

*Poor Magic* and the Temporal Emergency

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## Abstract

### *Poor Magic* and the Temporal Emergency

Joëlle Dubé

This thesis investigates the anxiety-filled artwork *Poor Magic* (2017) by the Montréal-based artist Jon Rafman, as presented at the National Gallery for the Sobey Art Award exhibition. Rather than understanding Rafman's artwork within its contemporary artistic context, this thesis instead situates *Poor Magic* in a constellation of philosophical concepts and considerations. Interested in the intricate ramifications of the anxiety produced by the artwork, the thesis begins by unveiling the anxiety-inducing elusiveness of death and the equally anxiety producing uncontrollability of technology – not only in the way Rafman uses them, but in their ontological structures. The focus then shifts around the outcomes of *Poor Magic*. Read from the standpoint of presentism, *Poor Magic* has the capacity to rescue us *into* the emergency of short-termism, rather than *from* it – here relying on contemporary continental philosopher Santiago Zabala's theory. By putting forth the shortcomings of presentism and of commonly used coping mechanisms, *Poor Magic* makes us question and face up to the temporal emergency we are currently in.

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## Introduction

Eschatological environmental narratives have become an intrinsic part of Western culture. The rise of the water level and of the global temperature, overcrowding of the Earth, acid rains, oil spills, or even nuclear catastrophes: for many it isn't so much a question of if these elements will lead to the end of times, but more a matter of how and when they will congregate and lead us to doomsday. While these environmental fears lead to an existential awareness of our own human finite condition, they simultaneously entail humanity's finitude. In both cases, finitude is understood here as a state of being where an individual – or a community – is circumscribed by a limit.<sup>1</sup> There is a growing consensus that humanity has created environmental conditions that will not allow for its survival on Earth in a relatively near future. Not only is this realisation anxiety-inducing, it also poses a difficulty to our imaginative faculty: how can Earth's future be thought when such future might very well be devoid of human beings? As exemplified by Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us*, the climate change crisis and the anxieties it unearths are leading to a sense of finitude: self-finitude and humanity's.<sup>2</sup> Here, finitude is anxiety-inducing because of its impossibility to be visualised nor conceptualised.<sup>3</sup> Yet, what if art could attempt to produce visualisations of this anxiety-filled future?

The pervasive anxiety of our era does indeed permeate the contemporary art world. Working from various degrees of anxiety are Ryoji Ikeda's *C<sup>4</sup>I* a sound and video installation that explores the permeability of technology and the real world, which might

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Finitude," accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/finitude>

<sup>2</sup> Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2007.)

<sup>3</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, n°2 (Winter 2009): 197-198.

in turn engender anxiety.<sup>4</sup> There is also the project of Berlin's *School of Anxiety* (2018). Formed by artists Awuor Onyango, Nyakallo Maleke, Sanyu Kiyimba Kisaka, together with Serubiri Moses, a member of the curatorial team of the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of Berlin Biennial where the project first came together, its aim is to unearth subjective anxieties in relation to the notion of historical unknowns. *School of Anxiety* does so through a meticulous investigation of "historical forms of anxiety."<sup>5</sup> More interested with anxieties taking place in the future, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Triennale di Milano *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival* (2019)<sup>6</sup> explores human's fragile relationship with nature. The 34<sup>th</sup> São Paulo's Biennial *Faz escuro mas eu canto* [Though it's dark, still I sing] (2020)<sup>7</sup> instead engages with the tension between the darkness and utopia, and the anxieties both entail. In Canada, too, this affect is pervasive. From *In the No Longer Not Yet* (2020),<sup>8</sup> an apocalypse-themed exhibition, to biennials investigating uncertain futures as *L'avenir (Looking Forward)* (Montreal, 2014)<sup>9</sup>, Canadian artists are endeavouring to come to grips with thinking finitude – both the environment's and humanity's. Be it Warren Cariou's petroglyphs critiquing extractive practices of oil and the dispossession of indigenous lands in Alberta<sup>10</sup>, or Rochelle Goldberg's strange sculptural amalgams evocative of a

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<sup>4</sup> "Ryoji Ikeda: *C4I*," Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://macm.org/en/press-release/ryoji-ikeda-c4i-2/>

<sup>5</sup> "Serubiri Moses : School of Anxiety," Berlin Biennale, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/projekte/1344/school-of-anxiety>

<sup>6</sup> "About: XXII Triennale di Milano," Broken Nature, accessed July 1, 2020, <http://www.brokennature.org/>

<sup>7</sup> "34<sup>th</sup> Bienal de São Paulo – Faz escuro mas eu canto," Contemporary And, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/exhibition/34th-bienal-de-sao-paulo-faz-escuro-mas-eu-canto/>

<sup>8</sup> Leonard & Bina Gallery, "In the No Longer Not Yet," accessed April 6, 2020, <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/exposition/in-the-no-longer-not-yet/?lang=en>

<sup>9</sup> Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, "La Biennale de Montréal: BNLMTL 2014, *L'avenir (looking forward)*," accessed July 1, 2020, <https://macm.org/expositions/biennale-de-montreal-2014/>

<sup>10</sup> "Petrography," Warren Cariou, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://www.warrencariou.com/petrography>

post-apocalyptic nature<sup>11</sup>: artists are actively engaging – in various ways and to various degrees – with the vast themes of finitude, the anxiety it provokes.

Technology's role in the matter is a frequent concern for such work. The ever-accelerating pace at which technology develops and functions brings us on an exhilarating light-speed voyage. Always accelerating, technology moves at an intoxicating rhythm. Yet can one jump off of this unstoppable train? Even if exhilarating, the speed induced by technology can also present a more sombre side. Unfolding in a temporality that isn't human, how can technological and human time co-exist? The future, always unknowable, is something we now hurtle towards, propelled by technologies that we sense we no longer control. How does this affect our relation to the notion of futurity itself?



Fig. 1 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017, HD video with stereo sound and sculptural seating installation, polyurethane foam, wood, paint, chairs, dimensions variable. National Art Gallery, Ottawa, Canada.

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<sup>11</sup> Rochelle Goldberg, *Trigger Towards Everything they've Ever Wanted*, 2019, Ranch fencing, batteries, fairy lights, polyester curtain, aluminum, cast bronze matches, copper wire, 51 x 51 x 44 in. (130 x 130 x 112 cm) Gallery Leonard & Bina Ellen, <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/exposition/in-the-no-longer-not-yet/?lang=en>

To explore these questions in depth I will look at *Poor Magic* (2017) (see *fig. 1*) – an artwork by the Montréal-based artist Jon Rafman – to see how it displays anxiety and what such display achieves. Depicting a futuristic or post-apocalyptic universe, the digital artwork is an installation where a video is projected onto a large screen, faced with bench-like and egg-shaped stereo equipped seats, covered with a substance resembling that of intestines or entrails.<sup>12</sup> 3-D animated dummy-like figures being displaced and violently steered, as if by some omnipotent and artificial intelligence. Motionless corpses piling up, and digestive tubes are presented – in no particular order – throughout the 7:08 infinitely looping video.

*Poor Magic* was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa as one of the five finalists' artworks for the 2018 Sobey Art Award.<sup>13</sup> Created in 2001, this yearly award is designed to bring awareness to contemporary Canadian artists, while providing monetary prizes and residencies for the shortlisted artists.<sup>14</sup> Previously long-listed for the award in 2015,<sup>15</sup> and then shortlisted in 2018, Jon Rafman – representing the Québec region – chose *Poor Magic* to be part of an intimate exhibition setting together with the other four finalists.<sup>16</sup> He was selected by a jury composed of six Canadian curators (and an international one) for his body of work and his take on technology and its implications.<sup>17</sup> Initially receiving recognition for his ongoing artwork *Nine Eyes of*

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<sup>12</sup> Note that *fig. 1* only depicts one egg-shaped seat (in addition to the bench-like seat). Still, there are two egg-shaped seats in the display I am referring to throughout this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> "Sobey Art Award 2018: the Shortlist," National Gallery of Canada, published May 29, 2019, <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/artists/sobey-art-award/sobey-art-award-2018-the-shortlist>

<sup>14</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award 2018: About," *Sobey Art Award*, published May 29, 2019, <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/sobey-art-award/about>

<sup>15</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award: Past Awards, 2015," accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/sobey-art-award/past-awards#collapse2015>

<sup>16</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award 2018: About."

<sup>17</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award 2018: the Shortlist."

*Google Street View* (debuting in 2008) (see *fig. 2*), and for *Kool-Aid Man in Second Life* (2008-2011) (see *fig. 3*), the artist's work intrigued the jury for its exploration of themes pertaining to the dark web, interactive virtual worlds and to the contemporary human nature complexified by the pervasiveness of technology.



