subliminal life, private and social, has been hoicked up into full view (…). Existentialism offers a philosophy of structures, rather than categories, and of total social involvement

instead of the bourgeois spirit of individual separateness or points of view. In the electric

age we wear all mankind as our skin. (McLuhan 56)

Wearing all of mankind as our skin, is a powerful image that I believe viscerally describes the

notion of the 'plugged-in', 'self'. We are almost always, connected to some sort of electronic

device that feeds and stores information. This is the same information that defines us as a

society.

Role-playing: multiple selves in techno-reality

Now that we have explored the dissipation of power from the individual to a contingent

'whole' through an externalized 'self' mediated by technology, it is useful to examine the idea of

a 'constructed self'. In *The Situated Self,* Bibi van den Berg examines existence in the not-too-

distant future of Ambient Intelligence. She defines Ambient Intelligence as being created by

artificial intelligence technologies that blend so seamlessly into everyday life that we become

both unaware and dependent on them. She predicts that we will soon be living in smart homes

that will automatically cater to all our need satisfactions—no button pushing required. For

example, these 'personalized' environments will 'read' who is in the space and then adjust the

light, soundscape and temperature accordingly.   Van den Berg is interested in how these types of

technologized realities will influence our idea of 'self'. Her concept is that social interactions,

and by proxy interactions with technologies, build our personas. This can be compared to the

way that I defined the contextualization of the 'self' in relation to and building narratives within

time and space, in this case both are controlled and determined by technology.

Van den Berg's notions of identity are based in the Interactionist school of thought. This

methodology has its start with George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, which has

become "one of the most popular sociological perspectives of the twentieth century (van den Berg 31). Erving Goffman, an offshoot member of the Meadian school, writes that "identities are constructed and expressed in and through *interactions* between people (qtd. in van den Berg 31). Goffman continues by explaining that in determining and defining a situation, individuals choose "a certain 'role'. Having assumed their 'role', the player then engages in 'performances' or 'presentations' (…)" (31). These 'performances' are judged by the situation, the audience, and the performer him/herself. According to Goffman, people perform both 'sincere' and 'cynical' performances, and that "when roles are frequently portrayed and consistently valued by both the audience and the performer himself a person may come to identify with that role to such an extent that it becomes part of his self image" (32). The 'self', from this perspective, can be seen as a construction made from many different 'rehearsed' roles. Van den Berg writes,

> Identities are constructed in social interactions, and hence are dynamic and open-ended. They may change over time, and a person may have conflicting sides to his or her identity—through identification with and internalization of conflicting roles in different situations one may display selves that are incoherent and complex, yet nevertheless exist alongside each other in one and the same person. Identities are thus multi-dimensional, multifaceted, variable, and changeable. (32)

I would argue that in this multiplicity and 'role playing' of the 'self', we find an important aspect of the technological sublime. The malleability and instability of these 'acts' creates in us that same sense of uncertainly and a questioning of 'self', as when we encountered the supersensible or the overwhelming force of nature in the past. Here, the instability of 'self' exists in the instability in the concept of 'real self'. In the realm of MMORGS, this is especially significant

because one is consciously building a 'second self'. As we saw in the research by Reeves and Nass, on-line or manufactured realities and experiences are hard to separate from 'real life' ones.

One would imagine that the ability to create multiple selves in online and virtual realities would lead to an unlimited sense of freedom of the 'self': the ability to be and do whatever one desired. What we see, instead, is that just like in the Kantian sense of freedom—one guided by moral or ethical threads overseen by supersensible law—these new 'virtual selves' also follow laws and 'understood' limitations. "We choose our performances," according to van den Berg, "on the basis of our interpretation of the 'definition of the situation' a definition that is thoroughly imbued with ideas on social rules, the appropriateness of behaviours, and the limits within which one's performance 'ought' to stay if one wants it to be labeled as befitting the situation and the expectations that apply there" (32). We always want to fit in, to be accepted and to do the 'right' thing according to social cues and the social order. It is no different in on-line worlds, and what I have observed is that everyone acts even more according to stereotypes and expectations in Second Life (SL) than in Real Life (RL). The interesting difference between the a priori laws described by Kant, and the law and order present in MMORPGs, is that the laws in the virtual world have themselves been constructed by humans—by a corporation.

