

## LOOK, NO WIRES! - SOME NOTES AROUND THE IDEA OF A SIGN. (1, 2, NOTHING)

'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, `tapping at my chamber door -

Only this, and nothing more.'<sup>i</sup>

(E A Poe, The Raven)

$$\frac{\text{queer}}{\text{gay}} = \frac{\text{signifier}}{\text{signified}} = \frac{\text{desire}}{\text{need}} \quad \text{ii}$$

Plausible indices of a unicorn may be produced using a set of horseshoes and a bull's horn, and do not testify to the existence of unicorns. A faked photograph of a unicorn, or whatever, may be assembled, using pieces of real photographs, processing them in a computer, or even creating them entirely by means of a computer program. Of course, the latter pictures are no photographs, and so no indices, but there is no way we can discover that from looking at them ... For all practical purposes, then, indices cannot testify to the existence of their objects.<sup>iii</sup>

I found this third incipit, - (the first will explain itself in due course; the second is refuted by the first which properly makes [un]clear the Lacanian relation of real and the imaginary, whereas the second believes that the imaginary ((in this case the queer)) can be seen or literally brought into view by a design rather than by a poetic), on the internet, amongst the many linguistics and philosophy sites that crop up when we begin our daily grind with Google. And doubtless, in this case as in

countless other cases, if the quotation does not point to an object, nor, according to its own argument, may it do so, then at least it is still safe to say that it emanates from a subject of sorts, individual, collective, corporate... That should be axiomatic, even though the nature of the subject remains an enigma or immaterial. The subject-enunciation of the internet works much as it does in daily speech, in academic lectures or in law courts – wherever, and in this respect the working papers of the European Graduate School, the sex chat rooms and gambling parlours, to take but three kinds of example, are up there on their websites in much the same way as origins of enunciation. The internet is but one historical formation of the process and, in the end, there may be nothing more or less interesting about it than the traces that it leaves in works of art or the accumulation of wasted time.

Anyway I was struck by this quotation as I thought that I myself had recently seen a unicorn or two, or some phenomenon corresponding to an index of some thing that certainly does not exist in the form that the indexical system represents it. This was ‘in’ the art work around which this essay circles, David Haines’ video *Three Months* (2004), an acted out or performed version of the transcript of a three-month long exchange between two men on the well-know gay sex site, Gaydar. Here, even in an initial exposition, the problem is exemplified at the smallest element of terminology. Are the unicorns in the work, or is the work itself the set of a unicorn system? What is the invisible spare ground between a performance and an acting out, as the form of a possible referent for either the one or the other, the ‘about’ with which they are concerned? Is this anything?

The puzzling character of *Three Months*, which is not a blue movie, led me to think that, in respect of the theoretical questions of indexicality framed by this conference, were I obliged to choose between competing theories of language, the model of Emile Benveniste in his discussion of

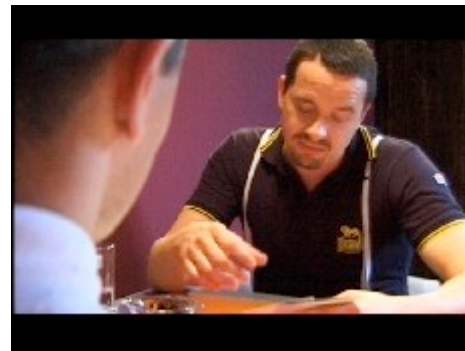
pronouns would be a clear winner.<sup>iv</sup> I am happy with it as it works at a the practical level of allowing us have a speaker and, at the same time, gets along with and sticks nicely to both a Saussurean and a post-Derridian model too.

It makes for what we can call a mechanism of uncanny thinking around the enunciative character of the 'I', and permits a means of tracing a thought-subject relation in the art work rather than providing an explanatory model for it, an 'as if/what if' relation. With Benveniste the finally uninteresting question of the binary in Saussure versus the betterness of a tripartite system in Pierce falls away. In a world of cultural phenomena that can anyway be thought through *différance* and deferred action in their mutual excitation, the supposedly reductive function of the binary looks like something of a red herring, as is the Piercean model if it is adopted to assign a refuge from binary reductionism. We can rather concern ourselves with the inherent fragility of an enunciation, its evanescence, and its incoherence. The performance, which we find in this fragile time or moment, lends itself properly to the mutual interrogation of works of art of different forms and media amongst one another. It allows us to set aside questions of the medium, such as new versus old, virtual versus non-virtual, film versus paint etc., other than understanding it as one element of signification amongst others. At the same time it gives us reason why we may, unashamedly, claim to be Cartesian subjects.

This is germane to what follows as the iteration of 'I', as a subject fully confident of at least fantasising its goals, starts with the first tapping on the keyboard. Sometimes the mood of this procedure reminds me of aspects of Descartes *Méditations*, especially those passages where he watches himself, observes his own physical being, but here it is not God that secures the subject, only wanting to desire and the text's scrolling as its figure. Any other deity is wanting.

