

IN THE MUDLINE

Guy Lobwein

March 16 - April 6

In the post-apocalyptic sci-fi classic, *The Matrix* (1999), humans are inert amidst the machinic takeover of the world, while also unwittingly contributing to this dystopic scenario: their sleeping bodies provide a source of power for the artificial intelligence that dominates the uninhabitable wasteland of this future world. *The Matrix* articulated fears around the, then-nascent, effect of the internet which seemed to be teetering between corporate control and a promise of freedom. The metaphor isn't subtle, its barely even a metaphor, but seems more relevant today than ever as the massive expansion of networked screen culture finds us sleepwalking into oblivion. The contemporary manifestation of the *Matrix*-like dystopia isn't dominated by anything as excitingly terrifying as sentient AI and its flying robotic minions (though these are present). Instead, the end-of-the-world is an accumulation of banalities: an ad-hoc panoply of corporate-controlled screens and devices that ceaselessly extract value from human attention, whilst draining the biosphere of its life-sustaining capacity in order to feed the demand for the energy and minerals on which the devices depend.

In a manner similar to *The Terminator* (1984-2019) franchise, *The Matrix* develops a vision of AI that is inseparable from environmental devastation, and directly linked to contemporary communication technology. In these films, self-preservationist sentience is the motivation for the killer-robot vs human scenario.[1] In our world, robot dominance isn't motivated by such philosophical ends, it is simply a by-product of the expansion of corporate capitalism. For Jonathan Crary, this dystopic future of machinic dominance has already arrived. Regardless of the reality of AI sentience, technical developments no longer have any connection to improving, or even preserving, life or human societies. As Crary writes: "Whether the AI-driven robotic Internet of Things is ever even partially realized is less important now than how its disclosure of human expendability contributes to demoralization and the crushing of hope. One awaits this future as one would await death." [2] Crary suggests that a world that imagines AI has already discarded the relevance of human thought, interiority and meaningful connection.

Like so much cinematic techno-fear sci-fi, there is an

ambivalence at the core of *The Matrix*. It suggests that, perhaps, if it was properly inhabited (in this case by 'the One') then the virtual world could be a place of freedom. But, more than this, the ambivalence towards technology is realised within the filmmaking process itself, which represents an embrace of digital technology. To visually generate its story of the dangers of the digital, *The Matrix* used what were, at the time, cutting edge computer-generated digital effects.

Guy Lobwein's *In the Mudline* shares with *The Matrix* both its themes and this ambivalence. The imagery in this exhibition presents a flooded and ruined world, populated by listless, sleeping or screen-absorbed figures. These images, reified as framed prints and rendered as a moving-image work, were generated digitally via Unreal Engine 5, a videogame development tool. Lobwein uses this technology to create a work that reflects on the contribution of digital entertainment and virtual worlds to the interconnected crises of climate change and the depletion of human autonomy and our capacity for community and action. In *The Mudline*, then, expresses the dovetailing of two overwhelming anxieties: climate catastrophe and our imbrication within digital worlds. Digital technology comes to represent the end of the world. Not just because of its massive demand on energy and resources leading to climate change, but because of its depletion of any forms of sociality and organisation community that could affect change or opposition to these ongoing crises.

Unreal Engine is typically used to realise immersive worlds of ceaseless violent action, such as its most famous creation, the ubiquitous battle-royale behemoth, *Fortnite* (2017). In contrast, Lobwein leverages this same technology to create spaces of stillness and of contemplative sadness. This is a world where the human figures have no impact, most of them are immersed within VR headsets and other screen-based technology. The only 'active' figure runs on a treadmill in a glass-walled gym while watching television; this is a controlled form of 'self-improvement' withdrawn from the social. The same figure is pictured slowly falling through blackness before disappearing into an ocean. The characters are turned away from others and, perhaps even, from themselves. The controlled world of the game engine encapsulates Crary's concern with the "cellularization of public space," the disintegration of sociality and the loss of meaningful or chance encounters: "This splintering of a social world is based on the obligatory acting out of busy-ness, of self-

occupation. It's irrelevant what anyone is actually doing, whether looking, working, texting, shopping, surfing, listening, gaming, or whatever. The result is mass acquiescence to an immaterial architecture of separation, sustained by the simulation of self-serving activity and indifference to anything external to that performance.”[3]

