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Re-reading Akerman Through Baudrillard: On the Subject of Feminist Representation

Ingrid M. Hoofd (Department of Media and Culture Utrecht University, the Netherlands)

It is no longer worthwhile to make a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and its revolutionary formula. These two orders are inseparable.
(Jean Baudrillard, 2001:21)

If Jeanne has, symbolically, destroyed the phallus, its order still remains visible all around her.
(Janet Bergstrom, 1977: 116)

By the looks of it, the last decade indicates an apparent gridlock or puzzlement in a lot of feminist activism and thought. Various feminist sentiments seem to be shuttling between weariness and nostalgia for the allegedly ‘very political’ second wave on the one hand, and an energized and perhaps stubbornly optimistic attitude regarding the continued virtue of feminist analysis and practice on the other. ¹ Intriguingly, this ambivalent state of affairs is accompanied by an increasing feminist fascination with or compulsion for doing politics by way of media technologies – regardless of whether this concerns feminist activism or the production of feminist theory. But far from the media being a mere tool for feminism, I suggest that the advent of new media technology dramatically alters the mechanics and hence politics of representation – not only in relation to truly ‘newer’ media forms like the internet, but also with an eye on so-called ‘older’ media like television, film, and photography. I furthermore argue in line with Jean Baudrillard’s ideas around simulation that this dramatic alteration of the mechanics of political practices is due to the ubiquitous digitalization and interconnection of all media forms into a larger economic imperative, which in turn gives rise to an entirely different status of the image in contemporary culture. We can see this changed status of the image immediately in the ways new media seem to complicate feminist representational politics. Traditional feminist critiques

of media representation, aiming for subverting patriarchal ideology, mainly targeted the reproduction of culturally specific sexist imagery and the repetition of gender stereotypes perpetuated through the mass media like television or popular magazines.² In tandem with such insightful feminist critiques, feminist counter-representational practices advocated the production and dissemination of imagery that was more egalitarian, or that reversed stereotypical gender roles.³ With the advent of new media spaces like online social networks however, the eventual subverting effects of repeated sexist representation versus feminist modes and critiques of representation inside and outside such spheres are no longer immediately clear, or even exceedingly unclear. This is because the sheer ubiquity of media imagery combined with the aesthetics of narrowcasting interactivity that especially new media allow for results in a situation in which any image can be targeted at its specific audience while obscuring other images for this audience. In terms of media content then, audiences will merely see what they want to see, and feminist imagery tends to merely preach to the converted.

Techno-happy pundits like Peter Dahlgren and Jeffrey Juris have hailed this new situation as a 'democratization' of the media, in which marginalized audiences can now partake in the production and consumption of 'their own' imagery. But as some feminist scholarship has also noted, while new media on the surface indeed seem to allow for a 'democratization' of subversive vis-à-vis dominant representation as they make possible the abundant dissemination and consumption of feminist and gender-equal imagery, the issue of such imagery's subversive *effects* vis-à-vis patriarchy appears nonetheless much more complex and difficult to achieve.⁴ The advent of new media technologies therefore requires a rethinking of feminist subversive strategies around sexist media representation and its relation to the critique of dominant patriarchal ideologies and arrangements. What is more, such a rethinking may show that this complexity around media representation is indicative of a larger problem concerning the work of politics as such, as the very idea of the possibility of authentic representation is already in a certain way fundamental to the current political order. I hence suggest that due to a current deficiency or disinclination towards properly grasping this aggravated complexity around representation in such feminist theory, both aforementioned popular 'feminist' responses – nostalgia or blind optimism –

remain insufficient in light of the ongoing feminization of poverty and other such perils of technocratic globalization. At issue is namely that a lot of feminist media theory (still) treats media representation as 'representative' of an objective 'reality' – as if the politics of visibility and unveiling through media representation is directly and positively engaging with the social fields and actors which it seems to signify *a posteriori*. Many foundational student handbooks within academic women's or gender studies, like for instance Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik's excellent and widely used *Women's studies and culture: a feminist introduction*, indeed work with this assumption. This fundamental assumption of the relation between representation and reality of course makes sense in terms of feminist theory and activism in general relying on an emancipatory ideal that suggests a politics of feminine or female representation is properly subversive of the patriarchal social order. However, this article suggest that objective social power today has largely vacated the realm of media representation in terms of mere content, or in any case that such content has become entirely *secondary*. Rather, the political sum-total of mass and online imagery may today have more to do with the new media *form* and its related social-cultural logic than its actual content – suggesting that we should start reading media content as not only an echo but also a symptom of its form and the larger oppressive and exclusionary social relations this form inhabits. Like for instance Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* then, I hold that the feminist emancipatory project needs 'to undertake a critical engagement with capitalist production' (2002: 31) by looking afresh at how 'the entire symbolic order' (Ibid.,41) has become complicit with current disenfranchisements – also along lines of gender and sexuality. I suggest that Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* presents us with an excellent foreshadowing of the accelerated complicity of feminist representations with the new techno-economic order, which I provisionally call *speed-elitist*.

