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Please cite published version:

https://www.rowmaninternational.com/book/affect_and_social_media/3-156-e43f234f-a8c8-418f-be9a-52e1d465e53b

Becoming User in Popular Culture

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This chapter considers the operation of mainstream cinema in enabling audiences to identify themselves as “users” of digital media rather than more radically mediational agential bodies. I consider the user of digital culture as an affective subject; and userness as affect. Actions of use are dynamic, everyday situations through which a user may identify themselves as such.¹ I turn to scenes of hacking as staged in popular culture as ways of experiencing a heightened affective encounter with everyday situations of userness. The scenes of “becoming user” that I discuss below attempt to keep legible the fantasy of an individual human subject who will benefit from the anthropocentric capitalist imaginary. Describing these scenes as staging userness is also a means of critically witnessing how little agency “individual users” have within the current political moment—these fantasies are ultimately ambivalent and offer little in terms of a way out of or alternative to userness. As a typical action hacker film, Len Wiseman’s 2007 *Live Free or Die Hard*, the fourth film in the *Die Hard* franchise, attempts to render userness as proximate to a popular fantasy of antagonism between individuals and systems: the antihero vs. the establishment; the good criminal in the wrong place at the wrong time; the strength of the human body against the mastery of technology.² In what follows I suggest that watching hackers on screen is a way of becoming user. Analysis of a series of scenes depicting hacking and control of digital

media systems in *Live Free or Die Hard*, elicits a description of protracted userness and passivity which touches on the anxious condition of the individual human user of digital media in relation to planetary scale computation.³ Which is to say, whilst purporting to be about users regaining control over a situation, *Live Free or Die Hard* is also about the environmental situation in which human and nonhuman bodies are mediationaly entangled and critically out of control.

User Affects

Cinema is an aesthetic, social, and economic coming together of bodies, narratives, affects.

Following Steven Shaviro, affect is the designation of “the fact that *every* moment of experience is qualitative and qualified”.⁴ Affect troubles the distinctness of cultural and aesthetic experiences, but such experiences are also ways to apprehend affective relations. Encountering our socio-economic and political formations as an aesthetic might give us ways of registering some of the affective intensities particular to contemporary life. For Shaviro “capitalism ‘itself’—however multiple and without-identity it may actually be— involves an incessant *drive towards* totalization,” but “we cannot see, feel, hear, or touch this project or process”.⁵ In other words, we cannot experience capitalism as affect because everything is affective. Without fully endorsing Shaviro’s position here I do take his subsequent turn to the aesthetic as a generative one. Within Shaviro’s framework the aesthetic is in fact another kind of affective scene: a way of making socio-economic and political formations “visible, audible, and palpable”.⁶ The aesthetic is both a site at which we encounter media as political or social formation, and a dynamic scene through which the political takes shape.⁷ For example, in Patrick Jagoda’s recent work, network aesthetics (the aesthetic manifestations of a network imaginary) are shown to, “track processes that exceed human cognition because they either fall under the threshold of perception (e.g.,

subconscious effects of social media) or overload an individual's real-time processing capacity (e.g., complexities of a global political system)".⁸ The turn to studies of affect is in part a reflection of the way new systems of production and control, new technologies, destabilise historically constituted social agency and "exceed" the indexicality of anthropocentric imaginaries.⁹ In what follows an aesthetic scene of digital media use is interrogated for the ways it might make palpable, visible, audible the affective dimensions of life after new media.

The term "user" names a participatory figure whose action is always in relation to the medium, but here I read it as ambivalent in the sense that a user is also always in *use*. As Olia Lialina has described it, "in times of invisible computing User is the best (the last) reminder that there are those who developed the system and those who use it, and that you are dealing with the programmed system first and foremost".¹⁰ In addition, the user is a mediational category of personhood, becoming with nonhuman agency (algorithmic iteration, rare minerals—multiple agents). In films featuring hackers, such as *Live Free or Die Hard*, we see the condition of userness taking shape as narrative. The hacker is an expert user, but the pitched battle between the individual hacker and the digital control system is how the anxious affect of userness is made narratable.¹¹ The condition of user as read here is both a generic trait of a narrative genre—action film—and a way of seeing a situation emerging. As Lauren Berlant writes, genre is not the communal manifestation of how things are, but rather "a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take".¹² In order to discover our becoming user we need to think the social situation emerging, which is to think with and against the aesthetic (narrative and spectacle), and think with and against the affective resonance of the aesthetic. In other

words, although narratologically and aesthetically *Live Free or Die Hard* favours the triumph of the individual *over* the system, offers a triumphant expert user, and is itself testimony to expert use of digital media to create a world, it affectively resonates with all the ways everyday userness is experienced as an ambivalent mode of agency.