Fig. 2 Jon Rafman, *Nine Eyes of Google Street View*, 2008, <http://antoineertaskiran.com/artistes/jon-rafman/>



Fig. 3 Jon Rafman, *Kool-Aid Man*, 2008, <https://koolaidmaninsecondlife.com/>



A brief inquiry into those two artworks might help situate *Poor Magic* more comprehensively. While *Nine Eyes* speaks to the constant voyeuristic and technological surveillance the world is subjected to – in part through Google’s nine-lense cameras capturing and documenting weird and unexpected scenes internationally,<sup>18</sup> *Kool-Aid Man* gives a glimpse into a parallel interactive universe where the unimaginable can become reality, blurring the lines between fiction and reality, the imagined and the lived.<sup>19</sup> Narrated by a distorted voice, *Mainsqueeze* (2014) picks up where *Nine Eyes* and *Kool-Aid Man* left off and plunges its viewers into the far corners of the dark web.<sup>20</sup> In a cabinet-like box is a seat facing a screen where a weird montage of short clips sourced all over the Internet is displayed (see *fig. 4*). This artwork brings a new element to Rafman’s artistic *corpus*: a claustrophobic-like physical proximity with the video. Similarly, *Dream Journal* (2015-2016) partakes in such proximity, here relying on virtual reality to do so.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 4 Jon Rafman, *Mainsqueeze*, 2014,  
<http://antoineertaskiran.com/exhibition/jon-rafman-hope-springs-eternal/>

<sup>18</sup> Gabrielle Moster, “Exhaustive Images: Surveillance, Sovereignty, and Subjectivity in Google Maps Street View,” *Fillip* 15 (Fall 2011), <https://fillip.ca/content/exhaustive-images#images>

<sup>19</sup> Brian Droitcour, “The Big Game,” *Aperture* 212 (Fall 2013): 52-55, <http://0-eds.b.ebscohost.com.mercury.concordia.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=19f5123e-b275-4ac0-b814-5c5583d3a232%40pdc-v-sessmgr06&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=90039967&db=aft>

<sup>20</sup> Jon Rafman, “An Interview with Jon Rafman,” interview by Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, *Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw*, September 25, 2014, Video, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/doc/video-wywiad-z-jonem-rafmanem>

<sup>21</sup> Jon Rafman, “Play // Dream Journal: An Interview with Jon Rafman,” interview by Penny Rafferty, *Berlin Art Link*, October 6, 2017, Written, <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/10/06/play-dream-journal-an-interview-with-jon-rafman/>



Even from this quick survey, it is possible to perceive the unifying thread that runs throughout Rafman's body of work. Having studied in literature and philosophy, and then in fine arts, his artworks are always underpinned by a dialectical narrative questioning the interrelation between technology and human beings, how one influences and moulds the other, and the other way around.<sup>22</sup> *Poor Magic* is an amalgam of the voyeuristic and pervasive aspects of technology present in *Nine Eyes*, the twisted virtual world of *Kool-Aid Man*, and the claustrophobic proximity of *Mainsqueeze* and *Dream Journal*, hinting at all of these elements and building on top of them.

Rafman has not clearly stated his ambition with *Poor Magic*, but critics have noted the way it echoes and signals the socio-political atmosphere surrounding its creation. The artwork is read by arts writer Chris Hampton as embodying our contemporary psyche, scarred by anxiety and fear of the dark web,<sup>23</sup> and by Barrett White as a "technofascist ontological disaster"<sup>24</sup> representative of 2016's corruption during the American presidential election. Even if their respective understandings of the work vary, both authors agree on *Poor Magic* encapsulating a certain degree of anxiety: Hampton writing more generally to Rafman's dystopian vision and depiction of hell,<sup>25</sup> and White intrigued by the ways in which "Rafman captures the anxiety unleashed by the aggregations of Russian trolls and Cambridge Analytica."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award 2018: Rafman," *Sobey Art Award*, Published May 29, 2019, <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/sobey-art-award/artists-2018/quebec#rafman>

<sup>23</sup> Chris Hampton, "Technology's Impression on the Contemporary Psyche: Jon Rafman in Sobey Art Award 2018," *National Gallery of Canada*, published August 28, 2018, <https://www.beaux-arts.ca/magazine/artistes/prix-sobey-pour-les-arts/empreinte-de-la-technologie-sur-le-psychisme>

<sup>24</sup> Barrett White, "Aggregators of Anxiety," *Document Journal*, published April 6, 2018, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2018/04/aggregators-of-anxiety-cambridge-analytica-and-jon-rafman/>

<sup>25</sup> Hampton, "Technology's Impression on the Contemporary Psyche."

<sup>26</sup> White, "Aggregators of Anxiety."



Fig. 5 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 02'29"

White's article also attests to the violence of the artwork – through the treatment of the crowds (see *fig. 5*) or the repulsive weirdness of the intestine-like environments. This violence is anxiety-inducing because it signals death – and a violent one at that – in various ways: mass death with the crowds and embodied death with the entrails. Both point to a painful end, which is all the more shocking considering how shielded we are from death and decay in our daily lives. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes claims that one of the main incentives for shifting from a state of nature to a social state is the shared will to avoid such violent death.<sup>27</sup> Jon Rafman seems to ask: what happens when the premise of social living is thrown out the window? In his brief comments on the work, Rafman himself puzzles over the possibility of a return to a pre-social world noting that the algorithms that create or define our world “can refer us back to a world without a

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers and Karl Shumann (London: Classic Texts Continuum, 2005), 101-103.

social contract.”<sup>28</sup> Hampton and White also emphasise the role of technology in amplifying the anxiety already set in motion by the video’s evocation of mass death. Both the hinting at some sort of an AI entity and the prevalence of the crowd-control technology are symptomatic of our repressed fear of losing mastery over technology. Not only is death feared because of its potential violence, the difficulty to know and think it is equally disconcerting and anxiety-generating. Hence, *Poor Magic* displays anxiety by tapping into death’s unknowability and the uncontrollability of technology.

A straightforward art historical approach to Rafman’s handling of these themes might seek to place Rafman’s work in a fully developed artistic context, thus drawing out parallels and uniquenesses and perhaps identifying the work’s links to a variety of artistic trends, such as digital art, surrealist/*onirique* art, or even interactive and participatory art.<sup>29</sup> Instead, I suggest an interdisciplinary approach, one that brings art history and philosophy together in order to broaden the context of reception for *Poor Magic*. My ambition is to situate it in a constellation of philosophical concepts that can ultimately facilitate its reading. But also, my aim is to make a case for art as a way to approach philosophy, art as what captures and make sense of philosophical issues, such as the ones raised in *Poor Magic*. This methodological strategy – the marriage of philosophy and art – is in no way recent. As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, philosophy seems to be a natural position from which to approach art: “[it] may find itself the twin or sibling of art and its various practices, [...] working alongside art without illuminating it or speaking

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<sup>28</sup> “Jon Rafman - The 2018 Sobey Art Award,” National Gallery of Canada, published September 14, 2018, YouTube, 3:23, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCiZE2\\_dY08&list=PLK8qVR6emhGA\\_KIESUtG\\_mYsoggQ1RX92V&index=11&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCiZE2_dY08&list=PLK8qVR6emhGA_KIESUtG_mYsoggQ1RX92V&index=11&t=0s)

<sup>29</sup> Rachel Falconer, “New Breed of Artist Exploring Society’s Digital Consciousness,” *Frieze*, published November 23, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/new-breed-artist-exploring-societys-digital-consciousness>

for it, being provoked by art and sharing the same enticements for the emergence of innovation and invention.”<sup>30</sup> Rafman's study of philosophy also justifies its use for reading his artwork. But more importantly, philosophy presents itself as a logical route in the context of this thesis considering that it has always been dealing to some extent with the two main vectors of anxiety presented in *Poor Magic* – death and technology.

To explore these two vectors, and the dynamic of uncertainty that accompanies them, I draw on a variety of philosophical concepts, all of which are unified by the overarching theme of *insaisissabilité*. Julia Kristeva's understanding of abjection<sup>31</sup> helps to grasp the visceral embodiment of death depicted in Rafman's artwork, while Martin Heidegger and Jean-François Lyotard's respective concepts of authenticity in regards to death<sup>32</sup> and of death as a limit<sup>33</sup> are useful when considering the finite ontological nature of death, a nature which is eminently unknowable, *insaisissable*. As for technology, Heidegger's understanding of technology's essence as framing our relating to the world – explained both in his essay “*L'époque des 'conceptions du monde'*”<sup>34</sup> and in “The Question Concerning Technology”<sup>35</sup> – allow us to better understand the pervasive, *insaisissable* (ungraspable) and uncontrollable essence of technology. Diving further into this essence and the will to mastery that often accompanies it, I rely on Jacques Ellul's

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Les pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Être et Temps* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, « Si l'on peut penser sans corps », dans *L'inhumain: causeries sur le temps* (Klincksieck: Paris, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, « L'époque des “conceptions du monde” », dans *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013).

book *Le bluff technologique*,<sup>36</sup> where the tension between human power and technology's power is unpacked, making a case for technology's uncontrollability.

Once the vectors through which anxiety is communicated to the viewers in *Poor Magic* are clearly circumscribed, one final question remains: to what end? Delving deeper into the temporality of death – with its ontological finitude – and technology – with its intrinsic speed – Santiago Zabala's analysis of art's ability to rescue us *into* emergencies<sup>37</sup> comes into play, helping to bridge anxiety's origin together with its purpose in *Poor Magic*. More than simply plunging us into a dark anxiety, I argue that Rafman's artwork makes *use* of anxiety, works from it and propels us into larger temporal considerations pertaining to the way we come to perceive the articulation between past, present and future, and how this articulation may well be in crisis.

I develop this argument over the course of four main sections. The thesis begins with a detailed description of *Poor Magic*. In this first section I highlight the moments where the work mobilizes the thematics of death and technology in order to generate anxiety, and end with a discussion of anxiety itself. Then, in section two, I move to a discussion centred wholly around death, exploring notions of death as finitude, both for human life and for humanity's, with a particular focus on how anxiety is intertwined with that finitude. In section three, the discussion shifts towards the ways in which technology too is entangled with anxiety, especially in regard to the will to mastery it awakens. Finally, I turn my attention to the effects these themes produce in Rafman's hands. Through an investigation of the interconnections between anxiety and temporality, I

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Le bluff technologique* (Paris: Hachette, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

examine further – in this last section of my thesis – anxiety’s scope at a time when the present seems to have expanded over the future. How, I ask, does *Poor Magic* make us project ourselves into the future? What is so troublesome about this endeavour? These are questions that lead this enquiry into the dark visual universe of Jon Rafman. As Rafman's nomination for the Sobey prize makes clear, these strange bodies, entrails and crowd movements resonate meaningfully with viewers, yet it is unclear in what ways. Published discussion around this particular work of art is limited to a few articles (Barrett White, Chris Hampton and exhibition reviews) that have certainly not exhausted the work’s capacity to provoke reflection. Therefore, I am suggesting a deep plunge into *Poor Magic*, one that aims at being informative of the anxiety-ridden ways in which contemporary Western culture predominantly relates to death, finitude, technology and time.