What hence becomes crucial to a new feminist politics of representation is to read anew the content of certain old and new media in conjunction with the new post-colonial and globalized mode of accelerated economical production of which the new media form should be taken as the main instrument and exponent. The crisis in feminist theories around media representation is therefore also indicative of the

larger impasse or crisis in feminist and liberal humanist thought as such. This is because such feminism's inability to effectuate subversion has to do with its larger assumptions around the nature of social reality and emancipation of which the idea of representation is constitutive, in particular in relation to the role of the *subject* of emancipation – as if the subject can 'authentically' represent him- or herself at all. Basing this thesis largely on the work of Baudrillard to investigate these assumptions around the feminist subject and their possible alternatives, I then claim that much contemporary feminist theory has finally failed to raise the stakes under speed-elitism – a condition of the ongoing and accelerated transmutation of signs *as capital* – that has become the primary ideological and material nexus under neo-liberal acceleration. This thesis agrees partly with Jodi Dean's argument in 'Communicative Capitalism' that consumer technologies have usurped political activity, but disagrees on the point that this entails a de-politicization; instead, I hold that doing politics and being political are in fact essential to technological acceleration. As the high-tech exponent of Eurocentrism and the humanist utopia namely, speed-elitism is that state of affairs that fosters an oppressive sort of unity of struggles through the *fantasy* of allowing for radical difference and multiplicity in the sphere of media and political representation in which the politically active subject supposedly coincides with her socio-technically assigned identity. The problem with any contemporary feminist politics of identity and visibility is then that this apparent freedom of expression and signification – in short, the subjective freedom to communicate – that especially new media allow for, is mistaken for actual emancipation. But instead of emancipating, sexist as well as feminist images become all equally complicit in the violence of speed-elitism. The circulation of images seeks to render all forms of radical alterity transparent to the humanist-capitalist logic of the accelerated circulation, which simply requires the active participation by the feminist subject. In effect therefore, feminist subjectivity is turned into one among the many *image-objects* within the realm of media representation.

Baudrillard explicates this implosion of 'old' ideals of emancipation and representation into capital circulation especially in *The System of Objects*, where he argues that at issue is no longer simply (patriarchal) representation or (sexist) content, but an entire political economy built on a patriarchal *modeling* of the

semiotic-economic sphere. This sphere today crucially relies on the reproduction of the ideals of identity, representation, visibility, and voice. The abundant circulation of realistically gendered images hence creates an appeal to 'phantom collectives' like 'women' or 'feminists,' while in actual fact those collectives are radically absent from the social (if we can speak of a 'social' at all.) It is for this reason that Baudrillard stresses in *Radical Alterity* that we should speak here of a compulsion to a 'sociality' which is emphatically 'no longer society (2008:43).'

What is more, the general nostalgia for identity and its political attempts to 'unearth' it or to make it speak, are the main mechanisms for the fragmentation and individualization of persons under this economy. This situation of what Baudrillard famously calls 'simulation' – a general enmeshment of the fake with the real – therefore entails, he claims in 'The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,' a 'recycling in the negative of the traditional institution (1994:80).'

The insidiousness of such a system resides in the way it obliges, precisely in the way Joseph also outlines in *Against the Romance* in relation to queer activism, the production of 'political' content based on an illusion of 'radical' collective identity and desire. In terms of the production of feminist responsibility, this obligation in turn also translates itself into a call to set up 'feminist' content over and against 'sexist' content so as to indeed 'play the ... liberating claim of subjecthood (2002:85).'

Baudrillard here posits that old ways of social and political mobilization are nowadays caught in a phallic *functionalism* which has supplanted or come on top of phallic symbolism. Such phallic functionalism can effectively be understood as a mechanized abstraction of this symbolism, entailing in addition the mechanization of binary oppositions and 'false' differences for the sole purposes of technological acceleration. Under such new conditions, says Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, the media's representative content now simply appears as this form's 'allegory'(1996:60). This symbolic realm or realm of sexist representation constitutes moreover a proper simulacrum of power due to the fact that it simulates (sublimates) and dissimulates (conceals and renders indecipherable) the 'true mechanism' of power (Ibid.,60). The media form hence functions as a 'camouflage' by way of which 'long-lost traditional values reappear as signs (Ibid.,62)' in order to 'make up for the symbolic void of [phallic] power (Ibid.,54).'

