

# THE SCREEN TURNS YOU ON: LUST FOR HYPERFLATNESS IN JAPANESE 'GIRL GAMES'

ANA MATILDE SOUSA

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**Resumo:** 'Girl games' (ou 'bishoujo games') são jogos de aventura focados em relações românticas e conteúdo erótico/pornográfico envolvendo raparigas em estilo *anime*, emergidos da subcultura *otaku* ("nerd" ou "geek") no Japão do início dos anos 80. A sua arquitetura do desejo, inseparável da experiência fenomenológica e tecno-fantasmática do ecrã de computador como dispositivo de mediação, é o produto de uma história moldada por restrições tecnológicas e de mercado. Começando como *eroge* acéfalos, os 'girl games' acabaram por transmutar-se em *visual novels*, com histórias ramificadas não-lineares, melodramas abstractos, pouco ou nenhum material explícito e uma jogabilidade cada vez mais passiva. Esta evolução denota um duplo modo de fruição, em que as experiências do imediatismo corporal e da mediação mecânica, da submissão e da consciência, de manipular e ser manipulado, se sobrepõem. Na raiz, está *hyperflatness* da interface gráfica, com a sua desafiante háptica de olhar *para e além* da planeza do ecrã.

**Palavras-chave:** *eroge*; japonês; interface; melodrama; pornografia; visual novel.

**Abstract:** 'Girl games' (or 'bishoujo games') are a type of adventure game centered on romantic relations and erotic/pornographic content involving anime-style girls, emerging within the Japanese subculture of *otaku* ("nerd" or "geek") in the early 1980s. Their architectonics of desire, which is inseparable from the phenomenological and techno-phantasmatic experience of the computer screen as a mediating device, is the product of a unique history shaped by technological and market constraints. Starting as mindless *eroge* ('erotic games'), 'girl games' eventually transmuted into 'visual novels' with non-linear branching storylines, abstract melodramas, little to no smut and an increasingly passive gameplay. This evolution denotes a two-faced enjoyment where the experiences of bodily immediacy and mechanical mediation, surrender and awareness, manipulating and being manipulated, overlap. At its root, stands the postmodern, post-Cartesian 'hyperflatness' of the windows-based graphical user interface, with its defying new haptics of looking *at and beyond* the "thoroughly planar" screen.

**Keywords:** *eroge*; japan; interface; melodrama; pornography; visual novel.

## INTRODUCTION

Japanese 'girl games' (or '*bishoujo* games') are a quintessential subset of 'visual novels'—*i.e.* interactive fiction consisting of non-linear branching storylines with multiple different endings but fairly passive gameplay — centered on romantic relations and erotic or pornographic scenes involving anime-style female characters. This paper examines their evolution and architectonics of desire in relation to the computer screen.

Shaped both by technological/market constraints and their emergence within the subculture of *otaku* (roughly, "geek" or "nerd"), the history of 'girl games' begins and to some extent is interchangeable with *eroge* (a portmanteau for 'erotic games').<sup>1</sup> *Eroge* were primarily the result of a domestic rivalry among various Japanese manufacturers seeking to assert themselves in the blossoming, but fearsomely competitive, home computer market of the early 1980s. The main contenders included the "16-bit trinity" (Retro Gamer Magazine, 2009) of Sharp's X68000, Fujitsu's FM Towns and NEC's PC-9801, with a tempting high resolution Japanese word processor but only 4096 colors (as opposed to its rivals' 30 000) and no sound system. To compensate for its weaker hardware, NEC sought to attract consumers by promoting porn games for the PC-9801. In 1982, the company Koei successfully introduced the first *eroge*, *Night Life*, featuring sexually explicit images in schematic black and white outlines. Other companies followed in its footsteps, creating *eroge* with anime-style graphics that suited the PC-9801's 640 × 400 display, but also fit the minute storage capacity of floppy disks.

Eventually, the plotless pornographic content of first-wave *eroge* became less appealing to consumers, who could get similar contents in cheaper media. Despite later attempts to intersect the *eroge* with more narratively sophisticated genres, such as the RPG or the 'sword and sorcery' (e.g. *Chaos Angels*, *Dragon Knight*, *Rance*), the quality of plots remained compromised by the main character's compulsory promiscuity. Only in 1992, with *Doukyuusei* ("Classmates"), did the company Elf come up with a solution: in order to develop more detailed and interesting plots without sacrificing the quantity of sex scenes, "why not have stories for each different female character, so that the player [...] can go after which girl he likes — and if he wants to, can play it again and go after a different girl next time?" (Todome, n.d., *Dokyusei* section). Thus the 'girl game' was born along with its 'route architecture,' in which every main female character corresponds to a playable narrative branch. The main character must make correct choices in order to win over each girl, creating a sense of progression within the romantic relationship and unlocking special illustrations called CGs ("computer graphics") — which

1 This historical overview is largely grounded on Satoshi Todome's *A History of Eroge*. All material is sourced from Todome (n.d.), unless otherwise stated.

eventually turn erotic or pornographic —, as a reward for growing intimacy.