### ***Poor Magic and Anxiety***

*Poor Magic* is a video installation comprised of a video projection and sculptural seats positioned side by side. Since it is a digital artwork, Rafman relies on multiple technological devices to create it (recording device, video editing software, crowd control software) as well as to display it (video-projector, sound system). Oddly mixing comfort and discomfort, the bench-like and egg-shaped seats are inviting – cocoon-like – but their stereo sound speakers create a sense of claustrophobic immersion. Adding to this discomfort is their appearance: they are covered with a substance resembling that of intestines or entrails which may or may not be human. While egg-like shape of the seats is inviting, the claustrophobic immersion in textured seats signalling entrails creates a strange tension between being inviting and repulsive all at once, allowing for anxiety emerge again: whose entrails are those? Should I sit on it? What are they made of?



Fig. 6 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 04'08"

Evoking a similar tension and anxiety is a 7:08 minute 3-D rendered video loop that presents three main categories of recurring imagery. The core of the video presents scenes of moving crowds (see *fig. 6*). Moving in sterile environments, crowds seem to be escaping a hidden menace, whilst being constricted and steered in various directions by an invisible master, or puppeteer even. Men, women and children alike move either

homogeneously as a group – in a military fashion – or hectically, reminiscent of catastrophe scenarios. In a weird twist of events, the crowds almost always end up piling up against obstacles, walls or simply on top of each other, making the viewers ask themselves: why aren't the crowds trying to avoid such violent deaths? We get the sense that someone – out of sight for the viewers – is compelling them to run into walls, as part of some sick game. The interplay between asserting control and being controlled – mastering and being mastered – is brought up in scenes of crowds that are totally deprived of any free will.

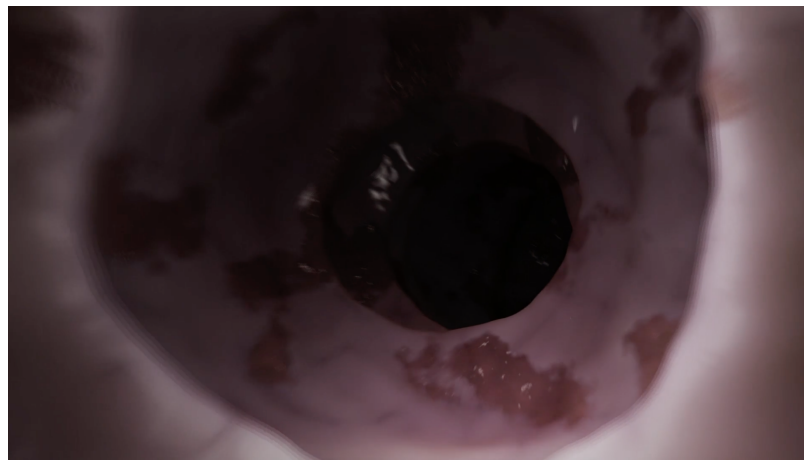


Fig. 7 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 01'32"

Building on this strangeness are scenes formed of various iterations of entrails (see *fig. 7*). Echoing the repulsive texture of the sculptural seats, they present slowly moving intestines contracting themselves while being lit up from the inside, giving us a glimpse inside a living entity. Pink intestines are represented in a tube-like shape, or they seem to be stretched out and applied as the texture of the environment where crowds are moving. When the intestines take up this tube-like shape, they are presented as an endless tunnel, one that moves slowly, undulating and contracting itself in a food-processing motion. *Poor Magic* also depicts oozing cartilages entangled with rope-like tendons in



still scenes; the only movement is that of the camera scrolling through the organic matter. Here again, a weird anxiety settles in. Have we been plunged inside someone else's body? Are we being observed from inside? To what end?



Fig. 8 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 00'40"

Scattered across both kinds of scenes are images of an anthropomorphic blue figure addressing itself directly to the viewers or contemplating the video alongside us, inviting us into his universe in a way (see *fig. 8*). Resembling a crash-test *dummy*, the blue figure seems to act as an almost familiar intermediary between the viewers and the essential content of the video. As with the crowds, the blue figure is also looking for a way out of this world. We see it crawling anxiously through an entrails-like environment, as if it too was longing for an escape.

The three types of imagery are tied together by a deep-voiced narration that spans the video as a whole: anonymous, slow, and slightly distorted. There is the sense that we are hearing the intimate thoughts of a consciousness trapped in a dystopic world mastered by an enigmatic entity.

If you can't sleep at night, it means you're awake in someone else's dream. How many hours have passed, how many days or even years? The environment melts away into an abstraction, we lose our texture, the audio vanishes. The only thing I can perceive is the motion of bodies. Trapped in this shadow world, my mind eats itself. Sometimes I want to express an idea but I'm missing the words. It feels like someone or something has entered our heads, it strolls through the recesses of our mind, surveilling all of our scars. It is all happening too fast now. Everything around me is falling apart. My memories, my imagination, it is all disintegrating. We can't die, [the narrator tells us] we've tried.<sup>38</sup>

Despite such disclaimers, death – or the unvoiced threat of it – death pervades *Poor Magic*. It is the unseen consequence of the unseen catastrophe from which people flee. It is the inevitable result of their chaotic pilings into each other, where the 'panic factor' amongst the members of the crowds seems to be turned on and off like a switch, at will. It is also the natural corollary of exposed entrails, where abjection hints at the anxiety embedded within our fear of corporal death. Finally, and as the very idea of a disembodied consciousness suggests, this undead deathfulness seems intimately tied to a technology that may not exist yet, but that we are more than capable of imagining: one that would control us instead of being controlled by us. Both the centrality of death and technology appear as two imbricated vectors that allow us to unpack the content of *Poor Magic* – they explain the origin of the anxiety embedded in the artwork, but a closer analysis of the two reveals how their entanglement produces anxiety in and of itself.

Before unpacking the various ways in which Rafman's portrayal of death and technology throughout *Poor Magic* is entrenched in anxiety, the very notion of anxiety calls for clarification. It is defined from a psychological standpoint as an "apprehensive

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<sup>38</sup> Jon Rafman, "Poor Magic, 2017," accessed July 2, 2020 on Vimeo, 7:07. <https://vimeo.com/206170680>

uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill”<sup>39</sup>, and medically as “an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs [...] by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.”<sup>40</sup> Central to both definitions is the close link between anxiety and apprehension, speaking to the temporal nature of anxiety. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), while fear is an “emotional response to perceived imminent threat or danger,”<sup>41</sup> anxiety is rather an “apprehensive anticipation of future danger.”<sup>42</sup> Not only does it span across the present moment and the near-future of an anxious subject, anxiety is also pervasive – being widespread amongst westerners. Political theorists Brad Evans and Julian Reid write to the increasingly normalised state of anxiety that neoliberal subjects are forced to live in: “Catastrophically speaking, the prevailing mode of contemporary affect is a state of normalised anxiety. Fear of course remains a constitutive element. But it is anxiety which is more apt in explaining the well-being of the resilient subject. Anxious conditioning is default setting for a system which is insecure by design.”<sup>43</sup> Demanding resilience in the face of anxiety, neo-liberalism positions it as the background against which subjects’ lives must unfold. Hence, anxiety is always already there, deeply rooted in a neo-liberalist regime that plunges its subjects into the turbulences of economic turmoil, massive migrations, refugee crises, climate catastrophes, endless wars, ... Psychologist

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<sup>39</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Anxiety,” accessed June 9, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anxiety>

<sup>40</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Anxiety.”

<sup>41</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “fear,” accessed July 2, 2020. <https://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm05>

<sup>42</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “anxiety,” accessed July 2, 2020. <https://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm05>

<sup>43</sup> Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 92.

Steven L. Shearer speaks to this pervasiveness in writing that: “Anxiety is ubiquitous. Everyone experiences episodic or situational anxiety symptoms. Diagnosable anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders, more prevalent than both affective and substance abuse disorders.”<sup>44</sup> It is clear that anxiety is one of the most widespread mental health diseases,<sup>45</sup> likely to be experienced – to various extents – by the majority of the population. Political scientist Mark Neocleous even positions anxiety as the overarching notion of our era when he writes: “We live, apparently, in anxious times. Nowhere is this clearer than in the idea that we live in an ‘age of anxiety.’”<sup>46</sup> Anxiety, then, is everywhere in our neo-liberal world; waiting to be encountered.