Becoming User

About two thirds of the way through *Live Free or Die Hard*, John McClane (Bruce Willis) and Matt Farrell (Justin Long) are running out of options to prevent “bad” hacker Thomas Gabriel (Timothy Olyphant) from using Farrell’s algorithm to break into various Government IT command centres. In action movies featuring hackers there are good people who hack, and bad people who hack, but there are rarely *bad* hackers; all hackers are assumed to be good at hacking and they are always a threat.¹³ McClane and Farrell visit a hacker comrade of Farrell’s, Freddie Kaludis, aka the “Warlock” (Kevin Smith), who will be able to get them online. In the Warlock’s personal “command centre” Kaludis and Farrell attempt to work out how Farrell’s algorithm is being used. Kaludis sits in swivel chair in a dug-out pit; multiple monitors rise-up in front of him. Kaludis and Farrell look at black screens filled with various pop up-windows of lines of code, blueprints, status bars, maps, and diagrams. McClane cannot parse the information on the screens and Kaludis and Farrell impatiently explain the hack they appear to be observing.

The command centre replicates the architecture of the “Control Room”, “a techno-aesthetic manifestation of the spatial and logical paradoxes of emergency jurisprudence”.¹⁴

As the scene develops we learn Kaludis does not embody any jurisprudence~~control~~; the domestic space of the command centre undermines the official authority of the control room, positioning Kaludis as a precarious user, becoming passive, ceding power to external sites of control. At the end of the scene the camera moves toward the monitor; the three

men are no longer visible. The graphics switch and new windows overlay the diagrams Kaludis and Farrell have been looking at. The camera angle widens revealing more of the monitor, and then switches angle to reveal a different room, and a different computer user, sat upright at a desk; one of a row of computer operators working in what is later revealed to be a van. This computer operator is Trey (Jonathan Sadowski), a hacker in the employment of Thomas Gabriel, who is called over to look at who is looking at their hack. Trey narrates what he is doing—“calling on host server right now”—and eventually Trey and Gabriel commandeer Kaludis’s web cam. In the next cut the two distinct monitors (made one fluid image by the camera movement that passes through them) become a single window: Gabriel and Trey appear as a live feed on Kaludis’s monitor; Kaludis’s room as a live feed on theirs. The domestic setting that opens the scene places everyday computer use in proximity to expert professional computer use. The hack at the end of the scene, as Gabriel and Trey commandeer Kaludis’s webcam, visualises the promiscuousness of networked digital computing—what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has recently named its “leakiness”—and narrates power itself as a leaky affect.¹⁵

Farrell is the only hacker who can stop Gabriel; it is Farrell’s algorithm which Gabriel is misusing in the first place, and so Farrell must be the one to hack the hack. As exemplified in the various narrative movements that position McClane as the only man for the job, action films are premised on the exceptional, and exceptionally heroic body.¹⁶ Although Farrell is at first reluctant to participate in McClane’s mission he goes on to accept the uniqueness of his service. Watching the film, the audience is distinguished from the hacker on screen as we are distinguished from McClane; we are the imagined citizenry of the film to be saved by Farrell and McClane, rather than the heroes themselves. That said, the neoliberal logic of

individual responsibility so spectacularly on display in the action genre is also the everyday reality of the audience. This situation is especially visible in scenes of computer use which position the individual user (hacker) as a sovereign entity temporarily effacing both the networked conditions of userness and the troubled sovereignty of typing into networked digital media; entering the flow of communicative capitalism, an “inversion of politics”, where “rapidly circulating differences and modulations ... ensure nothing changes”.¹⁷

Drawing a distinction between the mass audience of cinema and the individuated reception and production of blogs, Jodi Dean has argued that social media must produce different kinds of affective subject to mass media such as cinema. Reading Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Dean notes, “cinema organizes, locates, and seats its spectators The unity of the screen produces out of the disunity of persons a singular audience that can see and recognise itself as a collective”.¹⁸ Instead, social media, and cinema in the age of social media—what Laura Mulvey terms “the cinema of delay”, watched whenever, wherever—make their subject visible to itself only as an instance of participation.¹⁹ For Dean, “networked information and entertainment media of communicative capitalism”, “dis-place” the mass body, “producing instead ever-accelerating circuits of images, impulses, fragments, and feelings”.²⁰ Hollywood action movies continue to evoke the mass of cinema; they are intended to bring people together in front of a big screen through selling a spectacle best experienced in the cinema.²¹ In scenes such as *Live Free or Die Hard* the affective work of cinema as a mass medium captures the affective intensities of networked media which are always disassembling the user subject. Paradoxically then, the audience encounter their everyday userness as both the imagined collective body of mass cinema, and the individual sovereign body of the hacker/user.