In the virtual world, the 'other' is manmade. The manmade 'other' follows a mathematical code; our imagination has been set against our own rational mind. In the same breath, the 'other' can be seen as a figment of our imagination. The two Kantian faculties are set against each other and themselves—but also melded together—creating a 'second self' in a second life. Van den Berg follows Zygmunt Bauman's trajectory of shifting concepts of reality from the pre-modern, in which we "conceived of the natural and the social world as predestined 'Divine creation', for us to be accepted as is,", to a Modern one, which "led to a whole new

perspective on the world: a world to be shaped and molded into whatever form we human beings figured would most suit our (rationally construed) ends and needs" (qtd. in van den Berg 27). It is the same with identity. Van den Berg argues, "like everything else, modernity turned identity into a 'life project'" (27). I should stress, that van den Berg does not see technology as determining and guiding an individual outright, but that the two exist in a mutually exclusive and linked relationship. The elements work together and define each other in the whole.

The Narrative of 'Self': modernism, to the postmodern and the contemporary

So far, we have examined selected histories of the idea of 'self' and its relationship with the sublime, beginning with Burke and Kant whose theories define some of the most striking developments in this field. In Burke, we examined the relationship of the 'self' with the 'other' in the romantic dynamic of 'man versus nature'. In Kant we saw the 'self' existing in a not-so-clearly-definable relationship with a supersensible Idea. Lyotard focuses on the differend imbedded in Kant's sublime and highlights the postmodern dilemma of 'presenting the unpresentable'. Finally, I have explored some contemporary and technological perspectives where we find the 'self' represented as a fragmented, liminal being: self-aware and embodying multiple selves in multiple time/space constructs. We have also looked at the construction of identity through Interactionism in both social and virtual environments and situations. To conclude, I will bring the work of Gazira Babeli into the conversation. It is in her work that we find the elusive, contemporary, technological sublime, as well as traces of the Burkean and Kantian ones.

Gazira Babeli: the technological sublime

Gazira Babeli exists in the MMORPG, *Second Life* (SL). SL is an online game platform that hosts over ten million members. SL was created and is administered by Linden Labs, based in California. In the introductory video, *Second Life* is introduced as: "a place to connect; a place to shop; a place to work; a place to love; a place to explore; a place to be; be different; be yourself; free yourself; free your mind; change your mind; change your look; love your look; love your life" (*SL*). When entering SL, players create an avatar that becomes a 'second self'. We have already explored the idea that for the 'psychological' and 'behavioural' reality of the participants, the experience of the 'second self' is not that different from an 'actual' social one. In discussing this reality/virtual divide in the SL experience, Babeli, in conversation with FlimFlam Wirxli states, "in SL you forget the 'computer', it disappears and you are totally inside frame space. Everyone knows that this is a Real Experience (…)" (*Wirxli*). In another interview, with Tilman Baumgärtel, Babeli says, "Maybe these lives (RL and SL) are not so different: symbolic abstractions and virtuality are common attributes" (qtd. in *Baumgärtel*). Another description of this ambiguous experience is provided by Justin Clemens, who has written succinctly on the 'space' and 'reality' of SL. The following excerpt can be found in his essay that accompanies the Australian government funded SL project *Babelswarm*:

> Whenever one enters an environment such as *Second Life*, one is simultaneously in: 'first life', at a keyboard, probably in a room of some kind, in some kind of urban space (although this is now not of course necessarily the case; in a particular 'space' in *Second Life* itself. […] This latter space is further framed by: i) the screen itself; ii) the frame of the *Second Life* interface; iii) the 'frame' that is the specific locale in *Second Life*; iv) the frame of the avatar view (AV), which might either be default (the characteristic over-the-

shoulder aspect, with the upper back of the avatar in frame) or mouse look (as if you were

looking through your avatar's eyes), or even in the third person, when one's relationship

to an avatar is completely separated. (*12*)

As seen in these quotes from Babeli, and in Clemen's description, time and space are

complicated in SL. The multiple views and framing potentials, mean that we can be inside the

head of the avatar, controlling the avatar from an exterior vantage point, or be indifferent to the

actions of the avatar altogether. The 'self' can thus be said to inhabit several different spaces and

times, at the same time. This complicates a clear definition of 'self', as we may perhaps be both

'self' and 'other' concurrently.