Moreover, anxiety is greater – or enhanced – when combined with what we might term the *insaisissable*. Defined as what “One cannot apprehend; what can never be encountered. [As well as] [t]hat which constantly flees”<sup>47</sup>, the *insaisissable* is what always eludes our grasp. Moving beyond our reach, it confuses and destabilises because it is both elusive (unknowable, unthinkable), on the one hand, and uncontrollable, on the other hand. Both of these aspects contribute to anxiety. As Evans and Reid reference: “For Sally Winston, co-director of the Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland (ASDI), ‘The presence of unpredictability, uncertainty and uncontrollability all provoke anxiety pretty automatically.’”<sup>48</sup> Being confronted with something that can’t be

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<sup>44</sup> Steven L. Shearer, “Recent Advances in the Understanding and Treatment of Anxiety Disorders,” *Primary Care Clinic Office Practice* 34 (2007): 475.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Neocleous, “Chapter 4: Anxiety: Trauma: Resilience” in *Politics of Anxiety*, edited by Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, 61-77. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017. [https://web-a-ebshost-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE1MDE1OThfX0FO0?sid=3f009281-6b1f-44fa-adea-c69f68a93887@sessionmgr4006&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp\\_61&rid=0](https://web-a-ebshost-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE1MDE1OThfX0FO0?sid=3f009281-6b1f-44fa-adea-c69f68a93887@sessionmgr4006&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_61&rid=0), 62.

<sup>46</sup> Neocleous, “Anxiety: Trauma: Resilience,” 61.

<sup>47</sup> *Antidote*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (2017), s.v. “insaisissable.”

<sup>48</sup> Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, 94.

rationalised or that can't be controlled is bound to create anxiety to various degrees, depending on the level of *insaisissabilité* that a given threat presents. Returning with this understanding to *Poor Magic* we have a new framework to bring to our questioning of death and technology as vectors of anxiety. How does Rafman tap into the *insaisissable* in order to generate anxiety? How is his treatment of death and technology entrenched into the *insaisissable*?

### *L'insaisissable* and Death's Elusiveness

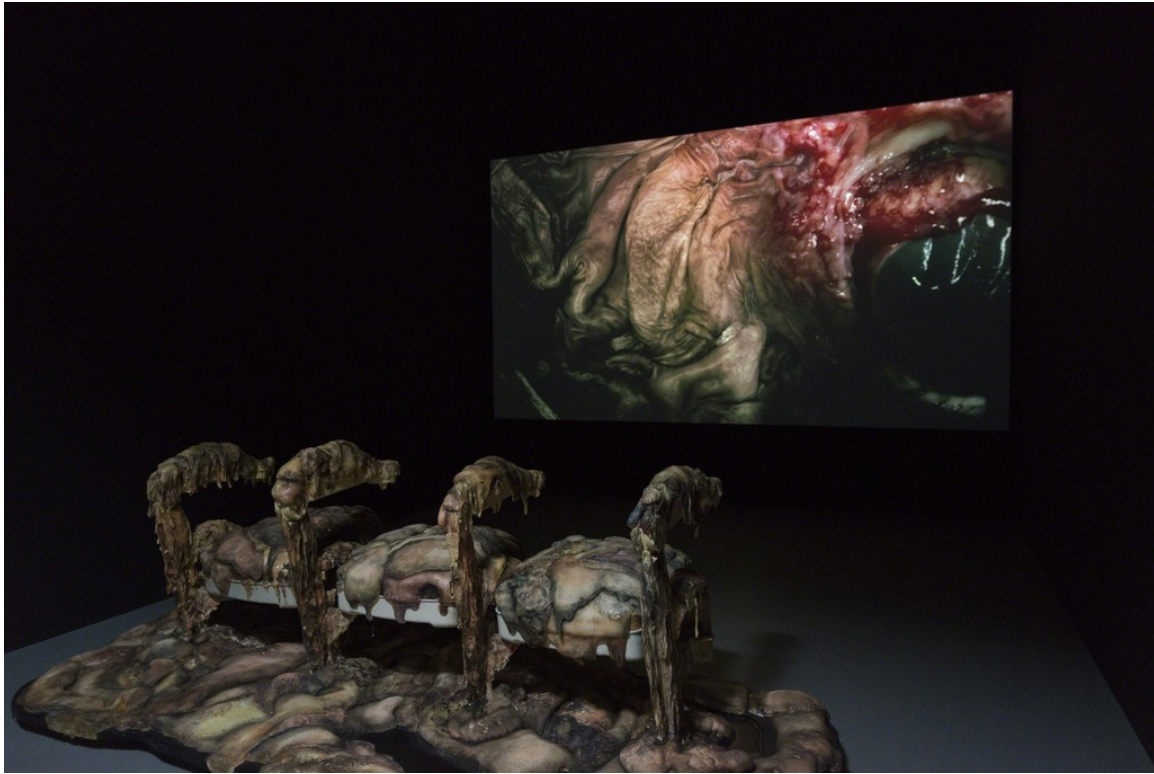


Fig. 9 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/show/galerie-antoine-ertaskiran-our-thing>

Entrails, mass death, displacement of bodies. Jon Rafman's handling of these subjects is particularly anxiety-producing because of the way in which it exacerbates death's unknowability, unthinkability, and more importantly its elusiveness. This culminates in an inescapable anxiety invading the viewers of the artwork. Take corporal death; how can such an absolute, but also an eminently material and physical, subject be made elusive? Intestines form a recurring imagery in *Poor Magic*, most palpably present in the appearance and texture of the sculptural seats, which convey the unpleasant impression of sitting directly on someone – or something – else's entrails, or a body turned inside out (see *fig.* 9). Even though the entrails covering the seats are simulacra of entrails rather than guts soaked in bodily fluids – as it can appear at first glance – there is still a sense of

pure disgust emanating from the eeriness of the experience. It is as if bodies had been turned inside out, or just eviscerated onto the seats. To touch the guts of someone or something else is an experience – more often than not – confined to experiences of diseases, accidents, or violent deaths. The body's guts are what should remain inside, hidden from sight, contained in one's bodily envelope. Rafman's display of entrails for sight and touch spreads the guts, safely contained in the video projection, onto the seats, as if what is being represented in the video has spilled into the "real" world. The artist is specifically intrigued in such threshold and its representations through art: "The dichotomy between our digital and real lives has collapsed. I'm interested in finding ways to represent this collapse," he observes.<sup>49</sup> *Poor Magic* plays off of this collapse by joining together physically felt reality and simulated representations in a single art installation.

More than a superficial introspection, *Poor Magic* – with its showing of entrails in the video and onto the seats – plunges its viewers straight into abjection, and the blurring of boundaries that it entails. For philosopher Julia Kristeva, a corpse is the "most sickening of wastes."<sup>50</sup> The abjection resides in the "suffocating moments in which inside and outside, subject and object lose meaning and order is disturbed, the moments when the excesses of the body reveal both our mortality and liminality."<sup>51</sup> The abjection created by the sight of a corpse emerges in the rupture it creates with our daily lives;<sup>52</sup> it forces us to consider death and renders us attentive to it.<sup>53</sup> A cadaver – or any elements hinting at it – is a reminder of my ultimate condition, one that I constantly need to push away in order

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<sup>49</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Jon Rafman - The 2018 Sobey Art Award."

<sup>50</sup> Mariana Ortega, "The Incandescence of Photography – On Abjection, Fulguration, and the Corpse," *philoSOPHIA* 9, n°2 (Spring 2019): 68.

<sup>51</sup> Ortega, "The Incandescence of Photography," 69.

<sup>52</sup> Ortega, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, *Être et Temps*, 312.

to live.<sup>54</sup> As Kristeva puts it: “Imaginary strangeness and real menace, [the cadaver] call us and ends up swallowing us.”<sup>55</sup> Even though *Poor Magic* doesn’t depict a cadaver per se, it is safe to say it strongly hints at the abject emanating from the organs and substance usually contained within one’s body. Yet, those entrails spilling over onto the sculptural seats, occupying all of the screen, systemically punctuating the video, do more than simply remind us of our corporal finitude. Our confusion and repulsion when confronted with abject matter – where the lines that used to clearly delineate inside and outside are blurred – runs deeper than pure disgust. It confuses us and troubles us because it is elusive; it eludes our grasp. How can entrails – something that is meant to stay safely inside, contained and protected – be displayed in such a way? How can entrails come to constitute the very environment in which crowds move? For all of its gross physicality, there is a deeply rooted conceptual *insaisissabilité* – an elusiveness – that hangs around corporal, abject, and embodied death. This is referenced in *Poor Magic*: death’s quality as difficult to comprehend or to make sense of.

This, then, is where the anxiety comes in, but in a counter-movement, this display of the body also demonstrates how anxiety can in turn be absorbed by the body, as on-screen images plunge us into the very interior of the intestines spread over the seating. At times, we are progressing inside intestines, as if we were accompanying a tiny camera, similar to the ones used in medical operations (see *fig. 9*). Not only is this point of view unusual, there is also a strangeness in seeing functioning intestines illuminated from the inside. Both the point of view and the light contribute to the unpleasant impression of travelling inside an organic body. Even the narrator expresses an intuition of being

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<sup>54</sup> Kristeva, *Les pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, 12.



surveyed from inside his own body. Unease settles in: am I too being controlled from inside of my own body? In this way, Rafman shows us the body as a sensible surface that is permeable to the fear and anxiety generated by its surroundings. The narrator of the video *Jon Rafman – Prix Sobey pour les arts 2018* – explaining Rafman’s artistic approach – echoes this understanding and ties it to technology: “Algorithms that create or define our world, the digital content void of any ethical base, enters our very being. Our very body.”<sup>56</sup> Here, the body both generates the anxiety and absorbs it, always caught in an inescapable loop that either drives it *from* or *to* anxiety.

Complementing its suggestion of abject corporal death, *Poor Magic* also presents mass death, but in a still more ambiguous – and ambivalent – light. Corpses pile up on top of each other while other members of the crowd continue their motion, seemingly unbothered at the sight of this massacre (see *fig. 10*). In other scenes, the members of the



Fig. 10 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 02’42”

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<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Les pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 12.

crowds are completely panicked, screaming, wrestling each other to escape a terrifying menace. What can we make of the weird dynamics animating the crowds' movements? Could they too be read from the standpoint of elusiveness and the *insaisissable*?