Once Thomas Gabriel has hacked into Kaludis's webcam he brings up an image of McClane's daughter, Lucy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). McClane, Farrell and Kaludis watch the monitor as Lucy is shown on CCTV footage trapped in an elevator which is under the control of Gabriel. Lucy is being held hostage, although she does not know it yet. This whole sequence is a mediation on gazing as surveillance and newly "smart terror". The audience watch one set of hackers watch another set of hackers who were always passively monitoring the first set; these covert acts of watching are revealed when Gabriel acts, and introduces the additional event of watching Lucy. Each instance of looking comes loaded with impositions of how to look: at Kaludis and Farrell as amateur bodies; at McClane as a redundant body (a kind of audience-user proxy, a pawn in everyone else's spectacle); at Gabriel as a master body; at Lucy who is "the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film".²² Although the audience is encouraged to identify with the omniscient narration, the digital mediation of narration here is also a mode of alienation.

In films like *Live Free or Die Hard* the computational is obfuscated, both as medium (they are digital films but not reflexively so, rather they follow the logic of digital cinema as remediation) and as narrative event (the screenplay is a series of non-sequiturs about what is happening with a hack/program).²³ Although in action hacker films the labour of the computer expert is represented, it is present in such a way so as to obfuscate the multiplex ways human and computers labour with each other. The gesture toward such work is the typing and stroking of keys seen on screen, which signifies the post-production of the film itself. The smooth transition between shots and screens in the sequence described above is enabled by animation software and cameras positioned within virtual environments. The

move between rooms and between surveillance footage is aesthetically and ethically of digital media, and the particular political and social conditions it instantiates. In other words, this sequence, in its giving over agency to the screen itself—in taking it from the human subject who appears to control it—produces a scene which situates the user as becoming-with digital media.²⁴ The affective resonance of this scene is to both placate the anxiety of life after new media as one of ubiquitous surveillance, and elicit an identification with the human subject of life after new media as living mediational entanglement.²⁵ The use of digital compositing embedded in scenes *about* digitally composed ways of being seen, and of living, give away what the film replicates about a digital society: our access to digital media beyond the screen is “planned, mapped, orchestrated and rendered”, without agency to “penetrate or ‘discover’ anything”.²⁶ In films about digital media and digital culture-as-surveillance, the anxious affect of the plot is userness made palpable, which might be both at once the acclimatising of the digital subject to their user subjectivity, and a troubling of this encounter through its reification as mass spectacle.

End User

Although this chapter has focused on *Live Free or Die Hard*, we might expand the analysis to include various scenes that similarly intensify everyday computer use by placing the action of use in proximity to the action of action cinema.²⁷ Such scenes appear to be narrating an instance of computation but more often represent the limits of what aspects of computation are narratologically and cinematically graspable. In mainstream action hacker/surveillance film the consumer/viewer encounters an affect of userness. The passive mode of watching cinematic spectacle becomes the passive mode of social media; not the total experience of social media as an individual, but the total effect in terms of the economics of production. That is communicative capitalism, in which, as Jodi Dean describes

it, “we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies”.²⁸ Registering the affective ambivalence of user sovereignty in the domain of communicative capitalism through scenes of hacking in a *Die Hard* movie is possible in part because action cinema, as a definitive genre of mass market capitalism, has always depicted ambivalent modes of sovereignty. In action cinema we watch the spectacle, space and bodies, but not always in ways contained by a legible plot. More specifically, the visual spectacle of action cinema often registers precisely at the limits of what a human body is able to endure, to withstand; at the limits of an anthropocentric capitalist imaginary.²⁹

Action cinema is a historically dynamic site in which an audience encounters the affective dimensions of new flows, intensities, and networks of capitalism. Steven Shaviro argues that cinematic affect itself has been incorporated into our small screen culture, as a process of attunement, of enduring and negotiating “the ‘unthinkable complexity’—of cyberspace and the unrepresentable immensity and intensity of ‘the world space of multinational capital’”.³⁰ *Live Free or Die Hard* is an example of the genre of mainstream action hacker/surveillance cinema, which operates as an affectively invested zone where narratives of our userness are taking shape. I have argued here that we can describe watching hackers as a way of becoming user. In other words, such ambivalent scenes as described above are an affective transmission, an experience of userness through popular fantasy, and a situation in which users are becoming.

