

Introducing Robert William Overweg: Between Subjectivity, Technology and Photography

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Introduction

Contemporary philosophical thought has produced a staggering amount of theories procuring the subject insights into its own inability to sustain a set of beliefs that promulgate transparency and self-knowledge, accumulating in a metaphysical Self. From many different angles the subject has been declared dead or fake; it is not so much a matter of negating biological existence; on the contrary, it is much more a project of demonstrating that subjectivity is at least a result of the precipitation of the signifier. Folding and retracting, locating and relocating, apperceiving alterity: this is what contemporary ontological projects investigate and, by extension, map. Since productions of the current art industry and theoretically inclined thought became so intertwined, the project of attempting to consolidate the Self through art seems also to be in vain, or at least remote.

However, the ascent of those insights and its anchoring in academia have also had positive repercussions; once possession of a nucleus of identity has been rejected, options for constructing identity, or multiple identities, whereby the subject is capable of reinvention, get nearer and become more probable. It is no wonder, then, to find highly regarded, so-called postmodern philosophers contemplating art and its *efficacy* on the subject almost incessantly, since involvement with art might have an altering effect on the subject.¹ In other words, rearranging the signifier pushes the envelope in the process of

I deliberately use the word 'efficacy' here, since it carries a transformational and therefore active element. It is true, however, that traditional humanist discourses do show an internal vacancy on the questions of the transformative powers of art. Those questions are, however, always aimed at transformative effects on the subject, while, at the same time, a stable ontological ground was attributed to the work of art itself. 'Postmodern' theories provide space to contemplate the ever-changing quality of the work of art and the subject at the same time. Hence, the enablement of those theories to see works of art as subjects. In this paper, then, I follow this assertion.

signifying and automatically implies a delocalization of the subject, and subjective alteration occurs.

Now, when signifying processes are at stake, contemplating art endowed with a technological backdrop and setting is most productive to initiate research in the field of the intersections between subjectivity and technology. To me, the photographs of the young Dutch artist Robert William Overweg, which show stills of well-known computer games played by millions of people all over the globe, do not only illustrate the idea of a subject constructed by, or even hidden behind, a flowing chain of signifiers, but, at the same time, display an innovative technique of creation where cuts in this signifying chain are being made, simply by taking photographs. Thus, I view Overweg's work as a documentation of man encircled and constructed by contemporary technological society. At the same time, his photographs are treated as subjects, which is to say that they are texts open to interpretation and alteration and therefore effects of possible meaningful sets of signifiers. In addition, considering that a large amount of identity is constructed by imaginary identification, contemplating Overweg's art needs to localize a certain space where the unconscious is addressed. Moreover, due to the fact that his work communicates with tropes and figures from the past, I will investigate his photographs' stance toward theoretical thought, while at the same time researching his use of metaphor. Hence, Overweg's work, as the gravitational point of this paper, enables the investigation into the field of the construction of subjectivity in relation to technology.

2 All Overweg quotations are drawn from his website: <http://www.shotby-robert.com>.

3 Since Overweg's photographs are taken from well-known video games, they depict certain moments occurring in the narrative development of those games. In doing so, Overweg creates works of art that exhibit playfulness toward choosing the right moment. Further on, I will go into his subjective position in taking those photographs.

Overweg's Technical Device: Cutting Narratives

According to Overweg, his project purports the idea that "virtual environments" are the "new public spaces" of contemporary society.² Besides, he "was grasped by their [the video games'] perfect beauty, most of the time copying our own real world." Furthermore, he questions whether "there [is] a difference between a photograph of a simulated object and a photograph of the object taken in real life." Indeed, these issues are particularly related to Overweg's project, but are, as I would suggest, not sufficient enough when it comes to understanding the question of how his photographs display the relation between its own being, that is photographs, to the beings from which they derive, that is video games.³