Such an assessment of the import of the media form, and of how it obscures the violent conditions of production, is also the main argument of Alex Galloway's 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' Galloway notes under the contemporary control regime that any 'visualization is first and foremost a visualization of the [media's] *conversion rules themselves* (2012:88)". If not picked up on, visualization leads to a 'form of blindness' towards the technical apparatus as well as to the current mode of production (Ibid.,95). It becomes therefore important, says Galloway in the same vein as Baudrillard, to read 'the image as an *allegory* for a map of a system' of tremendous capitalist and phallic power (Ibid.,99). But while Galloway rightly critiques the role of simulation in this new control regime, he also performs the humanist duty to represent 'the givens' (Ibid.,87) more accurately. Speed-elitism, I contend, is rather the epitome of the general displacement and simulation of the ideals of humanist and liberal representation due to the acceleration of the political by new media technologies to which much feminism also subscribes. The ways in which speed-elitism currently in-effectuates traditional feminist politics should therefore be taken as feminism's primary and more urgent object of analysis as well as be understood as the new condition of possibility for feminist politics and theory itself. In order to fully grasp the complexity and the enormity of the task at hand for feminist theory under these new conditions, I will attempt to further illustrate and rethink the conundrums and possible new avenues around the issue of female and feminist representation by way of rereading some puzzling 'feminist' activities and texts – puzzling in terms of these texts' or activities' status as properly feminist – through some of this supposedly anti-feminist work of Baudrillard. My analysis uses Baudrillard for this purpose because his ideas gel well with this article's thesis on speed-elitism, and also because his work may help point beyond the realm of certain solidified feminist assumptions regarding emancipatory social change and the role of the feminist subject in such change. In particular, Baudrillard's work may illuminate that these texts' ambiguity in terms of their status (or indeed, *image*) as feminist, is due to how these texts inhabit a complicity in speed-elitism by virtue of their 'feminism' being usurped or mobilized as part of that phallic functionalism inherent in the new media form. This concern with the media form or functionality within global capitalism is indeed central to Baudrillard's entire oeuvre. In 'The Ecstasy of Communication,' Baudrillard for instance claims – a claim that usefully offends

any optimistic theory of communicative action – that new media simply *stage* (feminist) politics and give the appearance of a new public sphere in which ‘debate’ happens, so that whoever seeks to emancipate oneself by mediated visibility submits to the ‘obscenity of what no longer has any secret (1983:131).” In *Seduction* – Baudrillard’s more direct engagement with feminist concerns that, as I outline in the introduction to this special section, many have interpreted as anti-feminist – he likens this new violence of the image to ‘pornography’ (1990:6). Crucially though, he describes this as a form of pornography that relies more on a subjectification than an objectification – or rather, that renders the subject into an object by technologically and symbolically conflating it with its representation.

Following this line of thought, Baudrillard notes in *Radical Alterity* that this turning of the subject into an ‘object-subject’ by way of media representation has become especially totalizing with the advent of new media technologies, in which ‘the problem [now] lies with the supremacy of the code’ which ‘*makes* us communicate and is there before everything (2008:42-43).’ This contemporary supremacy of the code renders all visible alterity relative to its system of representation, to the extent that we do not even know whether at ‘the other side of the code’ there is any ‘Other’ to be found at all anymore (Ibid.,43). In short

, for Baudrillard the violence of the media resides in their ability to turn radical alterity into relative alterity in the service of mediated capitalism. But what is more, he also hints that the wider issue of the emancipatory quest to identify alterity as radical may be a problem *as such*. The idea (and identification of) radical alterity, like the supposedly distinct difference of feminism from patriarchy, also functions as a fantasy that upholds the economy of speed. I hence equally hold that ‘feminism’ and ‘gender’ have become some of the many truly ‘floating signifiers’ (to use an old term from Stuart Hall) that have become perversely enmeshed with such ends. It is in this sense that the aforementioned nostalgia for the second wave, as well as the energetic engagement with new technologies, actually complement each other under speed-elitism. This is because such nostalgia is really an *effect* of new media arrangements and the mirage of some untainted previous feminist politics, in turn leading to the re-enactment of the promise of feminist emancipation by grasping at an *image* of true debate or dissent. In tying

the idea of speed-elitism together with Baudrillard's theory on signification as circulation, I claim that the contemporary situation marks a partial shift away from the West to the formation of a new global elite which is no longer exclusively masculine or male, but which instead builds precisely on the phallic formalization of the supposed real political *difference between sexism and feminism*.

Contemporary techno-mediated conditions tie the subject of feminist representation, as well as the active critique of sexist representation, intimately to an increasingly disenfranchising acceleration of capital in which such differences are consumed *as if* they are meaningful and subversive. In sum, this means again that the general liberal quest for representation (whether in politics or in the media) by way of its active subject has itself precisely become complicit in speed-elitism. Baudrillard's designation of the 'pornography' of media representation therefore does two useful things for feminists: it allies his work with the history of feminist concerns and critiques of sexist representation, but simultaneously thwarts the traditional feminist objection with sexist stereotyping as obsessing over the wrong object, namely over an *illusory surface*. Building a politics on the latter – that is, treating the surface as the real and only space of voice – makes feminism complicit in that contemporary 'pornography' it seeks to object to. One can distinguish a parallel here to how Baudrillard himself, as this article will illustrate later on, appears on the surface as sexist yet on a deeper level as feminist *or vice versa*; 'depth' and 'surface' indeed become indistinguishable.