The element of panic, being additive, makes its logic hard to grasp: whereas some crowds run emotionless towards any obstacles, other crowds seem to be invaded by a sheer panic, rippling through the members of the crowds. The conflation of panic and total disregard amongst crowd members produces incomprehension on the viewers' end. While the panicked crowds seem, at least, relatable – calling to mind images of people fleeing from natural catastrophes, terrorist attacks, or war settings – the emotionless crowds convey a certain severity and austerity characterising an inhumane crowd made of robots or automatons, simply fulfilling the task they were assigned. The stark contrast between the two possible attitudes enhances the impression of an invisible master who toys with crowds according to a logic that we cannot understand. Rafman reactivates the anxiety-inducing loss of control once again. If death is uncontrollable, elusive, is there such thing as human agency, or are all aspects of our existence similarly beyond our control?

Still, a grim and paradoxical hope remains: perhaps the ontological structure of death itself can offer some reassurance, some solid ground that permits us to better come to grips with the unsettling qualities of *Poor Magic*. Maybe death – when understood as finitude – can lead to a way out of Rafman's anxiety-inducing vortex.

The artist's approach to death's ontology, both visually and dialectically, is telling of a peculiar attitude in regards to death. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger identifies two possible attitudes towards death: an authentic-being-towards-death and an

inauthentic-being-towards-death. The inauthentic posture consists of systematically refusing to think about death by immersing oneself in daily tasks;<sup>57</sup> by contrast the more authentic stance faces death head on, embracing the inherent anxiety such consideration naturally creates. One reading of *Poor Magic* might claim such authenticity for it. The artwork's display of anxiety – through the awareness of individual mortality and collective death – positions the viewers in an authentic-being-towards-death. This attitude towards death, *Poor Magic* suggests, is all the more anxiety-producing considering how death – in the socio-political realm – has been carefully removed from our reach. Julian Reid and Brad Evans argue “that the political debasement of the subject through strategies of resilience more than puts the very question of death into question by removing it from our critical gaze. In doing so, it represents nothing short of a profound assault on our ability to think metaphysically.”<sup>58</sup> Rafman empowers *Poor Magic*'s viewers by providing them with a way of bypassing this resilience strategy, by inhabiting an authentic-being-towards-death.

Yet, even if it allows for a critical confrontation with death, this thinking or authentic attitude raises a number of problems – especially if death is thought of as a limit to human life, a finitude. According to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in order to properly understand a limit, one needs to stand on both sides of it.<sup>59</sup> But what if death – as finitude – is that limit? The restriction of human consciousness to life points to the elusiveness, the unthinkability, of finitude. We are left wondering, faced with the oppressiveness of the great unknown. The giant wall of *Poor Magic* evokes this dynamic,

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<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, *Être et temps*, 311.

<sup>58</sup> Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Lyotard, « Si l'on peut penser sans corps, » 19.

circumscribing the environment as a remembrance of an unsurmountable limit: one we are eternally confronted with, yet one we cannot consider simultaneously from both sides (see *fig. 11*).



Fig. 11 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 05'34"

It is, then, the very impossibility of thinking about death – its unthinkability or unknowability – that generates anxiety; there seems to be no apparent way to make sense of it, or to rationalise it. While *Poor Magic* signals this through its scenes of chaotic catastrophe, the paradoxical claim of the narrator “We can’t die, we’ve tried”<sup>60</sup> goes on to deny us even the certainty that death offers. Is *Poor Magic* reflecting an apocalyptic scenario of the end times? Or does it show us an eternal life beyond death as a techno-induced hell? It’s unclear. Such uncertainty only exacerbates the anxiety-inducing elusiveness of death, driving us still deeper in indeterminacy and undoing any possible security that the notion of human finitude might provide, setting us on edge. Where the pervasiveness of corporal death and the uncontrollability of mass death unearths deeply rooted anxieties regarding our embodied death, anxieties here compounded by

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<sup>60</sup> Jon Rafman, “Poor Magic, 2017.”

catastrophe scenarios, *Poor Magic* also displays the event more profound anxiety unleashed by death as finitude, and the intrinsic *insaisissabilité* and unknowability of such understanding.

### ***L'insaisissable* and Technology's Uncontrollability**

Even though the theme of death is front and centre throughout *Poor Magic*, it isn't the sole source of our anxiety. In a perhaps less obvious manner, Rafman's treatment of technology in *Poor Magic* is equally anxiety-provoking, revealing how our relationship with technology is riddled with latent anxieties. The chief way that the work's address to technology presents itself as insaisissable is by its reference to issues of control.

From its Ancient Greek etymological root *tekhnologia*, the term technology combines *tekhnē* (art, creation) and *logia* (discourse, ordering). According to interdisciplinary researcher in education and philosophy La Shun L. Carroll, *tekhnologia* can therefore be defined as: "something that is organized (implying creation of order) whose aspects function with a purpose that can provide some benefit."<sup>61</sup> The main problem with this definition – a definition that is still very much prevalent – is that it is highly anthropocentric, deriving technology from human needs.<sup>62</sup> German philosopher Martin Heidegger also criticises this definition as it reduces technology to an anthropo-instrumental conception of it.<sup>63</sup> While some attempts have been made to challenge this anthropocentric standard, Carroll claims that technology is still to this day more often than not defined as "a mere tool, as an instrument implying intentionality, as rationalization, or existing in a hybridized format with humans."<sup>64</sup> How could *Poor Magic*'s understanding of technology be characterised? Adopting a critical posture *vis-à-*

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<sup>61</sup> La Shun L. Carroll, "A Comprehensive Definition of Technology from an Ethological Perspective," *Social Sciences* 6, n°4 (2017): 6.

<sup>62</sup> Carroll, "A Comprehensive Definition of Technology from an Ethological Perspective," 12.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 2.

<sup>64</sup> La Shun L. Carroll, 13.

vis technology, the artwork calls into question the above-mentioned anthropocentric definition of technology, and by doing so generates anxiety.

According to this perspective on technology we are fully able to master it and assert control over it. But our lived relation to technology is constantly giving the lie to that belief. As we experience it in our daily lives, technology eludes our control in significant ways. It overwhelms our sense perceptions because it's too fast to grasp, too all-pervasive to perceive, and increasingly too powerful to contain. Its rationality is not always ours and we cannot predict the consequences it unleashes. Looking at each of these aspects in turn, we can see better how this frequent loss of control ends up being anxiety-inducing.

Once one enters the room where *Poor Magic* is exhibited, the artwork is encountered everywhere; be it through the scale of the screen, the encircling stereo sound system, or even the uncanny textured seating echoing the depicted scenes of the video. To enter this room is to enter inside *Poor Magic* itself. Through the use of technological tools, Rafman puts the viewer in a position whose visual, tactile and hearing senses are simultaneously stimulated and activated, demanding his/her utter attention. *Poor Magic* testifies to the analogous overstimulation of our senses that technology subjects us to daily. More than just overstimulating us, technology also proceeds to overwhelm us with informational overload. It induces an attention economy, one where the constant bombarding of perceptual stimuli results in a divide and dispersion of our attention ability.<sup>65</sup> Speaking to this context, the artist says: "My work tries to capture how much informational overload has infiltrated every aspect of our existence and shapes our very

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<sup>65</sup> Gregory J. Robson, "The threat of comprehensive overstimulation in modern societies," *Ethics and Information Technology* 19, n°1 (March 2017): 74.

perception.”<sup>66</sup> Rafman is correct in saying that informational overload permeates our existence in that overstimulation is a direct effect of this overload.<sup>67</sup> This constant overstimulation simultaneously reduces our attention span: all of the information presented to us seem to be “competing for our attention.”<sup>68</sup> Not only is our attention economy transformed by informational overload, the way our brain function is equally transformed. Beatrice Fazi, a lecturer on Digital Humanities Lecturer at Sussex University, notes that: “[...] the human brain is being rewired in favour of new cognitive skills, and to the detriment of the intellectual practice of deeper forms of attention.”<sup>69</sup> Rafman also speaks to this cognitive rewiring when recognising the effect that the internet – and technology in general – has on the unconscious part of our brain.<sup>70</sup> Like *Poor Magic*, technology keeps us in a disorienting, overwhelming and anxiety-inducing space where its control can more easily be asserted over us. The tension between wanting to control and being controlled resurfaces here, through overstimulation. Are we really in control, or is technology’s sensory overstimulation pointing instead to its control over us?

Speed is integral to this effect, adding to the confusion instilled by sensory overstimulation. Rafman’s video starts off slowly; midway through the video, however, the images succeed one another more and more rapidly, flashing before our eyes like a stroboscope, before returning to the original pace. This play with velocity echoes technology’s – and especially the Internet’s – ever-intensifying rapidity. The technological is anxiety-inducing because it moves too quickly for us to comprehend. Art

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<sup>66</sup> National Gallery of Canada, “Jon Rafman - The 2018 Sobey Art Award.”

<sup>67</sup> Robson, “The threat of comprehensive overstimulation in modern societies,” 76.

<sup>68</sup> Eva Respini, “No Ghost Just a Shell,” in *Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today* ( New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 41.

<sup>69</sup> Beatrice Fazi, “Distraction Machines? Augmentation, Automation and Attention in a Computational Age,” *New Formations* 98 (2019): 86.