The rendering of these figures via Unreal Engine 5 also captures the reconceptualization of human life as data. This is the human as a little more than a site for the harvesting of information that ‘improves’ the efficiency of the system. That our digital interactions are a site for contributing to the ongoing development of algorithms is gently alluded to in *In the Mudline* via the brief glimpse of a sleeping figure’s laptop, revealing the “Are you still watching” Netflix pop-up. Even asleep, the figure’s lack of response is generating data-viewing feedback for the correlation-obsessed databases of streaming services and feeding into ‘recommendation’ algorithms and program design. What is significant here is not an individualist concern over privacy or tracking, but the more significant ontological shift in which we are encouraged, through such concerns, to see ourselves in this data, to identify with it, and thus to acquiesce to a vision of the self as rationalised, routinised and instrumentalised [4]

It is significant that all of the sequences and images presented in *In the Mudline* are set at night. The biology of the human eye is such that we cannot see colour in darkness; colour is the domain of the cones in our eye, whilst the rods allow us to see in darkness, but without colour. As such, for most of human existence, colour was linked to the rise and setting of the sun. As Crary so eloquently observes, “the pulse of this endless coloring and darkening is an experience specific to our body’s response to the daily rotation of the earth.”[5] Crary notes that, on a material level, the development of synthetic and industrial colour founded the chemical conglomerates that have since poisoned the planet. On an ontological level, our endless connection to colour through electric light and screens exemplifies the extreme estrangement of the human from the planetary rhythms. We are synchronised to a screen refresh rate instead of the cosmic cycles that sustain life. The electroluminescence imaged by (and embodied in) the crisp, vivid colours of the nocturnal world of *In the Mudline*, emphasise this alienation.

As Carolyn Kane has elucidated, synthetic colour is increasingly delimited, homogenised and inseparable from commodity culture.[6] These trends are exacerbated

in the realms of digital colour, in which colour has become completely beholden to the commodity form. Our integration into these colour schemes, this “algorithmic lifeworld” as Kane describes it, is altering our being. Contemporary humanity is parallel to contemporary colour. Colour has become inward looking, its experimental possibilities and utopian potential for perceptual expansion have been discarded in favour of playing only with defined charts and codes and keeping within existing software and format parameters. Amidst the vivid, bright intensity of digital colour there is an indifference and complacency, a ‘hyper-individuation,’ in which alternative and shared futures are impossible to imagine.[7]

Marc Augé’s monograph, *The Future*, grapples with the seeming impossibility of imagining a future that is not circumscribed by the past and the illusions of the present, which is so deeply embedded in technologized capitalism. Augé writes, “Behind its curtain walls and TV screens, the planet is changing into an aquarium. In this enclosed world, simultaneously opaque and transparent, this world from which you do not escape, it is tempting to think that the lucidity without hope of Boverism could be the only way out, the only justifiable madness in this world of lunatics.”[8] We seem to have total visibility, access to everything, and yet also struggle to imagine a world beyond the glass rectangles and electronic daydreams that surround us. This is a world (as hinted at in the aquarium reference) where water has come to symbolise the threat of climate change. This is also the association of the omnipresent swells of water in *In the Mudline*. The power of this metaphor is highlighted by Mark Bould, who analyses various ‘mundane novels’ (by which he means literary novels as opposed to sci-fi), in which water is a prominent feature, to show the way that we can read them today, against all previous interpretations or expectations, as being about climate change.[9]