Let me at this stage turn to the first 'feminist' puzzlement to reread. A good example of how the media are making subjects 'obscenely visible,' and how this may be implicated in forms of gendered and raced violence that seeks to subjugate everyone to the largely but not exclusively masculinist and Eurocentric logic of accelerated capitalism, provides the recent over-exposure in especially many Western media outlets like television and news articles of Muslim women who wear face-covering veils. This pervasive imagery of *burqa*, *boshiya*, or *niqab* donning women by way of close-up photography and video the dominant global media sphere goes hand in hand with a severe demonization of Islam as a 'backward' religion from which women must be 'saved' – a fine instant of Gayatri

Spivak's apt definition in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' of the desire of 'white men (and women) trying to save brown women from brown men' under post-colonialism (1988:31). Indeed, the female Muslim subject is literally (namely by force of law, like recently in Belgium and France) as well as in the media forced to 'unveil' herself and become an allegedly emancipated subject, recognizable before the law (facilitating 'recognition' was exactly the argument put forward by Belgian decision-makers). One anonymous online *Guardian* reader fittingly translated the Belgian government's intentions by stressing that visibility as '*open interaction* between people is part of a liberal society.' (italics mine) John Phillips, in his interview with Samuel Weber, likewise suggests that 'the secret function of transparency' today may lie in the ways in which it seeks to enact the promise of total illumination and understandability that emerged out of the Christian and liberal traditions, where the media 'thus exhaust the existence of that what [they] nevertheless allow to appear (2012:161).' This shows how the fantasy of transparent communication grounds the argument for Western (neo)liberalism as a morally superior form of cultural, social, and economical organization, which in turn works to legitimize the 'liberal rationality' of for instance surveillance technologies like face-recognition machines at airports. It also showcases the obsession with unveiling and transparency under speed-elitist conditions as such, which Weber and Phillips also identify.

This 'white savior' mentality, whether feminist or post-colonialist, around the headscarf issue is of course ostensibly hypocritical. After all, whenever were Catholic nuns or mourning widows prohibited from wearing headscarves and veils in the West? This may possibly lead one to think that the feminist attempt at counter-rallying through the mass and new media *for* wearing the veil may overcome this pornographic and post-colonial logic of obscenely turning the other into an emancipated subject. But I argue that the feminist pro-headscarf politics in the media resulted in exactly the same – that of usurping alterity into mediated phallic acceleration, which is just as much patriarchal and racist. This is because the statement that wearing the veil is in fact representative of the veil-wearers' *true* or essential 'deep' desire also implicates itself in rendering transparent the supposed 'reality' of such a feminist aspiration and identity. So there is no analytical high ground for feminism to be had there either. The really urgent

feminist question would rather be to grasp how it is possible that these two seemingly antithetical or oppositional standpoints around veiling are representable in the media as equally true. In line with Baudrillard's thesis outlined above, I would argue that in this case the *difference in opinion* between pro- and anti-headscarf protesters has become exactly a node for the acceleration of information flows, and therefore operates as a false, staged or relative difference in the service of speed-elitism. The stance of the defiantly headscarf-wearing women in the Western media was that it was their 'individual right to their cultural difference' – 'their' difference and culture was thus made understandable through the implicit universalization of a profoundly humanist and liberal rhetoric, and as such annexed and showcased through the mass and especially new media. This repetition of humanism furthermore corroborated with the logic of speed-elitism through the extensive use of communication technologies by these women's non-Muslim allies to connect with those imagined to be 'Europe's radical others' from which a supposedly transparent subversive voice or representation emerged. This illustrates that the speed-elitist desire to make everything speak, become visible, and communicate, paradoxically results in the actual 'subaltern not being able to speak,' to use once more Spivak's phrasing: the non-Muslim (white European) allies of the pro-headscarf Muslim women pursued an arguably self-interested politics revolving around a narcissistic image of their own 'authentic radicality' – no doubt related to their own speed-elitist upward mobility as activist-intellectuals – that is as problematic as those of white right-wing politicians claim to 'saving' these women. So while the anti-veiling argument echoes directly the pornographic logic of the over-exposure of (and subsequent feminist obsession over) the veiling issue, the pro-veiling argument simply functions as the illusory counter-image while leaving the formal and phallic logic of unveiling intact. What is more, the term 'feminism' itself here becomes the 'floating signifier' that allows its expedient mobilization by the two seemingly oppositional groups as *if* they are fostering true liberation. But what this example finally shows is that feminism collapses into itself and becomes contradictory the moment it seeks to finalize its truth-claims around the emancipatory mobilization of representation and visibility.