<sup>70</sup> Hampton, “Technology’s Impression on the Contemporary Psyche.”



historian Eva Respini asks: “What do we make of this powerful medium which still holds so much promise but is also a sign of a world divided, full of anxiety, operating at a breakneck pace [...]?”<sup>71</sup> Such speed makes it harder and harder to keep up with life’s pace and *Poor Magic*’s narrator agrees: “It is all happening too fast now. Everything around me is falling apart. My memories, my imagination, it is all disintegrating.”<sup>72</sup>

Not only does technology's speed overwhelms us, it also messes with our sense of the reliability of time. The French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul talks about a ‘machine temporality,’<sup>73</sup> that takes place in parallel to human beings’ temporality, but operates on a whole different scale, measured with nanoseconds, and describes how the difficulty of aligning technological time with phenomenological time produces a sort of temporal disorientation.<sup>74</sup> Such temporality could even hint at a ‘timeless time.’

Sociologist Manuel Castells defines this timelessness in contrast to human biological time: “[...] timeless time is defined by the use of new information/communication technologies in a relentless effort to annihilate time.”<sup>75</sup> Because we can’t keep up with technology’s pace, because it goes too fast for us, slipping in our fingers – we sense that technology is in control, by always being ahead of us. *Poor Magic* operates in the temporality technology is opening up. As such, technology being able to speed us up testifies to the immense power that technology holds, once again speaking to its *insaisissable* and uncontrollable nature. Not only is technology overwhelming us through our senses, it does so through its infinite speed. More and more, a sense that technology

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<sup>71</sup> Respini, “No Ghost Just a Shell”, 41.

<sup>72</sup> Jon Rafman, “Poor Magic, 2017.”

<sup>73</sup> Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, 277.

<sup>74</sup> Ellul, 277.

<sup>75</sup> Manuel Castells, “Materials for an exploratory theory of the network society,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, n°1 (January-March 2000): 13.

might be the one in control seems to set in; there is a realisation that we might not be able to escape it (see *fig. 12*).



Fig. 12 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 06'14"

Just as much as in the death-filled story that it tells, then, the technological form of *Poor Magic* swallows up its viewers into an anxiety-filled dystopic world. The immersive character of the work, the feeling of being stuck inside a world that it engenders, is echoed by the video's narrative where the crowds and the blue figure are almost always escaping both *from* something, and *towards* something. Their unsuccessful fleeing gives the impression of a world that is truly inescapable. The viewers of *Poor Magic* are in turn surrounded by a technology-fuelled immersive environment – one that mirrors the inescapable nature of technology itself, thus tapping into another set of human anxieties embedded in the will to mastery over technology. Uncontrollable, but also inescapable, it seems unlikely we will never be able to evade its grip. Can a technology-

less world even be conceivable? According to a Heideggerian perspective on technology, once we have entered the metaphysical era of technology, it is solely through it that reality presents itself to us.<sup>76</sup> Technology acts as an invisible filter through which we come to relate with the world. It defines the whole of culture and “projects a historical totality – a world.”<sup>77</sup> And yet we are so often unaware of the fact. The danger of the essence of technology lies in the inability to return to an anterior mode of interaction with the world.<sup>78</sup> Hence, technology’s inescapability appears as a determining characteristic of the metaphysical era of the essence of technology, which is an era where the world can only be encountered through technology’s filter, or veil, inevitably transforming the entirety of our relationship with the world. Technology takes up so much space in our daily lives that it seems to be suffocating us as it influences all of the facets of our lives, on the one hand, and also infiltrating us, on the other. In her description of this dynamic, Beatrice Fazi mentions the work of American essayist and technology writer, Nicholas Carr, who speaks to this uncanny feeling: “Over the last few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn’t going – so far as I can tell – but it’s changing. I am not thinking the way I used to think.”<sup>79</sup> Such sentiments are echoed by the narrator of *Poor Magic*: “It feels like someone or something has entered our heads, it strolls through the recesses of our mind, surveying all of our scars.”<sup>80</sup> Not only can’t we escape, what we are trying to escape seemingly has instead

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<sup>76</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 12.

<sup>77</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 154.

<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 14.

<sup>79</sup> Fazi, “Distraction Machines?” 86.

<sup>80</sup> Jon Rafman, “Poor Magic, 2017.”

infiltrated us. By encompassing our world, it appears that technology is virtually controlling every aspect, element, and dimension of our world.

This question of control is central to Rafman's concerns: "What will happen to our humanity? [he asks] What is governing our actions? Do we even have any control? It becomes very puzzling. Where is the human being in all of this?"<sup>81</sup> How can human agency co-exist alongside the immense power of an unknown entity? A similar questioning is at the centre of the video of *Poor Magic*, which evokes its invisible sci-fi master as a metaphor for the larger reality that human beings have delegated so much of their own power to technology that now technology holds our power at a distance from us. The more powerful technology is, the harder it is to master, and the more we are aware of our inability to contain it.<sup>82</sup> Atomic bombs, space odysseys, nuclear energy, all are frightening instantiations of technology's immense power. Echoing our fears of technical disempowerment back to us, *Poor Magic* hints at all-encompassing technologically determined omniscience. In doing so, it signals the terrifying moments where technology – with all of its inherent power – of its own accord, seemingly following its own agenda. At such moments we realize that technology has truly become *insaisissable*.

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<sup>81</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Jon Rafman - The 2018 Sobey Art Award."

<sup>82</sup> Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, 295.



Fig. 13 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 03'09"

Rafman puts one of these “terrifying moments” at the forefront when he knowingly foregrounds a momentary glitch in the software that he used to create *Poor Magic*’s video, thus giving us a glimpse into technology’s logic. This logic is not ours; that is why it presents itself as strange and out of place. *Poor Magic* shows impossibly contorted bodies falling off a cliff, suddenly evaporating away and disappearing from our sight (see *fig. 13*). Twisted in implausible postures, human-like bodies are bending at the software’s will. They appear as glitches: glitches that the artist voluntarily puts forth for us to be confounded by, instead of removing them from the artwork; glitches as instances where technology functions following its own innate logic that has nothing to do with what it was designed for. In this case, Jon Rafman uses the *Miarmy* plug-in for *Maya 3D*, a software that aims to accurately depict crowd movements and behaviours, as well as to predict crowd movements in the case of emergencies and of immediate

evacuations of specific areas, architectures or buildings.<sup>83</sup> Yet the artist's twisting of bodies does not seem to be in line with the software's purpose. Rafman – by voluntarily casting light on moments where technology seemingly functions of its own accord – plays with the software's limit and pushes its logic to its extreme, resulting in those impossible flattening of the bodies evaporating away. Once again, technology slips away and is shown as uncontrollable.

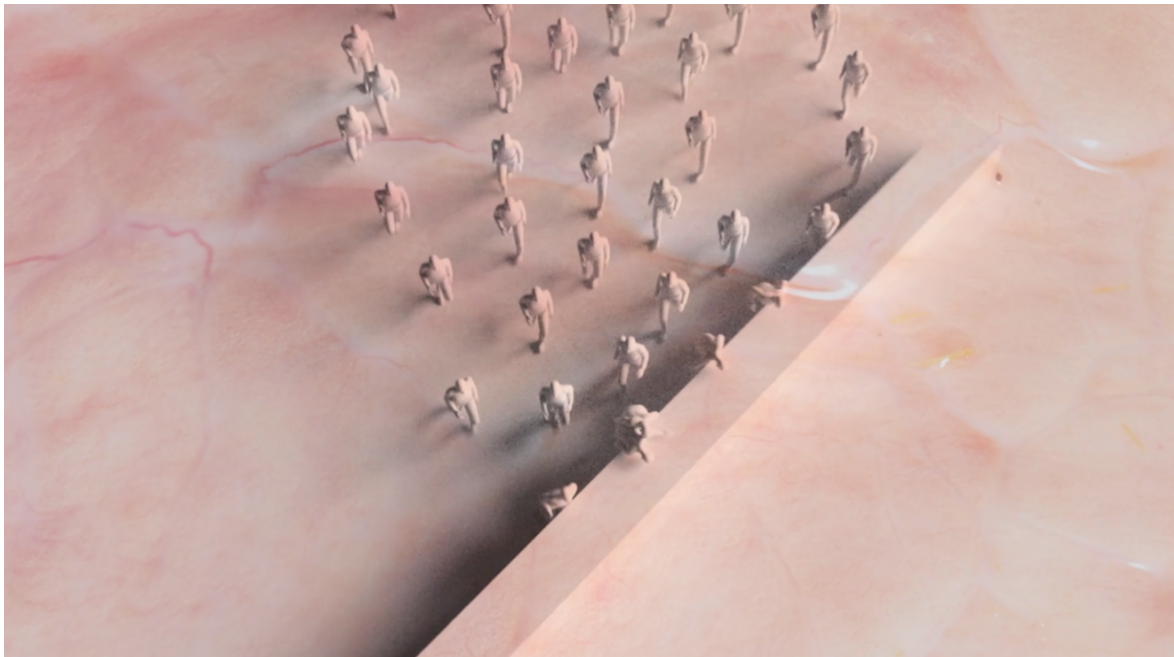


Fig. 14 Jon Rafman, *Poor Magic*, 2017. 00'52"

Still, not only is the artist willingly displaying the discrepancies embedded in the software, he is also putting it on its head by knowingly misusing it. By making the crowds run into walls, off cliffs, and against imagined obstacles, (see *fig. 14*) Rafman presents us with improbable scenarios, and diverges from the software original purpose.

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<sup>83</sup> Milad Haghani et al. "Panic, Irrationality, and Herding: Three Ambiguous Terms in Crowd Dynamics Research," *Journal of Advanced Transportation*, (August 2019): 2.

Conflating the software's glitches together with its misuse, Rafman amplifies the sense of uncontrollability and unpredictability emanating from technology, which is in turn echoed in the artist's own words: "There is less and less of a sense of meaning in what we confront."<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the situation in which the crowds are implemented seems to be purposeless. Why are the crowds confronted with such obstacles? What is the purpose of them being in this environment? That there are no answers to these questions is exactly the point.