We experience Babeli's identity through the aesthetics of her very specific 'costume':

shaman meets Beuys, meets the Matrix. On the power of Babeli's persona, Domenico Quaranta

writes,

Each of Gazira's works adds another facet to her persona, and her legend. A

painstakingly cultivated legend, in the knowledge that in a virtual world, identity building

is one of the main strategies of signification, and the avatar is the artist's very first work

(…) in Second Life you can meet loads of avatars but few people. Gazira is one of the

latter. She is not someone's puppet: she is someone in her own right." (*Quaranta*)

What is interesting about Babeli is that she only exists as her 'self' in the game, (except for a

couple of, what I believe to be failed, attempts at crossing over into the 'real' context of an art

gallery). She is described, by Patrick Lichty, a participant and artist in SL in his own right, in

his article "*I know Gaz Babeli*", to be "a true Barthian 'dead author' in that she never references

her operator," that, rather "Gaz uses a recursive modernism, deconstructing her identity with

every work (…)" (*Lichty*). However, at the same time, Lichty states that Gazira, "'griefs' my aesthetic and critical assumptions and in a way it feels like there is flesh growing back around the machines of intellectual abstraction" (*Lichty*). The paradox, is that even though Babeli exists only as code in the constructs of a machine, she again opens up conversations that question 'self', 'reality' and 'experience', as did the philosophers tackling notions of the sublime. Under the sub-heading "Gazira, the artist", in "*Gaz me two times baby*", Quaranta writes, "What's new in the context of virtual worlds, is being able to start talking about the body, time, space, identity once more" (*Quaranta*). It is perhaps this conundrum of the self-reflexive dichotomy that Babeli drops on us—the experience of being a thinking, yet not quite 'real self', within an existing but not quite 'real reality'—that brings about the same kind of existential uncertainty that Lyotard highlighted in the postmodern Kantian paradox. How then might we see the other notions of the sublime in Gazira Babeli's performances?

In examining SL from a Burkean stance, the infinite 'space' of SL echoes that of the 'real' universe. The virtual world has the characteristic of infinity, because we can endlessly build code and add computing power to expand it. This epic computational potential creates in us a similar state of unease and awe as when we are standing in a vast, awe inspiring, and 'natural' vista. Of course, the difference is that we have created this space; it does not exist 'naturally'. This dichotomy posits 'self' versus 'machine', rather than, 'self' versus 'nature'. The machine is in our control, whereas the romantic nature was not—or so it would seem. I would argue that most gamers experience virtual space as if it was entirely out of their power to change anything in or about it. Participation remains largely passive. It is Gazira Babeli's work that shocks the avatar out of this passivity and makes the player realize that SL is "an imperfect mishmash of code, textures, and polygons" (*Quaranta qtd. in Waeder*).

Babeli accomplishes this 'awakening' of the avatars to their 'code' in a number of works. In one striking performance, Babeli acts out all the possible 'codings' of SL's facial expressions in quick succession and looping incessantly. There are only a limited number of ways that avatars are able to express emotion through their facial movements and these are the same for everyone, (unless, of course, you purchase a broader variety of these animations). The resulting performance is uncanny, and a little bit creepy. Babeli 'acts-out' these contrived emotional responses out of context and with no attached causality. She is a puppet run by code.