A propos the subject, and hence also in regards to the ‘subject of the headscarf,’ there exists of course the argument in post-structuralist feminist philosophy that there is an aspect of ‘becoming’ to feminist subjectivity – like for instance in the work of Rosi Braidotti or Elizabeth Grosz – that cannot be captured by any mode of representation or, indeed, analytical interpretation like the ones I have offered above. But such feminist philosophies often still tend to ‘re-mobilize’ this aspect of subjectivity once more for feminist political ends, and as such still fall in the ‘trap’ of transforming radical alterity into relative alterity in the service of speed-elitism exactly due to staying loyal to their *aporetic* feminist responsibility.⁵ Moreover, my interpretation might indeed work itself just as much in concordance with the ‘obscene’ logic of unveiling under speed-elitism – after all, this article just as much performs the humanist-liberal logic that grounds feminism as well by aspiring to shed light on the feminist puzzlement. Where then is an alternative or new locus of radical alterity to be found, if not in the active political engagement by way of (a critique of) media content or even of its form? What, in short, escapes the logic of speed today? Paradoxically, the allegedly most anti-feminist work of Baudrillard may in fact provide more clues in light of this conundrum without claiming to solve the impasse and straightforwardly reinstate the old idea of representative politics. In Baudrillard’s *Seduction* – the one work also that deals more explicitly with feminist issues – the term ‘seduction’ appears the image of a kind of ‘radical’ alterity that the ‘productivist’ techno-logic, or what this article has named the speed-elitist order, tries to destroy, erase, or annex. Baudrillard argues here that seduction can never be demolished by our order of accelerated production, since seduction is absolutely immanent to production. Taken as a descriptive indictment, the general argument here is that the more an order tries to mechanically strengthen its power, the more that order becomes unstable. This is due to the fact that power is always illegitimate and grounded on deception, so that any mechanization of its deceptive imagery will result in exposing *all* its imagery as deception. Baudrillard names this increase in power’s endemic instability due to the technological-ideational attempt at strengthening it, and the collapse of power that this increase foreshadows, the ‘reversibility’ that is always intrinsic to power. Power – whether it is patriarchy or capitalism – can therefore never finalize its authority, because of (its) seduction; their master-signifiers are always threatened by the fundamental abyss that underlies the basic play of

signs. It is for this reason that Baudrillard holds that 'every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility(1990:2).' One could say that the image of radical alterity seduces the subject of emancipation towards a straying from her initial goal, as in the headscarf example.

Picking up on the idea of seduction as a supposed ideal concept for feminism, is of course contentious. This controversy lies in two issues which are precisely related to the un-decidability between subject and object, and which segue into the problem of femininity as a 'deep' or authentic property of actual women, and femininity as superficial sexist representation. Claiming that 'seduction and femininity are confounded (1990:2),' Baudrillard problematically seems to equate femininity with absence and instability, and romanticizes the feminine as more powerful than the masculine. But I suggest that the aim of Baudrillard's for traditional feminists preposterous suggestion is precisely to render gender, sexual identity and masculine superiority *even more superficial* by doubling it; in other words, to show that gender exists only at the surface level of appearances, *as if* woman is a mere object and man a true subject. Baudrillard continues with such paradoxical claims in his much later *Passwords* when he initially says that from his 'standpoint, what was at issue was no longer sexual liberation, which seemed to me in the end quite a naive project since it was based on value and sexual identity,' (2003: 22) but where he simultaneously claims that 'historically, women had a privileged position in the field of seduction' (Ibid.,23), which 'truth' would lead one to celebrate femininity as if it was more powerful. His claim is then itself exposed as simulation: it is as legitimate *and* as ludicrous as patriarchal discourse itself, since it undecidedly shuttles between extreme romantic stereotype and total effacement of the vicissitudes of patriarchy. I would claim that this seemingly deliberate confusion that Baudrillard mounts between sexism and its denial, and hence between representation and reality as such, is itself again (caused by) seduction; Baudrillard the author-subject himself becomes the very site of the instability of the patriarchal performance, and hence turns into that order's object. 'Seduction' is hence precisely real *and* fake; a quixotic image indeed. If we transfer this logic to the feminist performance, this likewise means that the feminist subject just as much cannot *enact* an alternative politics by way of agentive battles anymore, and that the possibility of subversion no longer exists

on the plane of the subject's representational desire or politics. Rather, it is already the 'seductive' radical alterity *inside* the fundamentally *aporetic* idea of subjective emancipation as such, always already escaping the logic of production, liberation, explanation, and representation, that will seduce the patriarchal and feminist subject into an alternative logic away from a politics of visibility and representation. The feminist battle around representation should or can then no longer run through advocating the production and dissemination of counter-imagery or through 'giving voice,' but through complicating this 'old' logic by 'leveling-up.' This would entail firstly, exposing how such 'feminist' content is an allegory of this contemporary phallic form (as Galloway does with data visualizations), but secondly, by letting the content-reading of the supposedly 'objective reality' of patriarchy crumble under its own contradictions – like the one between feminism and its complicity in patriarchy as such, and the resultant extreme instability of this supposedly dominant phallic order under speed-elitism. It is this strategy of apparent self-annihilation that Baudrillard designates as 'fatal' because it exposes its primary assumption of the subjective (feminist) strategy as already fatally wounded.