If subjectivity indeed is assembled in a discursive mode by the signifier, one could say that coherence – or at least a sense of it – chiefly comes into existence from the way the signifier is being arranged in a relatively coherent set of sheaves; it thus becomes a narrative, or narratives. The point, however, with Overweg's photographs is that they are 'highlighted' by being isolated from the rest of the narrative of the video game; in a sense, they become foregrounded. In other words, what Overweg does by taking the photographs is an act of 'cutting' the narrative of the video game and thereby interrupting its formal structure. So, it seems that Overweg leaves the basic idea of (structuralist) narratology, where every point in a signifying system refers to another, for a more phenomenological approach, that is the object looked at as if it were standing on its own without meaning derived in contrast to other points in this signifying system. Consequently, the distinction between *studium* and *punctum* propounded by Roland Barthes in

4 According to Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, two of the most important linguists of the 20th century, *paradigm* and *syntagm* constitute the basic movement of language.

5 I take the idea of condensation as the paradigmatic character of the metaphor from Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Lacan's structural interpretation of it as intrinsically analogous to knowledge in his paper "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud" in his *Écrits*. See below for a discussion of Overweg's images in relation to metaphor.

his engagingly introspective and contemplative approach to photographic documents, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, suits the technique Overweg employs in his artworks. However, where Barthes' distinction is primarily aimed at intratextual elements of a photograph – the examination of the coded culture of an image (51) and the fetishist prick that wounds (43) respectively – my employment of this distinction in relation to Overweg's work would alter Barthes' definition of the narrative of the video game (*studium*) and the still image derived from it (*punctum*).

Given, then, that Overweg 'freezes' time by deciding to capture a photographic image and thereby cutting the narrative, one needs to realize that subjectivity plays a considerable part in constructing semantic content in the images; they evolve into a subjective appearance of a *moment* that intrigues the photographer. Therefore, I would argue that Overweg implicitly prefers paradigm over syntagm.⁴ That is to say that in Overweg's work condensation and choice dominate over linear movement and the importance of the passing of time. In my view, analysis of Overweg's work thus requires pointing at the metaphorical status and content of his images.⁵

Thus, photographing certain moments in the video game – those moments fascinating to Overweg's eye – does not only imply a heightened consolidation of a subjective position in a work of art, it also establishes the creation of a *punctum* as I conceive it here. As Juli Carson states in her interesting vision on how one might approach the *punctum* from a psychological perspective, treatment of it as "a detail [that] signifies something outside the parameters of language" opens up new possibilities. (76) "Outside" those "parameters

6 The realm radically outside of language and therefore not open to symbolization is, as is well-known, the *locus classicus* of trauma.

7 The focus of this paper is, however, not aimed at distinguishing between Baudrillard's views from psychoanalytic ones. My point here is, namely, that from a Lacanian perspective the Real is empty and not open to symbolization, just as Baudrillard says that behind the signifier one only meets emptiness. (1736) Eventual diversions between the two theories would require another and more elaborate paper. For a short but fine introductory explanation of the Lacanian concept of the Real see Ross' article.

of language," but inextricably interwoven within, are, as Jacques Lacan points out, the Imaginary and the Real. My argument here is that Overweg's choice to capture a certain moment signifies his imaginary relation to that point in time. Remember that he wrote he "was grasped by their perfect beauty," meaning the detail from the narrative he wanted to ensnare.

Furthermore, the objection one might have to combining the linguistic argument of Overweg's inclination to choose for paradigm and stating that his photographs in themselves function as a *punctum*, foregrounded by narrative as oxymoronic, is not valid. Barthes' statement that the *punctum* serves metonymic movement (45) is, namely, not a problem provided that one sees that in *Camera Lucida* he has distanced himself from structuralism's preoccupation with meaning derived from the network of signifiers. This is, in my view, also the reason why this book displays a more phenomenological approach to photographs than a structuralist one. Moreover, since Carson tries to comingle Lacanian and phenomenological thought, I would assert that her use of Barthes' idea of metonymy is misunderstood, if one does not see that the *punctum* serves as a non-linguistic instigator of metonymic movement. Thus, in combining Lacanian theory and phenomenology Carson shows that the *punctum* primarily functions as a traumatic point of reference.⁶

Therefore, my use of the *punctum* as a starting point of symbolization, but not symbolized in itself, underscores the idea that Overweg chooses a moment to capture on film, but, at the same time, shows that this choice is not entirely conscious. The moment of pressing the shutter button is at least partly built on imaginary projection, that is "unarticulated (but articulable) idealizations

which are the building blocks of fantasy and ego;" (Ross, n.p.); hence, the importance of fantasy and the possibility of creating new constellations of meaning in Overweg's work.