Gazira Babeli references the romantic sublime in her *Grey Goo* works. Babeli stands in front of, and is dwarfed, by a SL landscape reminiscent of Casper David Friedrich's iconic "Wanderer Above the Mist" painting. *Grey Goo* in this case, endlessly reproducing question-marks, overwhelms Babeli and the viewer while filling the space. *Grey Goo*, in other works, has also taken the form of ever-reproducing Warholian bananas and the video game character Mario, from the Super Mario Brothers Franchise. *Grey Goo* has the ability to crash the game's system and temporarily shut down the platform. It caused a large amount of fear in SL inhabitants and programmers when it was first unleashed. When facing *Grey Goo*, avatars are powerless; they are stuck in the machine as the code runs amuck and self-destructs. We are literally confronted with the great question: who are we, what can we understand of existence, and what lies beyond the great unknown? The *Grey Goo* physically knocks us down and provides no answers: the answer of nothingness. Have we just encountered Lyotard's Kantian differend: of the knowable unknowable? Seemingly, these questions cannot be answered in our 'second life' either.

We find many of the contemporary, liminal, fragmented and convergent views of the "self" in Babeli's performances as well. In *Come Together* we are invited to step onto a pedestal where our bodies fragment and recombine with other 'participants'. This is a convergent dance

where we become one with a 'whole' (bunch of other people). This work speaks of the 'dissipation' quality of the technological sublime. You feel at once powerless, and empowered, as you participate in this extraordinary act of kinetic 'living' sculpture.

In *Come to Heaven* Babeli drops you from a height of 21,987.0987 metres. Your body disintegrates into pixelated chunks and your limbs multiply in the force of the fall. The code cannot compute this kind of extreme action and the system malfunctions in its animation. Again, you are helpless in your plight, as in many of Gaz's actions, but you are also aware of your double 'self'. Your adrenalin is raging as your 'second life' flashes in front of your 'second eyes', but your 'first self' safely watches on from the liminal view at the edge of the screen. Clemens describes the confused time and space experience of SL, in *Babelswarm*, in the context of broader media implications:

> Not quite a game, not quite acceptably a platform for art, then, not quite this, not quite that—this ambiguous, disturbing not-quiteness becomes itself an interesting and irreducible feature of Second Life […] The disquietude induced by Second Life's evasive not-quiteness directs us to the problematic dislocations that media by definition produces, to their confusion power, and their communicational transformations. (*21*)

Is the 'machine space' the adversary 'other' of contemporary times? Will this 'other' force us into strengthening the definition of 'self' in an attempt to relocate ourselves to a more stable time and space than that afforded by mediated experience? Or will our sense of 'self' continue to dissipate into fragmented noise, Clemen's 'confusion power'? Is the decentralized ego a better option for humanity and humanness than the self-interested egocentric one? Babeli does not provide an answer to these questions but she raises them, as well as others that I have not gone

into here. I think that Alan Sondheim, at the end of his article, "*I met my Baby, out behind the Gaz-Works",* encompassed the strength of Babeli's work best when writes,

> So one engages both crit-ically and psychologically/psychoanalytically - the works create both contemplation and affect, in ways we're not used to. And that, at least for me, is one of the highest goals of art - to create that sense of dis/comfort that gives us a place to question everything, and to return from that questioning hopefully wiser. […] Gaz is a pioneer in the body and space of the Other - and perhaps nothing more need have been said than that. (*Sondheim*)

Conclusion

Gazira Babeli playfully and profoundly engages the concept of 'self' in her work. The viewer is confronted with their two and sometimes even three selves while participating in her performance works. In the process of catching glimpses of the 'real' yet 'unreal' selves, the paradox of existing in an 'unreal reality' is revealed. We act out in our own volition, but are taken hostage by Babeli's scripts and, by proxy, by the programmed virtual platform script in which we participate. On a symbolic scale, we are made aware of what corporate 'free' market society has become: the illusion of the freedom of 'self' in a very controlled and 'marketed' environment. This scripted 'freedom'—the engagement of the 'power' of our imaginations—in the tightly regulated and controlled virtual game platform—brings to light the often conflicted, fragmented, liminal, and manipulated idea of 'self' that is defined by the technological contemporary. Gazira Babeli "hammers the void" and, in unsuspecting moments, our 'second selves' are shocked out of the encoded malaise of their 'second reality' and catch a glimpse of the sublime.

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