Allow me then to provide a more extensive second illustration of the way in which a purportedly feminist text turns upon and caves into itself, and how this crumbling points towards the speed-elitist condition and its profound instability. An excellent example of a work that can be reread in the above fashion, is the brilliant 'feminist' 1975 Chantal Akerman film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Like the headscarf issue more recently, *Jeanne Dielman* is a good example because it provided a similarly elusive object for feminist scholars who were analyzing the potentials and conundrums around the use or efficacy of feminist representational practices, also already during that supposedly 'very political' second wave of the 1970s. Film critics and analysts have over the last decades generally either read this film as a feminist work in terms of its content, or as an experimental film about film technology; but never have these two readings converged into a larger argument about simulation. Interestingly also is that certain supposedly 'deep' readings – especially psychological or psycho-analytical readings – of the film's characters and the female audience in feminist analyses of the film, have in fact served to naturalize

the 'false' distinction between and procession from reality and or to representation. They have also dissimulated the ways in which the film makes a strong statement about the speed-elitist conditions under which it was produced and the ways in which feminism is implicated in this. Janet Bergstrom and Constance Penley remark for instance in 'The Avant Garde' that *Jeanne Dielman* is feminist 'despite' the mix of narrative and non-narrative elements because it is 'about a woman from a woman's point of view (1985:298).' In 'In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism,' Ruby Rich seeks to desperately clear all doubt that *Jeanne Dielman* is feminist at all by claiming that the film is '*consciously* feminist' because it exhibits 'a female ordering of the [diegetic] space (1990:273, italics mine).' But the supposed self-evidence of the film's feminist impetus is only a product of surface appearances in which the 'unusual' representation of femininity and female housework, together with a healthy dose of 'feminist' directorship, is mistaken for the possibility or veracity of feminist social change. What is more, Rich's nostalgia for properly feminist 1970s film displays precisely that nostalgia for the second wave that covers over the fundamental *aporia* that marks feminism ever since it has grounded itself on the ideas and technologies of emancipation. This ambiguity or un-decidability of the film's feminism appears already in two seemingly diametrically opposite interpretations of *Jeanne Dielman* by Jayne Loader and Claire Johnston; while Johnston maintains that the film is *feminist* because it makes visible domestic tasks which are usually elided in movies and also because Jeanne's murder of her third client 'signifies the abolition of the phallus' which opens to 'a different symbolic order (1976:59),' Loader instead laments that the murder at the end makes the film *patriarchal* despite the allegedly feminist depiction of housewifery. Loader hence demands a more 'realistic' representation of women in the home, claiming that the implied prostitution and other 'juicy' elements 'destroy the film's credibility' (1985: 336) and fails to give real women a politics, (Ibid.,337) while Johnston's more optimistic analysis fails to notice how the film in fact resonates extremely well with the phallic 'reality' of the current order.

Again, at issue here for feminists should be the question of how such antithetical interpretations can both be true at the same time. What this possibly means is that apparently the very moment at which *Jeanne Dielman* is feminist constitutes

paradoxically the *very same moment at which it is patriarchal*. The 'female' content of the film works as 'camouflage' for an exceedingly vicious technocratic social order, while that content is simultaneously an allegory of the pervasive form in which images get usurped into a phallic functionality. The film's imagery is indeed neatly symmetrical like a Renaissance painting – the founding visual logic of all contemporary media – and its diegetic time is neatly linear – like the metaphysical assumption of linear progression. But the film is also extremely jerky and obsessive, and attempts to impose a regime of efficiency (through Jeanne within the diegetic space, as well as through the film frame and editing itself) which slowly descends into chaos and death. Efficiency and regimentation thus reveal themselves as eventually going and being out of control, which also runs analogous to how the almost tangible materiality of the diegetic space runs parallel to the viewer's near-claustrophobic yet profoundly unstable socio-technical environment, both inside and outside the movie theatre. Ivone Margulies indeed describes the film's workings rather aptly in *Nothing Happens* as exhibiting a 'lack of hierarchy between drama and surface depiction' in which eventually 'narrative and intentionality get dissolved (1996:3).' The supposedly 'feminist' strategy of rendering visible – the showing of housework especially – by way of representing the 'female' in her allegedly 'real' social conditions is hence shown to be a problematic aspiration when it is taken as unequivocally politically subversive. *Jeanne Dielman* namely does not function eventually as some tool of corrective feminist realism, but instead partakes in the 'pornography' of liberal transparency; and it is therefore that both Loader's and Johnston's readings can be correct, in the sense that also their 'correct' interpretations are themselves simulations of the phallic model. Moreover, the fact that Jeanne in the film is both a housewife and a prostitute in which, quite against sexist filmic convention, the acts of *prostitution* are elided (and not the housewifery), shows that the film tries to 'camouflage' its complicity in the pornography of speed-elitism. Margulies also perceptively remarks that the film has an overall uncanny and 'lethal quality' in which objects seem to 'have a life of their own (Ibid.,90).' In light of the fact that Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as that what 'excite[s] in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearances (Margulies, 1996:91),' this would indeed also point towards

the fact that the film is both exemplary of our speed-elitism and at the same time dissimulates it.