For Augé, the current moment is marked by an internalisation of fears and anxieties, which has tended to be interpreted as an individualisation of belief. Chief amongst these fears is climate change. Once, meteorological and other disasters were explained by ancient cosmologies connected to specific places and times. Today, with the potential mobility of networked devices and travel, there is an increasing disconnection from place and time.[10] In this context, combined with an expanded knowledge of the infinite expanse of the universe, we can be overwhelmed by this enormity, and by the disintegration of boundaries that might allow us to

contain an image of the forces that are acting upon us. Yet, still, as Augé writes, we turn to the artefacts of industry, which have created this context, to ground us, to orient ourselves.[11] In Lobwein's work, these artifacts are the tools of computer graphics and game engine algorithms. But the worlds constructed here are not an escapist, placeless, fantasy; it is not a Boverist escape.

Instead, the work marks, specifically, this place in which Lobwein lives and the work is exhibited: Meanjin (Brisbane). The places imaged are recreations of places that he knows, including Norman Creek, the Newmarket Village carpark, Jetts Gym in Camp Hill and Yeronga Park Swimming Complex. And the dystopic sci-fi future is already here: the work was directly inspired by floods in 2022 that affected many of these locations. The figures in the video and still images seem stuck in the moment, they are sedentary, immobilised. Here we see that the individualisation of belief, with figures cocooned in their solitary worlds, is an internalisation of fear, as Augé suggests.

For Augé, imagining alternative futures is fraught by the domination of language and life by capitalism; we find only the past and the present instead of the future. Similarly, Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer's analysis of (mainly dystopian) sci-fi novels and cinema finds the constantly repeated idea that, even in the most fantastic of worlds and scenarios of human evolution, where technology is rejected or bizarrely extended, capitalism seems always to return in some way.[12] The struggle to think beyond capitalism and exploitation seems to unify the many novels he analyses. Capitalism survives catastrophe, because it is catastrophic: "If there can be said to be a thesis to the trilogy [Kim Stanley Robinson's California Trilogy], it is that capitalism is predicated on the economic value of the catastrophe, from the individual to the social to the global [...]. Disaster capitalism is procedural; catastrophic capitalism is ontological – it is the basis of capitalism itself. This returns capitalism to the original conception of Marx's understanding of "second nature": the production of a commodity as an industrial product that separates humans from their natural environment and replaces it with an understanding of nature as mediated through industrial production and capitalist exchange." [13] Amidst the floods of *In the Mudline*, strewn with remnants of commodity culture - a stranded supermarket truck, computer screens and flooded cars - and its alienated figures, we find catastrophic capitalism.

What is specifically interesting about Wolf-Meyer's book

is that his analysis is layered with personal biographical details, akin to *In the Mudline*, it is grounded in places he knows, including Detroit, Santa Cruz and Binghamton. [14] Reflecting on his time in California, his suburban homeownership becomes a focal point. Though Wolf-Meyer's house was in an area prone to earthquakes and wildfires, this was not what worried him. Instead, amidst a three-year drought, he would wake at night worrying about an invasive weed and the leak in his roof. Within the context of the local real-estate market, it was these issues that would affect the property value, not the enormous, but more abstract, natural disasters that threatened the area.[15] Wolf-Meyer later moves to the city of Binghamton in New York, which had seen devastating floods not long beforehand in both 2006 and 2011. Yet the routinised floods had become a banality; as long as the insurance continued to be underwritten by the US government (which it was) and the property values were maintained, then it was ignored, 'catastrophic callousness'. [16]

Two ideas resonated with me in Wolf-Meyer's reflections.