Metaphors and Possibility

Given that Overweg's work is highly supported by technology and might be viewed, at least partly, as contemplative of the omnipresence of technology in contemporary society, I would assert that the question on reality versus virtuality is intrinsic in his work. In addition, since the construction of subjectivity always implies a quantity of unconscious investment, my argument would be that investigating the quantity of fantasy in relation to technology could shed more light on Overweg's work.

Many of us tend to regard cyberspace, and technology in general, as a human-like entity; as a result, phenomena derived from cyberspace are often embodied in human-like centered metaphors and personifications. For example, we talk about computers being infected by 'viruses' when what really is meant is not, of course, actual viruses, but something that causes damage to the computer, just as actual viruses might do to the human body. Humans, thus, project their own sense of being living entities onto inorganic ones, chiefly through technological constructs and artefacts. This is one of the reasons why philosophy and psychology require effort to investigate what the relationship between man and technology really contains. Many philosophers, for instance Jean Baudrillard, and psychoanalysts, like Slavoj Žižek, have contributed to the theorization of this relation. According to Baudrillard, the common-sense perception of the world rests on the presupposition that there is a rigid boundary between something like the 'real' world and a fake one. His thought, however, has tried to assert that there is no such boundary; at least, in a society dominated by technology man is constantly indoctrinated by "a new mode of signification in which signs are divorced from their referents in the object world, becoming reorganized into a 'hyperreal' of screen surfaces." (Poster, 45)

Now, when we take into account Baudrillard's claim that reality probably is constructed as an arrangement of *simulacra*, we might conclude that Overweg's work compels us to contemplate this conception. In addition, Žižek's theorizations, which draw much from Lacanian theory, proclaim a comparable view, although one might argue that they actually do differ at some points.⁷ In addition, Overweg's photographs are, of course, images taken from video games which are already not 'real': video games are artificial constructions made by humans. However, when identifying with them, as looking at and contemplating

8 I borrow these technical terms from I. A. Richards in his theorizations of the metaphor. New Critics like Richards attributed great value to metaphor, especially where literature is concerned. I want to extend this theory to my subject matter here, namely technology.

a certain object always requires, one finds that upholding the notion of a stable subject position becomes highly problematic. The fact that contemplating Overweg's photographs affects the viewer, that is contemplating signification, designates subjectivity's possibility to alter and therefore the performative aspect of it.

In addition, if one knows that subjectivity is open to alteration, the search for a core within oneself, or in the work of art, becomes unfruitful. However, I doubt Baudrillard's assertion that "with it [simulation] goes all of metaphysics," (1733) because, in my view, metaphysics is not at all limited to inquiry in the realm 'behind' the signifier. Investigating how the signifier is arranged to make up an identity, although alterable, is still a form of questioning ontology. Therefore, by stating that video games copy "our own real world," Overweg might have something else in mind than the world as it supposedly is in its 'core.' Although Overweg questions the nature of reality by photographing already artificial constructs, he still says that "virtual environments" constitute "the new public spaces." If public spaces are seen as realms of communication by way of symbolic exchanging sets of signifiers, Overweg's work then still explores the ontology of space.