Notes

¹ Here “situation” does not describe a fixed event or arrangement, but rather an arrangement in process. As Lauren Berlant has it, “a situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amidst the usual activity of life.” Lauren Berlant, “Thinking about feeling historical,” *Emotion, Space and Society*, 1 (2008): 5.

² To name some: *Tron* (Lisberger 1982); *WarGames* (Badham 1983); *Lawnmower Man* (Leonard 1992); *Hackers* (Softley 1995); *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999); *Swordfish* (Sena 2001); *Transformers* (Bay 2007); *The Social Network* (Fincher 2010); *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher 2011); *Skyfall* (Mendes 2012); *The Fifth Estate* (Condon 2013); *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015); *Blackhat* (Mann 2015); *Furious 7* (Wan 2015).

³ Here I am thinking of planetary scale computation in the sense Benjamin Bratton refers to it in his formulation of “The Stack”: a scenario in which “Users, human or nonhuman, are cohered in relation to Interfaces, which provide synthetic total images of the Addressed landscapes and networks of the whole, from the physical and virtual envelopes of the City, to the geographic archipelagos of the Cloud and the autophagic consumption of Earth’s minerals, electrons, and climates that power all of the above”. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015).

⁴ Steven Shaviro, “A Response: Steven Shaviro’s Post-Cinematic Affect,” *in media res*, September 02, 2011, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2011/09/02/response>.

⁵ Shaviro, “A Response”. Italics in original.

⁶ Shaviro, “A Response”.

⁷ For more on this formulation of contemporary aesthetics and its relation to affect theory see Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), and Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁸ Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, 32-3.

⁹ As Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg put it in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregg and Seigworth, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010): “At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect)”, 2.

¹⁰ Olia Lialina, “Re: Digital Citizenship: from liberal privilege to democratic’ *nettime*, March 23, 2015. Accessed March 23, 2015, <http://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-1503/msg00034.html>.

¹¹ For more on the narratability of digital media in narrative cinema see forthcoming Zara Dinnen, “Cinema and the Unnarratability of Computation,” *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

¹² Lauren Berlant, “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,” *supervalentthought.com*, November 2011, accessed March 11, 2017 <https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf>.

¹³ Some exceptions here could be Richard Pryor’s character, Gus Gorman, in *Superman III* (1983), and Jesse Bradford’s character Joey Pardella in *Hackers* (1995). That said, in both cases the klutz hacker unwittingly pulls off a great hack. So perhaps there are no truly *bad* hackers in movies.

¹⁴ Cormac Deane, “The Control Room: A Media Archaeology,” *Culture Machine*, 16: 1-34 (2015), accessed <http://culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/590/597>, 3.

¹⁵ See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), especially the third chapter.

¹⁶ See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), and *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, ed. Yvonne Tasker, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

¹⁷ Jodi Dean, “Whatever Blogging,” *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 135. On the performance of user sovereignty through hackers in film see Dinnen, “Cinema and the Unnarratability of Computation”.

¹⁸ Dean, “Whatever”, 132.

¹⁹ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, (London: Reaktion, 2006), 190.

²⁰ Dean, “Whatever”, 134.

²¹ Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

²² Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 13.

²³ For work on remediation see David Bolter and Richard Grusin *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999); Alexander R. Galloway’s *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012); for commentary on remediation and filmic interfaces see Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007); and Dinnen *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

²⁴ Here “becoming-with” media is taken from Kember and Zylinska’s work on mediation in *Life After New Media*: “media need to be perceived as particular enactments of *tekhnē*, or as temporary ‘fixings’ of

technological and other forms of becoming. This is why it is impossible to speak about media in isolation without considering the process of mediation that enables such 'fixings'." See Kember, Sarah and Joanna Zylinska., *Life after New Media: Mediation as a vital process*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012). 21.

²⁵ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*.

²⁶ Nick Jones, "Expanding the Esper: Virtualised spaces of surveillance in sf film," *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 9.1 (2016), 6, accessed March 11, 2017,

<http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.3828/sftv.2016.1>.

²⁷ see n3

²⁸ Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1.1 (2005): 53, accessed June 12, 2016, DOI: 10.2752/174321905778054845.

²⁹ See Purse *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 21-28.

³⁰ Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, (Hants: O-Books, 2010), 138.