Firstly, his identification of the emerging banality of the disaster; the inability to create a meaningful and effective memory or affect, and the subsequent inaction. Meanjin, similarly, saw massive flooding in 2010-11 and 2022. This flooding is, of course the impetus for Lobwein's digital renders. As the waters receded in 2022, so did any reflection on the social order that contributed to the catastrophe. The dialogue turned to restoration rather than alteration, the inevitability of ongoing disaster seemingly accepted. These events are seen as individual misfortune and severed from social consciousness. The house I currently live in, and also occupied in 2022, is visible in one of the overhead shots in Lobwein's video. Houses were flooded. Mere blocks from my own home. Yet, inevitably, things went back to how they were, routines were disrupted, not altered. From chaos and catastrophe new futures do not emerge, instead simply more of the same. In this context, Lobwein's work seems like a way to wrest these events from the vagaries of memory and to force them into the present. Via the process of their digital recreation, they become always-present.

Secondly, Wolf-Meyer's reflections struck me for the recognition that natural disasters tend to be conceptualised specifically through the lens of finance and property-value. In Australia, the reality of the coming impact of climate change seems to have gained traction,

to have forced itself into consciousness, in terms of its effect on the insurability or property, which has been widely discussed and reported.[17] Flood maps, updated to the most recent mudline, seem only to affect real-estate prices and insurance premiums, and everything else goes back to a an apparently inevitable capitalist 'normality'.

The figures in In the Mudline seem unaware of, or are perhaps resigned to, the rising water that surrounds them. Several figures slowly sink into the waterways and ocean.

Perhaps, however, this submersion isn't an end, but a potential for a new beginning. In Undrowned, Alexis Pauline Gumbs looks to marine animals - dolphins, whales, seals – and their beautiful, hybrid diversity, for ways to live in the ruins of colonial capitalism; not just to survive, but to love. In the water Gumbs finds mobile, interspecies collectives, collaborative living, hybridity and cross-species care. Looking at the Indus River dolphin, which has persisted (and indeed thrived) despite pollution, monsters, fishing and interhuman violence, Gumb writes: "Through all of it, the Indus river dolphin, who clicks all day and night, has been saying, here. Here. Here. Here. [...]. In the language I was raised in 'here' means 'this place where we are,' and it also means 'here' as in 'I give this to you.' Could I learn from the Indus river dolphin a language of continuous presence and offering? A language that brings a species back from the brink, a life-giving language? Could I learn that? Could we learn that? We who click a different way, on linked computers day and night? [19]

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[1]As is common, see also Ex Machina (2014) and M3gan (2022), for example.

[2] Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*. London: Verso, 2022. p. 60.

[3] Ibid, p.119.

[4] Ibid, p.95, 108-09.

[5] Ibid, p.106.

[6]Carolyn L. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art and Aesthetics after Code*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. p.58, 142-43, 170.

[7] Ibid, p.4-15, 244, 272-92.

[8] Marc Augé, *The Future*. 2012. Trans. Scott Howe. Verso Futures. London: Verso, 2014. p.44. Augé defines

'Bovarism', (as part of his analysis of Madame Bovary) as a retreat into imagination from an unsatisfied existence" (p.31-32). Augé continues, "Death or 'nothing': Is that the only choice?" (p.45).

[9] Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate, Catastrophe, Culture*. London: Verso, 2021. p.53-65. The method of Bould's entertaining and inventive book, is to present an analysis that assumes that all cultural products are about climate change (see p.15-17).

[10] This is the subject of Augé's oft-cited book, *Non-Places: introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995).

[11] Augé, p.57.

[12] Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer, *Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology. Forerunners: Ideas First*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

[13] Ibid, p.55.

[14] Wolf- Meyer's biographical reflections are motivated by a recognition of the importance of the specific socio-economic circumstances that situate his frame-of-reference; notably, what he describes as, an upbringing in 'suburban complacency'. Ibid, p.1-20.

[15] Ibid, p.60.

[16] Ibid, p.75-76.

[17] See, for example: Inga Ting, Katia Shatoba, Alex Palmer, Thomas Brettell and Bronwyn Herbert, "Paying a Premium" ABC News 6 Sept. 2022.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-17/how-climate-change-is-pushing-insurance-stress-to-new-extremes/101336302>

[18] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Emergent Strategy Series. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020.