In many ways then, the film can be read as an allegory of our social condition which is precisely, according to Baudrillard in *The Evil Demon of Images*, itself 'cinematic' (1984:16); Akerman's film is ostensibly *about* the film apparatus and its aspiration to (female) reality, and as such the film becomes 'doubly real' for its viewer. As Akerman herself has hinted at in interviews with feminist critics who eagerly wanted to read the film as a straightforwardly feminist work, the film is therefore not (simply) feminist – even not in terms of her intention, which functions for many feminist critics as the agentive 'proof' that the film is indeed feminist. It is rather more pressingly about the contemporary human condition. Notably, Akerman mentions in an interview with Marsha Kinder for instance that she was interested in the relationship between the body and film time (1975:2). This concern with the human technological condition is apparent in the ways in which the film form or structure runs parallel with its content, and in turn in the ways in which this allows the spectator to enjoy and identify with the cinematic space because it is the perfect allegory for what Virilio in *The Lost Dimension* terms 'speed-space (1991:102).' The visual 'boxing up' of Jeanne in the rooms of her apartment is analogous to the 'box' of the screen-frame, and this is in turn analogous to the 'boxing-in' of the movie-goer in the dark theatre in which she or he is partly immobilized and in which the visual function is dominant, just like our condition in a hyper-media society at large today. Jean-Louis Baudry indeed already notes in the 1970s in 'Ideological Effect of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus,' quite in line with Virilio's later thesis on the media and hyper-visual inertia, that such a 'boxing' draws heavily on Renaissance perspectivism and works on many levels like a 'letter of condolences (1974:44).' The feminist psychological and psycho-analytical analyses of the film content as a representation of women's objective reality hence seem so compellingly true because this truth merely appears as a *function* of the doubling of the speed-elitist condition and its techniques and technologies of reproduction. On an unconscious level these techniques are so familiar yet unsettling to us that they get 'camouflaged' in our obsession with the supposed woman-centric or feminist content. *Jeanne Dielman* is then a 'domestic melodrama' in which 'order is the

mask for chaos' as Marguiles typifies the film (1996:10), not simply on the level of its content but especially on the level its form: it exemplifies and allegorizes the melodrama of our domestication under speed-elitism. In other words, the realism of the film content dissimulates our actual technological condition, and this dissimulation can be read because eventually the film itself seduces the feminist interpretation to such an extent that the hypothetically 'straightforward' feminist goal is led astray by the film object. The very feminist *hypothesis* of the attainability of a feminist utopia by way of the political mobilization or interpretation of the film as a self-evidently subverting the reality of patriarchy is therefore itself a *product* of the logic of speed-elitism. This is because such a mobilization or interpretation is itself modeled after the phallic functionalism that this political economy requires, and is as such not the authentic expression of some kind of inherent feminist subjectivity or desire.

All this leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that any feminist politics of liberation or 'voice' in a capitalist society marked by the implosion of the semiotic in the axiomatic is currently self-defeating, since it requires as its grounding moment exactly what it seeks to overthrow, namely the objective existence of the phallus. The implications of this are manifold. It means for instance that the feminist strategies and counter-strategies around representation, when for instance taught in the academic classroom to students, really teaches those students even more diverse methods of complicity in speed by instructing them how they can *consume* – that is, mobilize and 'eat up' – their imagined social relations for speed-elitism. In the feminist media studies classroom then, teacher and student consume the idea of resistance through discerning between the 'fake difference' between sexism and feminism; providing all of them, as feminist subjects turned into the objects of acceleration within the modern university – which is of course, and has always been, the right hand of power – the illusion of autonomy and emancipation. After all, most feminist media modules concern themselves with a critique of advertising, and advertising's first 'sale,' as Baudrillard illustrates in *The System of Objects*, consists of giving its subjects the illusion of personal choice and autonomy together with the whole unjust social machinery of patriarchal functionalism that grounds it (1996:101). It also means for instance that the contemporary tug of war in academic feminist literature

between 'properly radical' feminists and so-called 'third wave' consumerist feminists occurs because 'proper' feminism wants to project onto the third wavers something that actually resides within itself, namely its own complicity with speed-elitism.