Also in 1992, the company Chunsoft released *Otogirisou*, a mystery-horror graphic adventure that pioneered the standard format for novel games: first-person POV, fullscreen background image with a superimposed text box, soundtrack and occasional branch selection with multiple endings. This format, trademarked ‘sound novel,’ was appropriated by the young company Leaf, which applied it to the ‘girl game’ territory. Keeping the dark atmosphere of *Otogirisou*, but adding character sprites (i.e. graphical overlays), Leaf coined the term ‘visual novel’ (VN) with *Shizuku* (“Drip”) and *Kizuato* (“Scar”), both in 1996. Despite these titles’ commercial success, Leaf’s definite breakthrough happened one year later with *To Heart*. A trendsetter, *To Heart* (1997) held the VN formula but departed radically from the scenarios of violence and rape in *Shizuku* and *Kizuato*, opting instead for a heart-warming high school romance in which the main character gets to know different classmates along the academic year and chooses to fall in love with one of them. In particular, the secondary heroine HMX-12 Multi — an endearing, hard-working domestic robot shaped as a high school girl for your convenience —, became extremely popular among fans, asserting itself as an icon of the emerging *moé* aesthetics (a subgenre of cuteness involving tender and nurturing feelings towards ‘little sister’ type characters) that would dominate *otaku* culture during the first decade of the XXI century.

The rise of the VN format in ‘girl games’ gradually demised their earlier point-and-click models, translating into a more passive gameplay in which the player simply clicked the mouse to read texts and view illustrations (Azuma, 2009, p.76). Moreover, the success of *To Heart* led others to invest in ‘girl games’ with moving love stories and *moé* visuals. Among them was Jun Maeda, a writer and composer influenced by the novels of Haruki Murakami and working for the company Tactics (Mui, 2011, para.6). Maeda’s team developed *One ~ Kagayaku Kizetsu e ~* (“One: Towards the Radiant Season,” 1998), a ‘girl game’ with branching plotlines that introduced the simple but effective formula of the *nakige* (“crying game”), consisting roughly of “comedic first half + heart-warming romantic middle + tragic separation + emotional get together” (Todome, n.d., Ch. 3). In the wake of the success of *One*, Key (a company co-founded by Maeda after leaving Tactics), launched *Kanon* (1999), *Air* (2000) and *Clannad* (2004), generally considered the “holy trinity” of the VN medium (Mui, 2011, para.10) and most influential among prominent VN authors such as Romeo Tanaka, Ryukishi and Gen Urobuchi.

In addition to *nakige*, another class known as *utsuge* (“depressing game”) evolved, whose purpose is to depress the player with “no happy end, no help, no hope” scenarios (<http://vndb.org/g693>). Or, in some cases, provoke extreme emotions such as fear and disgust, as in Urobuchi’s *Saya no Uta* (“Song of Saya,” 2003), a lovecraftian ‘cosmic horror’ love story notorious for its all-out use of gore and disturbing themes. Ironically, with the dissemination of the *nakige* and *utsuge*, the pornographic content at the heart of ‘girl games’ became increasingly diluted in the melodrama of the stories. This trend was accentuated by

the import of popular ‘girl games’ into consoles (e.g. Sega Saturn, Sony PlayStation), where explicit content is severely restricted. Yet, as noted by Hiroki Azuma (2009), already in *Air* the pornographic material was concentrated almost exclusively within the first half of the game, leaving the remaining 10 hours to an abstract melodrama consisting of formulaic elements (“incurable disease,” “past life”) left blatantly unexplored (what incurable disease? which past lives?) (p.78). This was a tour de force, stating implicitly that sexual gratification is not the ultimate goal of ‘girl games.’ But then *what* is?

### THE PLEASURE OF HYPERFLATNESS

The ‘melodramatic turn’ in ‘girl games’ can be partially explained by technological constraints. Until the 2000s, it was difficult for most PCs to process complex animations and voices, so companies invested in stories that could motivate strong feelings and illustrations with which the player could readily empathize (the *moé* aesthetics) (Azuma, 2009, p.76). These narrative and visual elements — based on preexisting clichés and stereotypes — were easily conveyed in spite of the fragmented structure of ‘route architecture,’ which comprised branching storylines with multiple endings and thus “required to combine as many stories and characters as possible through the effective permutation of modules” (Azuma, 2009, p.76). The same goes for the layered, fragmented scene design typical of VNs: background pictures with superimposed character sprites, text boxes, dialogue voice-overs and soundtrack (Fig.1). This data is constantly “recycled” into new scenes, in which the same files acquire different meanings. Such an expedient was necessary in early ‘girl games’ due to time saving and hardware limitations (Azuma, 2009, p.80). However, since melodrama and recycled layers continue to dominate VNs to this day, it is clear that such constraints alone cannot account for their persistence. For instance, one could expect ‘girl games’ to adopt the 3D graphics trend that swept across most video game genres since the 90s; yet that didn’t happen.