Uncontrollability and unpredictability: while *Poor Magic* clearly speaks to those elements, technology too is closely intertwined with them. Consider the instances where technology fails to fulfil a given task in the manner we expect. Unpredictable behaviours exhibited by technology are made even more frustrating when inserted in a logic of human control. How can we control something that is at times unpredictable? This sense of duty of control over technology is to be related to our always growing need to rationalise everything we encounter, to 'impose our practical reason.'<sup>85</sup> In a world picture – Heidegger's *Weltbild* – the world is perceived and apprehended through a calculative reason – originating in science as the defining phenomenon of modern times – that ultimately reduces the world to a 'predictable picture,' in which everything needs to be categorised, organised, and rationalised.<sup>86</sup> Yet, when the world encountered is not so predictable anymore and is punctuated with uncontrollable and unpredictable behaviours, the stability of the world picture is suddenly shattered. We enter into the sublime realm of the incalculable, where technology follows its own course, unbothered by human

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<sup>84</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Jon Rafman - The 2018 Sobey Art Award."

<sup>85</sup> Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, 248.

<sup>86</sup> Heidegger, « L'époque des "conceptions du monde," » 101.

interventions. When such discrepancy occurs, anxiety sets in, because it appears more clearly that technology slips out of the reach of our control.

*Poor Magic*, by overstimulating our senses and suffocating us, by playing with velocity and displaying technology's inescapability and immense power – to alter humanity and perhaps to bring it to its end – and finally by putting forth unpredictable behaviours, points to the overall underlying uncontrollability of technology. Clearly displaying the apparent disconnect between the narrative we tell ourselves concerning technology (that is, falsely believing we are in full control of it) and our daily experience of it, *Poor Magic* confronts us with the anxiety such disconnection engenders. If we are not the one in control, does it mean technology is mastering us as in our dystopian nightmares? Moreover, it appears that the technology represented by Rafman dispossesses us of our deaths. Death is the “possibility of being”<sup>87</sup> that should belong to us the most – meaning that our death is always ours to experience.<sup>88</sup> Yet, Rafman showing us the ways in which technology is in control, the ways in which a technological entity can endlessly kill crowds without ending their lives, seems to suggest that technology – in the strange universe of *Poor Magic* – dispossesses humans of their deaths by torturing them endlessly. Technology, then, deprives those crowds of their own deaths, of their strongest possibility of being.

Death's elusiveness amalgamated with technology's uncontrollable nature culminates – in *Poor Magic* – in this ontological dispossession, it also produces the impression that the inherent speed of technology is driving us faster – making us run – towards our death, which is all the more anxiety-inducing. Here, with *Poor Magic*, we are

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<sup>87</sup> Heidegger, *Être et temps*, 251.

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger, 251.



presented with a vision where the technological utopian promise has failed, or at the very least has been transformed in a nightmare where death is impossible, increasing the anxiety level. Part of this technological utopianism can be found in Marshall McLuhan's reading of technology in *Understanding Media: The Extension of the Man*.<sup>89</sup> McLuhan, in what could be critiqued as an anthropocentric approach, conceives of technology as an extension of the human body and of its 'central nervous system.'<sup>90</sup> *Poor Magic* diverges from McLuhan's approach in that it presents bodies, organs and crowds that have been infiltrated by technology, instead of the other way around. *Poor Magic*'s portrayal of technology is one where the body-technology amalgam is now imbalanced; technology invades human bodies, takes over human agency, and toys with human death, all of which culminates in a crippling anxiety. Still, the achievement of such experience and the idea that Rafman uses anxiety almost as an artistic medium remain to be examined.

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<sup>89</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of the Man* (Boston & London: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>90</sup> Eric McLuhan, Frank Zingrone ed. "Understanding Media," *Essential McLuhan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 149.

## *Poor Magic's Achievement*

### **Temporal Matter**

The uncontrollability of technology and death's conceptual elusiveness thus lays the ground for a crippling anxiety to subsume its viewers. Yet, to what ends? What do these two vectors for anxiety – which are both displayed in *Poor Magic* and embedded in their ontological structures – have in common? Death and technology both operate on a temporal level: the first one bringing finitude to human-measured time, and the second always speeding us up. On the one hand, death is anxiety-inducing because of it being equated with the temporal notion of finitude. Even though the anxiety stems in part from the unknowability of death, it very much has to do with its finite quality and our inability to think beyond finitude. On the other hand, technology is anxiety-provoking because of its overstimulation of our senses, its immense power, its inescapability and uncontrollability, but also its breakneck pace that we seemingly cannot keep up with. In delving into the anxiety produced by finitude and technology's pace we are confronted with questions pertaining to the relationship we have come to establish with time. Reciprocally, the way we relate and understand time influences our relationship with finitude and technology. In this way, *Poor Magic* itself also speaks to our relationship with time and, more broadly, to the temporal regime we are in.

Increasingly, that regime is characterised by a certain difficulty in thinking beyond the present tense. François Hartog, a philosopher of history, has coined the term presentism (or short termism) to refer to a collective incapacity to project ourselves beyond the present. Living in the moment, we react, he says, far more than we act.<sup>91</sup> We

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<sup>91</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), 12.

are confronted by an exacerbated present, one in which we are condemned to the instantaneous and one that, by taking up all of the available space, drastically limits our temporal horizon.<sup>92</sup> The present has swollen into both the past and the future, informing our regard of the past through remembrance, heritage and debt, and our consideration of the future through the notions of responsibility and precaution.<sup>93</sup> Rather than being perceived as openness and full of promises, the future is instead regarded as “obscure and menacing.”<sup>94</sup> This induces anxiety, which is inherently tied to futurity. We have seen that anxiety is an “apprehensive anticipation of future danger.”<sup>95</sup> What happens to this understanding when our temporal horizon shrinks: when the fear is that there will be no tomorrow? For historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the phenomenon of presentism is especially visible in the context of the current climate emergency which “precipitates a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility.”<sup>96</sup> The future is both too far to be reached, but also safely maintained at a distance since it generates so much anxiety; hence, the present, however uncomfortable and smothering it may be, seems to be the only temporality where one can stand. Yet, presentism is perhaps more than a temporal regime. The uncomfortable position it forces us into is more akin to that of an emergency or a crisis. Hartog describes a temporal crisis as a loss of meaning of past, present and future’s articulation and cohesiveness.<sup>97</sup> As such, presentism is defined by a dislocated

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<sup>92</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 267-268.

<sup>94</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 261.

<sup>95</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Online*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “anxiety,” accessed July 2, 2020. <https://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm05>

<sup>96</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 197.

<sup>97</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 38.

relationship between past, present and future; where the present almost completely annihilates the other two temporalities.

Different ways have been developed to come to grips with the temporal crisis we are facing. The “Catastrophism” so patently on display in *Poor Magic* is, Hartog tells us, a common response.<sup>98</sup> Closely entangled with recurring doomsday narratives, it consists in approaching catastrophes “of climate, health, nuclear power, or something else”<sup>99</sup> as always on the verge of happening. Yet it fails to provide us with tangible solutions. By being always caught up in easy and temporary fixes, as well as constant anticipation, an in-depth reflection on why those catastrophes emerge and what possible futures would constitute an adequate response is avoided. Constantly running from one catastrophe to another, the crowds of *Poor Magic* are seemingly fleeing one emergency, only to be confronted by another, caught in an infinite loop.

Yet, in our day to day lives, it seems as though we are confronted by two different sets of emergencies: imminent threats and absent emergencies. According to continental philosopher Santiago Zabala, the greatest emergencies “are the ones we do not confront.”<sup>100</sup> Such “absent emergencies,” as he terms them, are emergencies we are fully aware of (i.e. climate change) but fail to address in a unified manner. Take the COVID-19 crisis, for example. Scientifics warned us a year ago about the likely possibility of pandemic sweeping over the Earth. Still, no unified responses were formulated then, because the emergency was not yet tangible, it was an absent emergency. Now that we

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<sup>98</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*, 268.

<sup>99</sup> François Hartog, “Intervention: The Present of the Historian,” *History of the Present* 4, n° 2 (Fall 2014): 215.

<sup>100</sup> Santiago Zabala, “Surviving Change in the Age of Alternative Facts,” Interview by MQUP, *McGill-Queen's University Press*, April 15, 2020, Written, <https://www.mqup.ca/blog/surviving-change-santiago-zabala-guest-blog/>

are forced to deal with it and that it has become a very real threat, international efforts are deployed.<sup>101</sup> Epitomising presentism and its propensity to be solely caught up in the immediate and instantaneous, a catastrophist response to the temporal crisis we are facing fails to address the long-term underlying drivers of the catastrophes and emergencies we are now faced with.

Another possible posture is to work from the very uncertainty that temporal dislocation creates.<sup>102</sup> Since the past is considered as what has led us to the threatening future we now have to confront, it is impossible to turn to it for advice. How can one work from the uncertainty the future inspires? Risk technologies offer one solution to this temporal dilemma, allowing their users to explore different scenarios through simulation processes. Here relying on François Rachline's reading of our relationship with the present,<sup>103</sup> Hartog writes: "In our uncertain universe, we no longer choose a single projection, through which we 'foresee the future,' but instead we "measure the effects of several envisageable futures on the present," such as to move forward virtually in several directions before deciding on one direction alone."<sup>104</sup> He refers to this as a "multidirectional present."<sup>105</sup> Not so much wanting to anticipate, such a present is instead interested in the idea of being flexible. The rationale is that in mapping out various possible projections, it allows to always be able to respond right away if one scenario or

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<sup>101</sup> Zabala, interview.