Yet, having put all of that in order, what *Thee Months* confounds is the very idea that the *énoncé* emanates from anywhere! Yet at the same time we see the *énoncé* as the iteration of a desire on the part of the other – I wish you to desire me in this way/to be desired by you in that way, and this iteration is who or what I am (at the moment of writing).

This cutting between the said and the seen as the men come to know or invent one another and a kind of self, generates a rhythm of image and sound, in which what is, in effect, voice-over is spoken as if daily speech. Is this what seen speech sounds like? These inner speculations concerning the heard separate the seen document from the probability of its existence other than in the disinterestedly aesthetic logic of the video as a text - which is yet not a fiction. It is not necessary to explicate this but rather to see where it belongs in the matter of meaning at all, or as *signifiant*. How do we attend to this?



If we take the distinctions between, for example, Henri Meschonnic's poetics of rhythm and Julia Kristeva's semiotic chora, we

can begin that these differences are about nothing other than the way in which we attend to an utterance and inhabit it. But to go on to take this literally is to come to wonder if these differences really concern nothing, and the possible form of their unity. But a nothing that we might want to save for interrogation and play, which is a nothing of the text in the process rather as Benveniste supposes a nothing of the subject other than in enunciation. As I understand the ‘being only in writing’ of Meschonnic and the ‘being in chora’ (my phrases) of Kristeva, they both pose the emergence of *signifiance* in relation to something which is said/written, but which is neither its material its meaning, a commonality rather than a difference.<sup>v</sup> And this thing in common is indeed no thing at all and, at the same time, not Hegel’s impossible nothing. But it might also be the nothing that unfolds in *Three Months*, a something that can happen only in the video or as the video, its substance.

Nothing is both the precondition of the subject/text and the continuing absence that we hypothesize as a beginning, constantly played out in daily life and thought through concepts such as the unconscious or the *néant*. The concern with nothing, then, from the beginnings of Christian theology in texts such as Augustine’s discussion of the Book of Genesis in the eleventh book of his *Confessions* to twentieth-century phenomenology and existential thought is important enough to be brought into the play of reflections on the sign in the framework of contemporary technologies of vision and attention. The more so when we want to ask if something has happened, if anything. E A Poe in his *The Raven* and T S Eliot in *The Waste Land* are insistent on the matter as something in poetic language:

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?

Nothing again nothing...’

Or

‘On Margate Sands

I can connect

Nothing with nothing ...’<sup>vi</sup>

Obsessively, poetically the word nothing marks and remarks the point at which the work comes into being as if despite itself; despite it's being nothing, in the first place and in the end it is these nothings that the poet connects ... ‘I *can* connect...’

This nothing, then, to which I will return, has a relation to negation and *néant(isation)* but it is by no means the same as these – which is a bold enough statement in a field of such speculative uncertainty. It is something we can postulate in, say, Giorgio Agamben’s thinking of the *musulman* in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which could be understood as a negative aesthetic and theology of the subject in extremis.<sup>vii</sup> But a detailed and compelling account of the intricacies of these paradigms and histories of being a subject can be found in Kristeva, rethinking Sartre, Barthes, Freud and Aragon, in her *La révolte intime. Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse II*.<sup>viii</sup> Here her post Debordian locating of these intricately theories to imagine the perhaps impossible survival of the unconscious in a hyper-mediated world underpins my eclectic devotion to Haines’ video: in my own turn in the hope of finding in my viewing of it the after-time of devotion, is a hope for the future of the work itself, the something that may come of it.

But if the crucial element of this methodologically fragmented attention is my learning from the video how I myself can think, then it is certainly worth imagining that this can also lead us to Laura Mulvey’s DVD still from Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, which is in two senses the *néant* of the filmic sequence; in not just the way that it stops the film and drains it of its diegetic haste or concealment, but even more in the absence of a point of sound, the aural content of one frame; an absence

that empties the still too of its having been film at all. Following on from Mulvey's early lectures on the still, I began to stop-frame just about everything I watched; in the case of *Easy Rider* I found what I had could not have imagined – something uncannily close to *The Waste Land*, signifying spaces of emptiness and cluttered ruin rather than a rock-road movie. Haines video again disturbs this unexpected quality of the stop frame and its rethinking as film.<sup>ix</sup> When *Three Months* runs it seems as if Mulvey's stills were brought back to movement, but no longer made the same film as they had done before being stopped. To go back from the video to the script is to find nothing that really adds up to it, yet the text is not necessarily an open ended play-script, to be performed and redirected! It is a documentary record of something that never was in the form of its representation, and in this it is an acting-out of a desire for something to be present, perhaps the necessity of desire, and nothing more. I only guess.