In his article "Cyberspace and Virtual Places" Paul C. Adams treats spaces in technological networks primarily as metaphorical. Not only the fact that they stand for something else creates their metaphorical content, but also the fact that they are named, often in the form of a personification, mark their metaphorical status. In other words, they operate as verbal and linguistic equations. In my view, this kind of equation does not imply total ontological equality between the two poles; there occurs a discrepancy between the *tenor* and *vehicle* of a metaphor.⁸ In other

9 Similar visions on this diverging element of metaphor can also be found in Hayden White's highly regarded and influential book *Tropics of Discourse*. For example, when discussing Kenneth Burke's tropology he states that "[m]etaphor [...] explicitly asserts a similarity in a difference, and, at least implicitly, a difference in a similarity. We may call this the provision of a meaning in terms of equivalence or identity." (72)

10 This argument would also be the best argument against conservative visions on video games as potentially dangerous. Those who are in favour of restrictions on video games do not consider this argument at all. They assume that people take video games literally and not metaphorically. When people know that what happens in video games is just fictive and not a point to identify with completely, the presumed dangerousness of the video games is interchanged for its possible purgative function.

words, the entity that is being equated does not perfectly overlap with the entity the equation is made with; otherwise, it would be useless to equate and produce a metaphor. The genius of the process of 'metaphorization' lies, then, exactly at that point where a phenomenon can be seen in new light by analogy. By extension, a certain amount of semantic ambiguity goes along with the metaphor; one becomes unable to pinpoint exactly where *tenor* and *vehicle* overlap and where they diverge.⁹

Considering that Overweg's images are coagulations of those virtual environments, that is the video games, which are seen as "new public spaces," one might deduce traces of ambiguity in his photographs. In other words, what Overweg presents are not images of spaces in which the subject alters him- or herself *per se*; rather, it shows us the possibility of (re)creation of subjectivity through cyberspace and cyberart.¹⁰ Here Overweg's praxis as an artist comes very close to, for example, Donna Haraway's notion of the shifted / shifting identity of so-called cyborgs.

Moreover, by way of seeing Overweg's photographs as inherently metaphorical, one might see that "[b]y linking two ideas previously unlinked, metaphors destabilize taken-for-granted realities, bringing about changes in human-environment relationships and social relations." (Adams, 156) Thus, my initial assertion of Overweg's images as providing possibilities is supported by Overweg's project of mapping public spaces through recording moments in video games. Although Adam's use of possibility remains mostly tied to the public sphere, I would argue that Overweg does also create possibility in an artistic field. He does not only record public spaces by photographing, he also comments on what he believes contemporary art must provide modern man.

11 This so-called ‘*mathème*’ of fundamental fantasy is much more difficult than my elaboration renders here. For a good introduction to this topic see Fink.

Unconscious Knowledge and Intertextuality

I already touched upon the relevance of fantasy with regard to Overweg’s work and, by extension, technological art in general. However, the relation between the metaphorical aspects of his work in relation to unconscious fantasy has not yet been explored.

While closing his article, Adams remarks that “[p]eople fill voids in their knowledge with geographical features and metaphors that confirm the overarching cultural meanings they already hold: a sense of self and society, of time and space, of community and cosmos.” (167) My use of metaphor in this paper tries to argue for precisely the opposite view; namely, that knowledge is not surrounded by and filled up with metaphors, but the other way around, that is metaphor as the breeder of knowledge. My analysis of Overweg’s work demonstrates that knowledge about how to view his images is framed by a necessity to underline their metaphorical content. I argue, therefore, as Lacan puts it, that metaphor is the container, and thus the base of the development, of knowledge. The only way to unravel what cyberspace is by looking at what it does is to treat it as a space to create and disseminate metaphors. And indeed, as Adams points out, the self becomes fluid in cyberspace and is no longer aligned to boundaries in the ‘real’ world (166). Furthermore, “vision” in cyberspace acts as if it “[...] ceases to be structured by the horizon and Cartesian geometry [...]” (166) Along these lines, one is able to insert Lacan’s notion of the metaphor as the locus of knowledge. According to Ross, the mutual enrichment between two signifiers when compared with their respective signified, although bearing, in my view, linguistic

diversion, shows that there is a process of imaginary identification going on. Indeed: I as an Other.