<sup>102</sup> Zabala, interview.

<sup>103</sup> François Rachline, « Qu'arrive-t-il au présent? » *À la recherche du réel*, Association Droit de suite, n°18 (Mai 2001).

<sup>104</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: presentism and experiences of time*, trans. Shaskia Brown (New York: Columbia Press, 2015), 202.

<sup>105</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 202.

another comes about: “that is, [Hartog tells us] to be able to be immediately present (“on the case”).”<sup>106</sup>

As a coping mechanism offering a way out of presentism, the multidirectional present – and the risk technologies associated with it – is at the centre of *Poor Magic* too. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Jon Rafman misuses the crowd control software – Miarmy within Maya 3D – running improbable or purposeless scenarios. This perverts risk technology and thus undermines an often used mechanism for bypassing presentism. The main flaw of multidirectional present is that it is conceived from within the logic of the very temporal posture that it is trying to escape; it is still caught up in the instant. Also, while this strategy may be promising from an administrative or managerial standpoint, its use in daily living is complicated and time-consuming. Here we were, thinking that the multidirectional present could provide us with some comfort in our anxiety-filled and exacerbated temporality, yet *Poor Magic* seem to tell us otherwise. In corrupting this coping strategy, Rafman raises the possibility that the multidirectional present might simply be a way to avoid the temporal crisis we are in, instead of facing it head on. Perhaps it could be postulated that *Poor Magic* rescues us into the temporal emergency rather than from it.

### **A Way Out of the Temporal Emergency**

For the philosopher Santiago Zabala, art that matters and that truly has a disruptive power *should* indeed engender anxiety. Referencing Mark C. Taylor’s article “Financialization of Art”<sup>107</sup>, Zabala tells us that: “To overcome the ‘art world,’ the ‘financialization of art,’

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<sup>106</sup> Hartog, 202.

<sup>107</sup> Mark C. Taylor, “Financialization of Art,” *Capitalism and Society* 6, n°2 (2011): 1-19.

and ‘beauty’s indifference,’ works of art must rescue us into the emergencies that concern us as human beings. This is why [Mark C. Taylor claims that] instead ‘of offering reassurance, art should be insistently unsettling and disturbing. The art that really matters engenders rather than removes anxiety.’”<sup>108</sup> Zabala understands ‘emergencies’ as “result[ing] from our noticing an alteration within the world picture.”<sup>109</sup> Here, Zabala is pointing to Heidegger’s *Weltbild*, where the discrepancies arising as emergencies are toned down and seamlessly integrated within the world picture, through dominant reason and rationalisation,<sup>110</sup> hereby becoming absent emergencies. What if one of these absent emergencies were to be the temporal crisis we are now facing? *Poor Magic* uses the anxiety that arises from the elusiveness of death and the uncontrollability of technology, sparking existential concern about the end of days. Then it deprives us of the coping mechanisms out of presentism that has become our society’s dominant response to that anxiety. Santiago Zabala criticises being rescued *from* emergencies because it equates with being simply “saved by temporary fixes that ignore the greatest emergency”<sup>111</sup> that are absent emergencies. One could say that both coping mechanisms previously mentioned – catastrophism and multidirectional present – rescue us *from* emergencies in advocating for “temporary fixes” above all else. Perverting both catastrophism and the multidirectional present, *Poor Magic* refuses to participate in avoidance strategies. Instead, it opens up a space where the emergency of the temporal crisis is made tangible and even graspable for an instant.<sup>112</sup> That is why it could be said that *Poor Magic* rescues

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<sup>108</sup> Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Zabala, 17.

<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, « L’époque des “conceptions du monde,” » 111.

<sup>111</sup> Zabala, interview.

<sup>112</sup> Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 17.

us *into* the emergency rather than *from* it. It “provokes us into the emergency”<sup>113</sup> and ultimately gives us a tangible way out of presentism. The direct confrontation of the absent emergency that is the temporal crisis is a posture very much at odds with that of the avoidance strategies. Confrontation creates a space where presentism's drivers can be fully addressed and explored, instead of favouring quick fixes.

Yet, more than just short-circuiting presentism's logic, *Poor Magic* also allows for an evacuation our collective dystopian nightmares through the process of catharsis, so that it can transfigure all of the anxiety it generates through the elusiveness of death and uncontrollable nature of technology. According to sociologist Thomas Scheff, a catharsis functions when its origin is positioned at an ideal distance, in order to alleviate one's distress. Such distance he terms “the aesthetic distance.”<sup>114</sup> Viewers of *Poor Magic* are positioned in a similar distance. The work is inviting enough, immersive enough, to captivate the viewers' attention; yet the patent unreality of its simulated world shelters us from any deep psychological distress. By presenting dystopian nightmares – in which we are repeatedly confronted to embodied deaths and to humanity's death, subjected to technology's own free will – the artwork allows us to externalise and so to evacuate those nightmares. When the darkest futures have been experienced, what remains? Other futures. Futures where it is not too late to act and where humans still detain a certain degree of agency. By opening up possible futures, Rafman reevaluates the present. Suddenly less suffocating, our actual future appears more promising after our encounter with Rafman's work, fostering renewed hope rather than anguish. More productive than the usual multidirectional present, the cathartic experience provided by *Poor Magic*

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<sup>113</sup> Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2001), 57.



functions as a way out of the *impasse* that is presentism. In line with Zabala's argument, such artistic experience rescues us *into* the emergency rather than *from* it, by insistently confronting us with the said temporal emergency of presentism.

## Conclusion

*Poor Magic* provides its viewers with a unsettling artistic experience, one that is full of visceral and latent anxieties resurfacing all at once. Tapping into the elusiveness of death and the uncontrollability of technology it works both thematically and formally to heighten viewers' uncertainties and insecurities, making us feel as though we are running at a breakneck pace towards our own death. As such, it raises questions about finitude itself and opens up reflections on larger temporal schemes rhythming our lives. Here, Jon Rafman uses anxiety as an artistic medium in order to shock us *into* the temporal emergency that is presentism. Evoking of a sense of being trapped, confined and mastered, the artwork emulates that logic of presentism, in which we are as equally trapped, confined and mastered.

As critical as it is of utopian technocratic futures, however, *Poor Magic* also helps to evacuate dystopian futures through catharsis. By referencing both types of scenarios, the work is very much aligned with the project of Critical Future Studies (CFS), as it has been defined by media professors Luke Goode and Michael Godhe. CFS is a field that seeks to “‘*undefine the future*’ and which is not concerned merely with predictions or comparisons.”<sup>115</sup> By short-circuiting coping mechanisms design to respond to presentism, *Poor Magic* participates in “*undefining the future*” in a way that is both critical and reflective, but more importantly, that is suggesting its viewers with futures to be discussed and deliberated. Similarly, Critical Future Studies welcome both utopias and dystopias as they influence our affective dimension – by generating excitement and discussions about possible futures – and cognitive dimension – by making “radical

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<sup>115</sup> Luke Goode and Michael Godhe, “Beyond Capitalist Realism - Why We Need Critical Future Studies,” *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 9, n°1 (2017): 112.

thought experiments all the more necessary.”<sup>116</sup> The manner in which *Poor Magic* shocks us *into* the emergency of presentism – and presents us with a more viable way out of it – is indicative of a will to expand imagination surrounding futures to come, an imagination that is evermore atrophied by capitalist realism. In a narrow mindset, capitalist realism presents the future as a mere extension of the present and its ideologies, therefore limiting endeavours in imagining futures radically different from the present.<sup>117</sup> Instead of endlessly perpetuating capitalist realism, *Poor Magic* subverts such a ‘future’ by interweaving both utopian and dystopian futures, thus enabling a critical imagination of futures.

*Poor Magic* might also point to a specific failure. Evans and Reid write “that as a species we have failed historically to recognize ‘the truth of finitude’ because we have not recognized the finite nature of the resources which our civilization has depended on for its exploitation and growth.”<sup>118</sup> How, then, can we undo this tendency to approach the world as infinite? Displaying finitude – as anxiety-producing as it may be – is a reminder of our self-limitation, but also of our collective limitations, limitations that are especially pregnant in the crisis of climate change. While artworks such as *Poor Magic* might open up a threshold where we can better think futures and their potential implications, Evans and Reid contend that: “we need to develop a much better understanding of the political stakes, as contemporary anxieties are now projected into a future that is seemingly full of inescapable yet unknowable catastrophes.”<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, the roots of the dread – of having to face futures that are as catastrophic as one another – are to be found in the

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<sup>116</sup> Goode and Godhe, “Beyond Capitalist Realism,” 119.

<sup>117</sup> Goode and Godhe, 116.

<sup>118</sup> Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, 147.

<sup>119</sup> Evans and Reid, 98.

‘political stakes’ that set the stage for those futures to come. Even if *Poor Magic* – and other artworks with similar reach – can thrust us into anxiety as to open up our thinking of futures, the political framing of those remains unchanged and unaltered, especially when a certain resilience – entrenched in capitalist realism – is demanded above all else from neoliberal subjects. Relentlessly pressuring them to adapt to all kinds of catastrophes, resilience creates a predicament of “naturalised vulnerability”<sup>120</sup> where subjects are forced to accept and internalise the constant endangerment of their lives. *Poor Magic* certainly signals this permanent state of endangerment through the torturing of crowds at the hands of technology. Still, the question now becomes, to what extent can *Poor Magic* and artworks the like can fundamentally challenge both neo-liberalist resilience and capitalist realism?

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<sup>120</sup> Evans and Reid, 65.

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