This juxtaposition of such radically separate and incompatible levels of significance as these models and that of Haines' work at the diegetic or semantic level, in effect leads me to hold to a notion of *significance* as a crucial step in aligning it's procedures with those that are open to me in my reflections on the virtual and the sign. What now follows is more what jumped out of this box of secrets than it is an argument.

In effect when I saw *Three Months* in 2004, shortly after it was completed, it put an end to the work that I had myself, like so many academics, being doing around the Internet and the virtual. If in my case the course of this work was jolted and stimulated by Laura Mulvey's important essay 'The Index and the Uncanny' it was first and foremost a rationalisation of my own unexpected addiction to the thing and the discovery of how many older activities it now stood in for, such as going to a library or waiting for economy hours to make 'phone calls overseas. I became concerned with a capturing of my attention by something in

which some of the theoretical terms of the discussion of the image, - gaze and the object, the screen and the gaze -, seemed to merge in a freedom that only imagines its own limits and delusions at the point when the interdiction of the remaining world falls like a shadow across the screen.<sup>x</sup> Or, the moment when another two words, 'real' and 'virtual' get to take a new turn around each other as the virtual begins to look more like the effective reality of the symbolic than like the real out of which the symbolic is made in a Lacanian schema: and precedent forms of the symbolic slide into the position of the 'real'.

While I can now see that this was part of an emerging discourse on the internet in which Margaret Wertheim's *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*, and the intense reflection that surrounded it had played a determining role, I want here to restrain my discussion to a notion of the divine as a methodological issue rather than part of the larger description and analysis of cyberspace as a sacred space bearing the promises of Christian eschatology. An article by George S Hendry entitled 'Nothing', on an Internet theology page, covers very much the same ground, from Augustine to Heidegger and Sartre (as well as Tillich), as does Kristeva.<sup>xi</sup> Its presence on *Theology Today* underlines both the banality of virtual communication as a space of enunciation and as a vector of conventional and established discourse in which we can become all-too clear about how our discourse hardly belongs to us, as if we ourselves were nothing to do with it. So it is important to note that it is on the Internet that doubts concerning the character of the new, in our days, and its possible newness circulate as well as speculations around its frail appearance as nothing more than the residue of something ancient. The very choice of such distinctions as that between the divine and the sacred, indeed, already implies a discourse more like that on and of Renaissance mysteries than one of contemporary street cultures or imaginary cities.

In my thinking I had focussed on the Internet around a detailed textual analysis and ‘real-time’ tracking of my conversations in gay chat rooms, particularly in terms of how utterances misalign, get out of sequence and slip into becoming an unintended poetic on the one hand, and trying to approach the affect of this process as perverse form of one’s presence to one’s self, at the same time as it becomes present to the interlocutor. This developed into a series of long and complex seminars pulling together theories of urban space since Maurice Halbwachs, to take just one reference point, with other paradigmatic accounts of spatial practice and psychoanalytic configurations of the formation and action of the subject. The replication of a city like London, imbricated in the world of virtual communication, generates a space of strange expansions and contractions in which the gazes of the street, the cruising gaze of another era, shifts from induction to deduction as its starting point. Rather than isolating a figure from the crowd as in the tradition honoured in Poe and Baudelaire, and inherited by gay cruising, the crowd is reassembled as a topographically constituted object of which certain coordinates may come to embody or congeal a crossing of general and specific desire with a geographical availability, itself conditioned by the weather (never indexed), time of day, degree of certainty that there will be a meet, and so forth. <sup>xii</sup>

The images electronically exchanged, either as a lure or a gage, as an offer or in response to a request, now bold and now coy or even timid, extend and elaborate the moment at which a kind of name falls on the interchange – a name like ‘Yes, this’ or ‘no, not’, or some other inner utterance that prolongs, ends or concludes the chat. The point at which a sexual encounter becomes impossible instates a cut in the phantasm; perhaps because it is raining, or you don’t like the ‘pics’ or he yours, or you do but or the guy is six zones away, or he or you cannot be bothered going out, in the end. And an even worse, more radical interruption of

‘reality’ can be that it is indeed possible, because he has a BMW and can actually cover those six zones in twenty minutes. Will I really like him? Or he me? And what if ... ?? The scenario is obvious enough and the scenarios of its prolongation are obviously endless.

But wherever it occurs, whenever, the cut is an intrusion in the daydream, much as arriving at a bus stop when you have fallen into a reverie on a long, hot journey in the city. It is a fleeting imposition of the law.

*Too strange to each other for misunderstanding...*(T S Eliot, from *Four Quartets*)

Yet at the point in Haines’s video where the two men are actually seen to meet, in the outside world, in the presence of other people to whom they are of no importance, misunderstanding is the very substance of this ‘too strange...’ and has brought it into being. At this point the decor of the encounter is no longer a kind of brightly coloured set, but the outside world, peopled with day-to-day activities. The everyday becomes uncanny or non-normal and, at the same time, the two modes of document ruin one another and with themselves the field of the indexical.