Considering the metaphorical status of Overweg's work, I would assert that looking at his images, while knowing that they are reflections of cyberspace, questions the nature of imaginary identification and therefore unconscious fantasy. Fundamental fantasy, according to Lacan, could be stated in a structural formula, $\$ < > a$, where the split subject (\$) – alienated, but constituted, by language and the unconscious and subjugated by the Law – stands in a complex relation of projection and introjection (< >) to a point at which desire encircles the object (a).¹¹ Now, the question becomes whether Overweg's work is able to establish a traversing of fantasy in the perceiving subject as well as in the photograph itself. Simply stated, this traversing of fantasy is the subject being able to accept his or her castrated position with regard to the Other, that is being alienated and unconsciously tied to the Other's desire. Thus, "[t]he traversing of fantasy [...] involves a going beyond of castration and a utopian moment beyond neurosis." (Fink, 72) In viewing Overweg's work, the unconscious content *in* and *of* his work should therefore be accepted as inherent and an important part of its being.



figure 1 *Summer Tree*



figure 2 *City Tree*

Consider, for example, figure one and two. *Summer Tree* (fig. 1) and *City Tree* (fig. 2), derived from the video games *Far Cry 2* and *Godfather 2* respectively, are interesting to scrutinize because of their inherent

12 The idea of an inorganic entity, for example a text or in this case a photograph, endowed with an unconscious seems strange at first sight but is not considered from a Lacanian perspective. James Mel-lard elaborates this very well when he states that metaphor is knowledgeable in itself and a space of unconscious containment. (23-24) Hence, my metaphorical treatment of Overweg's images as carrying knowledge.

composition, but, when juxtaposed, seem to articulate even more than just the images they depict. First, where we see green foliage in *Summer Tree* signifying summer and, by associative analogy, bloom and prosperity, we see in *City Tree* a tree with autumn-like qualities, such as rusty and dying leaves. In addition, the amount of space devoted to the blue sky in *Summer Tree* is far greater than in *City Tree*. Furthermore, where the surroundings of the first tree are natural, although dried out, the surroundings of the second image are highly technological and artificial. We could derive from these observations that the first image – already signified by its title – displays a more positive connotation toward nature, while, at the same time, the second image displays a more negative stance toward technology.

However, what really dismantles this quite obvious opposition is, in my view, the fact that the first tree, by standing on top of a hill, refers – again by associative analogy – to a somewhat traditional notion of epistemology, since the tree, as an embodiment of Classical science, signified the structure of thought for centuries. At the same time, the tree in the second image, by standing on a roundabout, might allude to the peripatetic tradition in philosophical thought. Thus, the second image, compared to the first, displays much more internal ambiguity; it could be conceived of as a negative critique of technology – the tree in seasonal decline – or it might be open to an understanding of technology as inviting us to partake in the ancient Greek idea of *peripateia* (peripety) as contemplative action or even as instigated by the advent of technology. This being open to multiple interpretations, or explications, might be of interest from the viewpoint of the unconscious.

Consequently, my short analysis based on the composition of the photographs allows for an inference to see that the intersections between the image in question and the Other, that is the unconscious and the alienating symbolic structure, seems to suggest an intertextual allusion, although unconscious, to the past while not simply debunking the (technological) content.¹² Thus, it is impossible, and not at all productive, to clarify whether Overweg's images are debunking or embracing technology. The statement, then, that video games provide for "new public space" is, as I understand, neither a normative nor prescriptive one; hence, the inherent ambiguity toward the content of Overweg's images. The images display, therefore, their being split (\$) and ambiguous toward their own points of reference in the past, while, at the same time, they do identify with them (a). In conclusion, Overweg's work escapes simple categorization, just as artwork always does; its construction opens up new ways of seeing the polysemic nature of technology.

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the photographs of the young Dutch artist Robert William Overweg. In doing so, the topics of subjectivity, his technique, metaphor and technology are addressed. His photographs are primarily framed by theories proposed by Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard. Overweg's photographs are seen as symbolic structures to be interpreted, just as the 'postmodern' subject is. Furthermore, the relation between unconscious knowledge, metaphor and intertextuality is examined by way of analyzing Overweg's work. This begins from the assertion that technology and photography are inherently interrelated.

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