These are finally only the first-stage complications that the diagnosis of feminist self-defeatism generates. More seriously and urgently, the acceleration of the feminist *aporia* by way of its mediated enactment only serves to widen the abyss between feminist intention and its effect. The reading strategy that comes with the acknowledgement of such an abyss – the radical absence of the organizing phallus as such – will have to be profoundly different from the conventional feminist analyses of representation; in fact, this old strategy has reversed itself to such an extent that at first sight an opposite tactic seems to emerge that appears as fatally 'anti-feminist.' The only possible subversive response would namely initially appear to not respond at all, but to somehow silently acknowledge or defy the violence of the image; to advocate eventually the only possible *irresponsible* response. But the principle of seduction in Baudrillard's text does not allow this article to stop there, at the point of a straightforward critique of agentive politics and humanist responsibility – not in the least because this article itself performs such responsibility by claiming to be able to interpret feminist texts as speed-elitist. Moreover, to oppose absence or silence as the straightforward anti-thesis of visibility and voice, would itself just as much be usurped into the speed-elitist order's reliance on an apparent 'political' alternative as a false difference. It is for this reason that we can read Baudrillard *in the spirit of his feminist politics* against his own grain and in turn argue that his fatalistic 'politics' of seduction by way of an 'alternative' representation, like in the enactment of the masculine-feminine and subject-object opposition, is equally questionable. In fact, taking Baudrillard's argument to its logical extreme would imply that the *image* of 'phallic functionalism' itself could just as much be a mere ruse, and that in turn *reality is actually not accelerating at all*. In other words, my interpretation of the puzzlements in the above feminist texts as exemplary of speed-elitism constitutes likewise a simulation in that its model of acceleration quite possibly just as much

precedes the imagined speed-elitist social 'reality' of the texts. I finally suggest therefore that a feminist appropriation of Baudrillard's texts has us end up in the moment where we *can no longer be certain* whether his or our analyses and concepts constitute a genuine dispute or a masterful ruse. In this very moment, truth – like the 'truth' of patriarchal domination and oppression that feminism has to affirm *a priori* – appears as a superficial deception, just like the alleged 'feminism' of Akerman's film. Likewise, we can no longer satisfyingly decide whether the pro-headscarf or anti-headscarf position works as the most or best feminist standpoint, because the phallic master-signifier was itself *always already a scam to start with*. And this should lead one to conclude that it is not feminism which is absurd or stupid – which some feminists claimed Baudrillard was arguing – but neo-liberal *patriarchy* that is absurd. The phallic master signifier, together with its close ally the autonomous agent of emancipation, is a merely superficial and illusory image-object of a finally non-binding reality. If power has vacated the realm of media representation and has become instead entangled with an imagined speed-elitism, then a more radical feminism today, very much in contrast to the celebrated politics of the second wave, should perhaps (ir)responsibly *denounce* agentive and representational politics as a property of some feminist subject. Here, we find the paradox of an un-feminist feminism; a feminism that acknowledges how the stakes have been raised under contemporary conditions of technologically crafted acceleration so as to vacate the premises for the appearance of 'real' radical alterity. After all, did not my description of the 'real' state of feminism at the start likewise show (that the humanist, liberal, and scientific obsession with treating appearances as reality unveils) *absolutely nothing*?

Ingrid M. Hoofd is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Culture at the Humanities Faculty of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her research interests are issues of representation, feminist and critical theories, philosophy of technology, game studies, and information ethics. She is the author of *Higher Education and Technological Acceleration: the Disintegration of University Teaching and Research* (Palgrave, 2016), and *Ambiguities of Activism: Alter-Globalism and the Imperatives of Speed* (Routledge, 2012). Her research analyses the ways in which alter-globalist activists, as well as left-wing academics, mobilise what she calls 'speed-elitist' discourses and divisions in an attempt to overcome gendered, raced, and classed oppressions worldwide. These analyses outline the accelerated tensions and relationships between various new technologies and activist-academic moral imperatives from a critical-cultural and deconstructionist perspective.

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Endnotes

1. This quandary seems to permeate much feminist academic and activist debate today, but comes in particular from the discussions I had and the keynotes I attended at the last three European Feminist research conferences (in 2006, 2009, and 2012).

2 One can think here especially of the feminist analyses with an affiliation to critical cultural studies, like the work of Rey Chow, Tania Modleski, Ien Ang, Angela McRobbie, Susan Bordo, Gayle Kaufman and many others, but also of the

feminist critiques of the hegemony of the masculine in cultural production which work with the premise of increasing female visibility or subjectivity, like Sandra Gilbert for literature and Laura Mulvey for film studies.

3 There are of course two other complications of representation, namely dialectical sublation and deconstruction. I am not discussing these here because this article concerns itself with feminist strategies of representation that imply the primacy of feminist agency.

4 An interesting early description of the disintegration of (the illusion of) feminist identity online emerges for instance in Michael Ayers' 'Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists' in *Cyberactivism*.

5 Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects* and Grosz' *Volatile Bodies* are good examples of such theories of becoming in feminism. For an in-depth analysis of this re-mobilization of 'becoming' in such feminist philosophy, see Ingrid Hoofd's 'Between Baudrillard, Braidotti and Butler' in the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*.

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