Here, as in the internet, once some shock has shattered absorption and distraction, which is here felt as absorption’s involuted form, the state of mind diffused turns out to have been nothing other than one of devotion, caught in a devotional posture long prepared by the bend of the neck that is specific to the observation of a VDU. Here, in its arranging and rearranging the signs that the keyboard and the mouse articulate and summon up, this devotion might well point to an Other, but this Other is an effect of my acquisition and re-attribution of its names imagined as his making present – something like a unicorn, indeed, or an angel in Moses Maimonides twelfth century intrications of the presence of divine ‘substance’: it is not quite like anything else, this process of devoted

naming of one's own desire as another's, unless it has something of a Flaubertian absence of metaphor and its fetishistic signalling of the presence of the world, as does Haines' video in its making present of this making present.

At the same time the purpose of my considerations before *Three Months* had been to counter the more trying sociological tautologies that populate the pages of Sage journals and Media studies books that have proliferated around the internet, full of propositions of the general order that 40% of group X do Y because they like it, or feel lonely, or both... as well as to evade the somewhat more subtle discussions of a Lev Manovich, for example.<sup>xiii</sup> These kinds of academic project, however different, share the function of formulating the virtual, the electronic and their forms as an academic disciplinary object, and it was this general order of discourse that I wanted to evade in my making the terminal into an object of reflection or of devotional attention and myself into a kind of angry St Theresa, waiting for what in the end one would never know to have happened, the jouissance which will never have been... I wanted my messages to take on some of the poetics or rhetorical flavour of a Theresa or a John; the position I adopted was not the epiphany proposed to the reader of William Gibson's prophetic *Neuromancer* (1984), for example, but the frustrated or deprived condition of the Saint who will have missed the epiphany exactly as a condition of having come to know of it.<sup>xiv</sup> To do that seemed like the best way of saving or recovering lost time – and in relation to Elizabeth Cowie's discussion I recall how much time we did lose, albeit with disinterested virtue and sublimatory projection, in our devotion to the cause of the Working Class. This was still the only categorical ethic available to a Marxist of the 1970s who was living at that hopeless end-point of the European and Asian social(ist) revolutions. Now I can be saved by this knowledge: that the mess of words and images that is left as a trace on my computer is a record of something that

was never, or not as yet, to be. Or, cyberspace offers nothing (new), but in that it does offer a nothing of complex signifiante.

*Three Months* in effect accomplished what I would have wanted to achieve, and did so in a single but enigmatically complex gesture, suggesting the realisation of a question that I had not even begun properly to formulate. It is, of course, something that artists can do from time to time, the kind of demonstration for which the Ascension of Jesus is such perfect material, the 'look no wires' effect of Raphael's version in the Vatican. (Something much later to be refuted by Bruce Naumann in his *Failing to Levitate in my Studio* (1966), but who, in his failure, remains an artist, or becomes one. The Ascension is a subject that shows what art can do, it is a matter of art rather than of theology and its representations, and offers a paradigmatic figure for the possibility of an impossible that is, finally, autonomous of faith. The matter of the unicorn and its indices is far more complex than my opening quotation could ever envisage and, at the same time, stunningly simple as the Unicorn's many images – the Cluny Tapestries for example - testify. The Unicorn is easily fabricated and made to point to something other than itself; allegory's allegory in that this is all it can do. If my chatting is, after all, allegorical, I have still to find of what it speaks.



The way in which the video performs this vanishing act is, I guess, as follows. Haines imagines the metaphors of the Internet back to front, as if they were an analogy or a documentary (denotation) rather than a metaphor. In a classic fictional manoeuvre he identifies ‘as if’ with ‘what if’ so that proposition and supposition justify one another in a curious tautology of ‘this is’ – which aimlessly drifts somewhere near to Ludwig Wittgenstein's classic formulations of language's aporia. But the men in the video – the actors – do not point to the chatters they represent, but to the scenario of desire already engendered by these chatters and now dissipated. In the chat room these forms of speech relate to each other in a fluid and inconsequential manner, according to the flow of the unfolding daydream *à deux*, and to the only approximate relation of one cell of chat to another as a statement or a question or a response. Above all there is no voice, other than that imagined or ‘heard’ by the chatter as he writes or reads a message, so the silence is bathed in a phantasmatically perfect sound generated by the figuring of desire.

In the above part-frame one man has offered to the other, across the table at which they are sitting, prints of the photographs that they have originally exchanged electronically either voluntarily or at one or the

other's request. Each in turn admires the other as if he was absent, and one then says 'I would really like to meet you'. In effect the idea the chat room whether it is on a governmental, academic, teenage lovers', gay or terrorist website is a new one, and probably should have had a new name: it points to something that does not exist in our day to day life, while being a part of it, and can hardly be translated into it other forms of it other than by the no-strings faculty of art. It remains a 'space' where one goes to chat rather than to smoke or eat lunch, to chat as a separate and distinct function from simply speaking to each other over a sandwich or a cigarette, and it is truly becoming a generalised alternative to other forms of social relation, to the extent that some of us are even asked to put up a chat room alongside an academic syllabus.

Thus though Haines' manoeuvre arises from a conversation in a particular gay cruising chat room, its findings could be extended in various ways back into the real – as distinct from the virtual in this restricted sense - and so virtualise the convention of a documentary reality of which the chat room is a particular and original abstraction. This, the chat room, is what sociability becomes as it is abstracted to certain of its functions – these functions are an always-already virtuality of the social as the articulation and projection of sexual desires – and queerly, while gay, precedes gender.

At the same time, one might prefer to leave this formulation close to Lacan's naming the formation of the unconscious, in his fifth seminar, (XII<sup>e</sup> Leçon, p. 213 ff.), as that of a virtual reality, and so say that in the internet chat room, what stands outside it comes to play a role of the imaginary in its relation to the symbolic within - in a general Lacanian sense of contemporary cultural theory. Clearly this is open to a deepening and a more complex understanding as 'Lacan' becomes more fully read – each succeeding paragraph of the passage I have in mind would tend to virtualise my deployment of its predecessor, and this piecing together of

something that is not an ensemble is important will be important in the unfolding of this work.

So what Haines does is to imagine a number of rooms, public a private spaces from the bedroom to the office to the park or art gallery – documentary spaces so as to speak, or ones that can be documented in a documentary convention – and to treat these spaces as those in which the little written exchanges of the chat room come to have been uttered. Two men, (unicorns? Angels?), play an elaborate sexual game with each other, of desire and domination, spoken in the partial and contracted language of the message, with its imagined inflections – inflections which are, so to speak, the inner speech of these little utterances, their enunciative principle - but one that can only be made audible at the risk of sounding inauthentic, inappropriate and unconvincing: sometimes the men terminate a phrase expressing quite specific desires, - to be humiliated, to humiliate -, with the shortening ‘etc etc’, something we rarely say in the street, while each exchange of smiles - of smileys in the text – is figured through only one repeated set of lips and teeth. The smiley transcends human particularity – and does so in silence, in a rupture of the diegetic flow by a detached mechanism of affect that that does not quite adhere to the symbolic, which anyway is shattered in the speaking aloud of these written texts that are not a script!

This manoeuvre, the ‘look no wires’ of the video, thus reverses figuration in either its accepted rhetorical or pictorial procedures; and for the length of its 37 minutes, in the almost crushing banality of its script, - which is the complete transcription of the ‘conversation’ -, the video sustains an uncanny sense that ‘one’ has not seen this or even this kind of thing before and that its reality is irreducible! Yet it is not a script in the theatrical or filmic sense, it has indeed already ‘happened’, it is a transcript that is as if fixed in being otherly performed, but only after its

meaning has been depleted. *Signifiante* - *nothing* indeed seems like the borderline activity that I imagined above.

One man says to the other that he wishes to be able to treat him violently, bondage, scat, etc., as and when he wishes, and the other replies that he would wish for this to be the case. In each demanded instance of a 'humiliation' he resists, but finally says 'for you' I will do it! Not for my own pleasure, or me but for you! And here what we rediscover at the heart of the novelty of the banal is a memory of an immensely long term, almost like the bio-time of the uncanny, nothing more or less than the heretical Christian concept of pure love according to Fenélon, as it phases into the Kantian categorical: 'if you, god, choose to destroy me I will love you for your choosing and do so without interest or the hope of recompense.'

Curiously and necessarily nothing is consummated in this scenario. At one point, as I have already noted, there is a careful re-enactment of a meeting that did take place, a lunch, shot in a different style of reality, or a lesser style of ideality, in which the lighting becomes conventional and *random* figures appear here and there. There is not sign of sex as a touching but rather its absorption into speech; as if there really is no sexual relation, other than there. But at the level of desire's daydreaming an ancient form of the absolute enters as a sexual relation with one's self in one's relation to the screen. There is a meeting, and here I want to press on with other concerns, even though this meeting may turn out to have been the most pressing.

It is on account of this realising – in an elaborate and protracted metaphor that, in Haines' film, becomes the substance of the screen, even in the film's absolute exclusion of metaphor as a figure – of the devotional character of the terminal and the modes through which it may be addressed, that my own work came to a halt: if only because the image points to more things than my arguments had been able to shape, unicorns

you might say, for which there is no index: I had looked at the net etc. to form a version of some kind of a highly differentiated and fractured unity of the kind we call a 'self' – something on which J-B Pontalis has written eloquently in his *Entre le rêve et la douleur*.<sup>xv</sup> I had got this far before I gave up:

1. The interaction between this temporary self of the chat room, which might also be longer lasting than it seems or even a 'true' self, and its interlocutors represents a drive against the reality principle but that this drive is either: A: Reversed as soon as a meeting is arranged between two chatters other than in the imaginary spaces of the web. For now the concrete spaces of the city, distance, cost of transport, weather all intervene to say yes or no, as does one's own diary that lies half-neglected on the desk with its already existing appointments, between them reinstating the law. More often a meeting must be deferred and, perversely as an outcome of this process desire itself is hypostatized as the very vector of deferral. B: The daydream like structure of the relation with the gaze is more likely to be destroyed by the offer of a meet than by its refusal, as at that moment the promise of sexual pleasure becomes confused with jouissance as a wager won in advance of its own illusion. It becomes delusion.
2. As an outcome of these considerations as well as many others, it begins to look as if the relation of the internet to the individual in some way resembles Walter Benjamin's problematic of the new or the revolutionary having expressed itself in an old and in appropriate technology or cultural form: here the most contemporary culture of communication is one that is itself easily seduced

by the formation of the subject and the conflict between Freud's systems ucs, pcs, cs and so on; the unconscious nestles in this 'place' and nourishes it, overpowering or disempowering its newness. At this point chatting assumes the unicorn like quality of becoming allegory's allegory.

3. Waiting itself becomes a sustaining structure for the subject of this enunciation – you might even say that waiting is the subject's medium in which it is suspended and is nourished. It is in waiting that the non correspondence of things and signification is anyway invested: then in this, in the being-subject of the enunciation, in waiting for the signs, icons, indices, signifieds etc. to stick together, something of the historical experience of the mystic begins to look like a matter of language in the everyday, at least in this new aspect of the everyday. Interestingly the times of waiting are highly differentiated from the most immediate, such the now collapsed of photographic time for the taking of a picture and putting it on line - which impatience may turn into an age -, and the months it sometimes takes to arrange to meet someone. These times enter into each other through a mixture of languid patience and little epiphanies of visual pleasure in the process of exchange and reading profiles. The consumerist slogan of Gaydar, '*What you want, when you want it...*', so similar to that of early credit cards, traps the individual in the promise of jouissance, but as if it were the threat of a privation, as if this were always acknowledged. At the same time the enunciation of the internet and its exchange of words and pictures teeter on the borderlines of the whole matter of the infinitesimal yet

cataclysmic conflict between transubstantiation and consubstantiation that shook European society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, something that also concerned what you want and what you get, and when. This past is trapped in such a mesh, in the sieving process of a contemporary vernacular, and in turn takes hold of it and clogs it up. Whether the flesh and the word will coincide, and how and when is a pragmatic theology of the present.

4. Waiting at the monitor figures the screen as the collapse together of the object and the gaze, as if they has ever really been so highly differentiated, something which is embarrassingly obvious, a purloined letter, in its shiny luminescence, in the literalness of its screenness, the text lying just behind it, and so forth. Another way of putting this that would relate to the work of critics who have recently thought through the implications of Lacan's later work and the concept of the *sinthome*, is that this whole process and relation are something that teeter on and show the edge of the 'real'. Somehow we see over the excluded or negated matter out of which the symbolic has come to be made at the point where its functions are put into doubt.

A preliminary conclusion must be, then, that not much has happened, and maybe nothing and that this nothing is germane to the question of the index. In one sense, if we were to think of the process of producing signs as godlike, then we can begin to borrow from an old theological language, not so much concerning the presence of the body, transubstantiation, consubstantiation and so on, which are indeed concerned with the index, but rather the inscription of signs in Philo of Alexandria:

‘God is continuously ordering matter by his thought. His thinking was not anterior to his creating and there never was a time when he did not create, the Ideas themselves having been with him from the beginning. For God's will is not posterior to him, but is always with him, for natural motions never give out. Thus ever thinking he creates, and furnishes to sensible things the principle of their existence, so that both should exist together: the ever-creating Divine Mind and the sense-perceptible things to which beginning of being is given’ .<sup>xvi</sup>

In the end the best way to set out and maybe even conclude this provisional essay is to set out the phases in which it might see a completion, which is not necessarily desirable. I had wanted to start with two gestures, one of which is the trying to think about this at all and admitting a failure, and the other of which is dramatising the way in which this was brought to a halt by something which in itself represents all our questions in this conference – the video in question.

A guide through the phases that set up the space of my discussion could then look like this, and they are archival and theoretical:

1. The argument of the old timer and the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes* (Qohelet), Solomon, or whoever it was: There is nothing new under the sun. Suppose we take this as a phrase to be heard, something which for me is always important in relation to writing, and that which writing can too easily take back from speech in its graphocentrism. Where will the emphasis fall? The phrase could be uttered in such a way that what we believe to be new under the sun is, exactly, nothing, despair, resignation. Or, the nothing is what is new, and we need to ask what is the character of this nothing that the new is? You can see that these tonalities can be strung out on

reflection, the reflection of uttering and audition.<sup>xvii</sup> If, in Benjamin's formulation, that I have already mentioned, the new eventually finds an appropriate technology, at the point it becomes fully visible it is no longer new; so it is as if a nothing of this new technology on which it has taken hold and at the same time renders the something new as if nothing. The relation of futurism and the cinema might be something like the relation of the unconscious and the Internet, so that the virtuality is something that occurs elsewhere, as if before the Internet and the loss of the indexical: nothing in turn will point somewhere; it will become a negation or a negative index. One form of this negation that may be useful for us is something that Hannah Segal said in a conversation at a public seminar of the performing arts group RESCEN seminar, in reply to an request to repeat what she had said at a preceding workshop: 'everything I say is new and very old.'<sup>xviii</sup> This can be heard as a way of saying that the new is an epiphenomenon of something that might have already happened; and another might be André Green's discussion of 'rien' in his essay on King Lear, which is not about the famous phrase 'nothing will come of nothing'... but that exchange where Cordelia tells Lear that she can give him nothing back, without which denial, Green asserts, nothing more can unfold - 'Cordelia ne peut rien rendre....' There is nothing to return in return for a gift or heritage, and it is this necessity that sets the symbolic in crisis, or loosens Lear's position within the chain.<sup>xix</sup>

2. All of this is germane to a question of waiting for the sign, once brought into being, to adhere: to a historical body of material, in a way that seems to articulate the insight of deferred action as a temporality – an affect that now haunts *Night Cleaners*. Is this nothing what is new, or is this new actually a 'nothing new'. Does

the experience of the virtual as it happens in the internet, before this gaze and object that is the screen, reinstate the subject as a monad at the point where we had critically and theoretically achieved the dispersal of the self? Or does it point to its intensified dispersal just at the point where the seduction of current fields of dispersal and distraction, - portable 'phones, internet etc, could make us wish to resort to the monad as an idyll, a resistance, political and economic, to this hardly voluntary process of being networked? I don't think that these things are known or decided, but they seem important in taking an account of what might have happened and what it is that we have done, as we are trying to do in this conference.

- i. Since I am here tracking something that looks like a non-dialectical relation of what we call old and new in a complex process of small negations, and looking for the substance or materiality of signification, it has already come to seem strategically valuable to track the whole question only through texts that distance us from contemporary thought. Here I would like, as a further possible alienation, to propose the Judeo-Aristotelian discussions of the unity and incorporeal nature of god written by Moses Maimonides in his *Guide to the Perplexed* and his *THE LAWS OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE TORAH*, or the related discussion of the different types of angel found in both books. It's interesting too for me to do this, as nothing could be less gay than this great scholar! <sup>xx</sup>
- ii. Taking the following quotation as a base we could think about how its certainty haunts contemporary descriptions of the virtual and the net as an

unnameable set of sets in distinction to previous forms of communication: *The Third Foundation is that He is not physical. This means to believe that the One whom we have mentioned is not a body and His powers are not physical. The concepts of physical bodies such as movement, rest, or existence in a particular place cannot be applied to Him. Such things cannot be part of His nature nor can they happen to Him. Therefore the Sages of blessed memory stated that the concepts of combination and separation do not apply to Him and they said, "Above there is no sitting nor standing, no separation nor combination." ... The prophet says, "To whom can you compare Me? To what am I equal? Says the Holy One." (Yeshaya [Isaiah] 40:25) If He would be a physical body He would be comparable to physical bodies.*" This opens a flaw in our post-foucauldian modes of thinking comparison, (*Les mots et les choses*, for instance), for us to imagine ways of arguing about incomparability in the bodiless sameness of the virtual as well as about the body as a ground of signification.

iii. I would like to underline the discussion of trans- and consubstantiation and other theological discussions such as the identification of the living flame with Jesus/holy spirit, something that has recently received a compelling exposition in Derrida's late work, especially in his *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy. This seems to be of some urgency in reviewing any theory of the sign, not least because of Lacan's own insistent *mise en scène* of Catholicism and mysticism in his

work – for a recent discussion see Jacques Lebrun, *Le pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, or a tracing of the evolution of a space that we come to call the unconscious in *L'inconscient des modernes - essai sur l'origine métaphysique de la psychanalyse*, a magisterial study by Jean-Louis Vaysse. All of these three foreground the complexity of the old/new relation and its discursive fields and the slow, uneven and non-self possessing character of the unfolding of our thought. What is new of the Internet is that, in the endless superposition of words and images and even of word and image, it reminds us that the 'problem' of such relations is ongoing and has never been of itself very important. It shows us something old but in a new way and for now.<sup>xxi</sup> This newness is the medium of the artist David Haines, and not video.

After simply sketching a few possible displacements of our subject, ones that become really possible in the space of virtual combination, and evacuating any sense of progressive time from it, I would, were I to complete this essay, be concerned simply to speak to the value of some of these sources as a practice of estrangement, as a mimesis of a certain moment in the belief system of modern radical or avant-garde art and its theories. That is, to treat this looking back, or giving in to the re-emergence of the old, as a radical thing to do that is consonant with the once ambitions of radical and political academic theory. As for the question raised by Laura Mulvey of the relation to the working class, and my comment that our relation to this class was already, always perhaps, in despite of the desire for justice (so powerfully recovered in Elizabeth Cowie's discussion of *Night Cleaners*), - a devotional one to a virtuality, and as good an example of pure love as I could find, the resolution of it

will do or undo what I have said above. For it will return us to other questions of liberty and justice, for which this work is an allegory.

Nothing is what we make, not of the thing in itself.

- <sup>i</sup> From *The Raven* by Edgar Allen Poe, 1845
- <sup>ii</sup> Donald Morton 'Birth of the Cyberqueer', PMLA, Vol. 110, No. 3 (May 1995), pp. 369 - 391
- <sup>iii</sup> Originally found 1995 on Lund University website, but no longer on line, at <http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/encyclo/indexicality.html>
- <sup>iv</sup> Clearly this is a widely shared preference from thinkers as diverse as Giorgio Agamben to Mieke Bal, and there is a common sense that Benveniste enables the multiple insertion of other language theories into critical practices. Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale, 1 & 2*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, 1974.
- <sup>v</sup> The work of Henri Meschonnic is much less current in visual and cultural studies than that of Julia Kristeva, whose *Révolution du langage poétique* is canonical. The following quotation from 'Henri Meschonnic: Rhythm as Pure Historicity', by Gabriella Bedetti in *New Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring, 1992, pp. 431-450 is useful in condensing the point of my comparison: 'value plays the role of an element of the system of the work, to the extent that the work constitutes itself through certain differences. These differences may relate to phonemes, words, characters, objects, places, scenes, etc. There is no value in the pure state but only in the interior of a system.'
- <sup>vi</sup> p. 72
- <sup>vii</sup> G Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York, Zone, 1992.
- <sup>viii</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La révolte intime. Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse II*, Paris, Fayard, 1997
- <sup>ix</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second. Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion, 2006
- <sup>x</sup> "The Index and the Uncanny", in *Time and the Image*, C.Gill & T. Matthews (eds.), Manchester University Press
- <sup>xi</sup> See M Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*, London, Virago, 1999. See <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1982/v39-3-article4.htm> - 'Nothing', by George S Hendry, consulted 1995 and March 2009.

<sup>xii</sup> See my 'Gay Paris, Trace and Ruin' in *The Hieroglyphics of Space, reading and experiencing the modern metropolis*, edited by Neil Leach, Routledge, London 2002, pp. 125 – 135. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, New York, Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001.

<sup>xiv</sup> See, for example, Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night Of The Soul*, Translated by Mirabai Starr, New York, Riverhead Books 2002. Also Dorian Fasoli and Rosa Rossi, *Le estasi laiche de Teresa d'Avila: psicoanalisi, misticismo e altre esperienze culturali a confronto*, Edizione Associate, Rome, 1998.

<sup>xv</sup> J.-B. Pontalis, *Entre le rêve et la douleur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, see especially p. 159 ff. 'Naissance et reconnaissance du <<soi>> Pour introduire à l'espace potentiel.'

<sup>xvi</sup> This maybe found on The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at [www.iep.utm.edu/p/philo.htm#SH9a](http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/philo.htm#SH9a) - consulted March 2009.

<sup>xvii</sup> See the *ArtScroll Tanach Series, a traditional commentary on the books of the Bible*, Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz general editors, Brooklyn, undates, pp. 123 - 157, here entitles *Koheles*.

<sup>xviii</sup> See [www.rescen.net](http://www.rescen.net) for a transcription of this seminar.

<sup>xix</sup> André Green, *La Déliaison. Psychanalyse, anthropologie et littérature*, Paris, Hachette, 1992, Chapter V, Lear ou les voi(es)x de la nature, p. 181. ff.

<sup>xx</sup> I have been working from French editions of both these works. Moïse Maïmonide: *Le Guide des égarés, suivie du Traité des huit chapitres*, Paris Verdier, 1979. See p. 258 ff. for the discussion on the meanings of the word 'angel'. See also *Le Livre des commandements*, Paris, L'Âge d'Homme, 1990, for various discussions of sexuality.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris, Galilée, xxxx: Jacques Lebrun, *Le pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, Paris, Seuil, 2002:

J.-M. Vaysse, *L'inconscient des modernes - essai sur l'origine métaphysique de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.