Azuma (2009) argues this persistence is due to the pleasure of hyperflatness in ‘girl games.’ The multiplicity of interfaces that characterizes new media (“whereas ‘old media’ usually only have one” (Nusselder, 2009, p.5)) encapsulates the hyperflat nature of the computer screen: that which is “thoroughly planar and yet transcends the plane”, that “is flat and at the same time lines up what exists beyond it in a parallel layer” (Azuma, 2009, p.102). Anne Friedberg (2009) classifies the windows-based graphical user interface (GUI) as a “post-cinematic visual system” that, while maintaining the “viewer-turned-user [...] in front of [...] a perpendicular frame” (p.232), introduces a gravity-defying “new haptics [...]: in front of and above” (p.227). This merging of the window with the desktop — collapsing the vertical into the horizontal, the deep into the flat — allowed for the simultaneous display of different interpretations of invisible data by opening

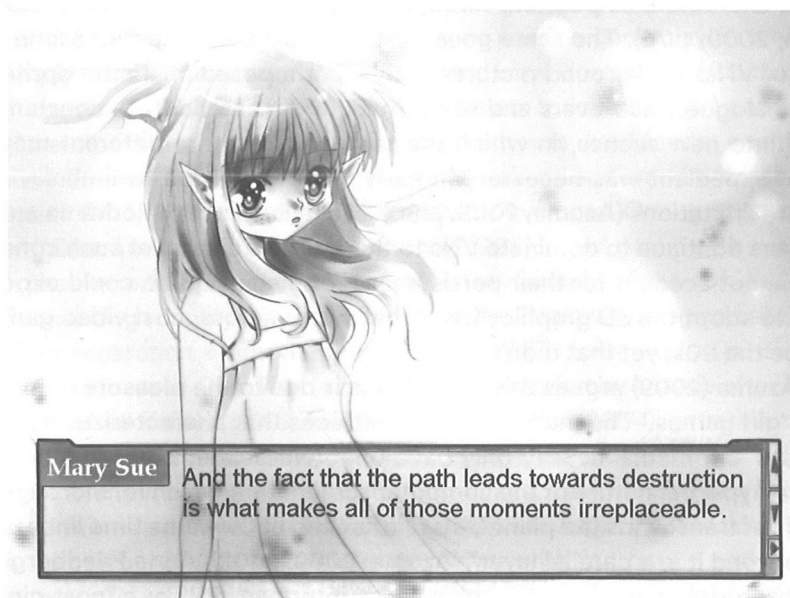
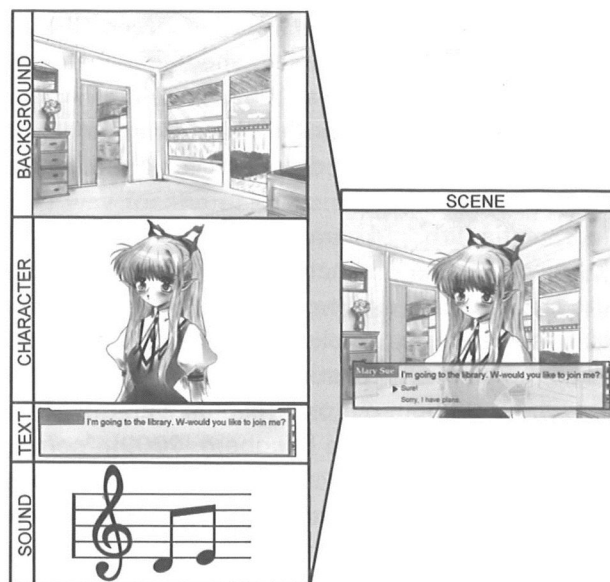


Fig. 1 — Example of a scene in a 'girl game', 2014. Source: author (after a screenshot of Key's *Kanon*). Figure Description: In this case, the player would click "Sure!" to follow Mary Sue's route.

Fig. 2 — Example of melodrama in a 'girl game', 2014. Source: author (after a screenshot of *Tactics' One ~ Kagayaku Kisetsu e ~*). Figure Description: Sentimental and abstract narration with metaphysical elements is a common feature in visual novels.



**Fig. 3** — Example of layered scene design in a 'girl game', 2014. Source: author. Figure Description: Detached files — background image, character sprites, narrative text and soundtrack/voice-overs — add up to form a linear scene.

**Fig. 4** — Example of CG in a 'girl game', 2014. Source: author (after a screenshot of Key's *Air*). Figure Description: In this case, first-person POV is disrupted by the insertion of the main character's nape in the scene.

multiple, coexisting virtual windows. The windows-based GUI is, therefore, the best metaphor for this multitasking visuality where information is consumed in parallel, instead of hierarchically (Azuma, 2009, p.102-104). Arguably, the ‘melodramatic turn’ in ‘girl games’ translates the moment in time when the lust for experiencing hyperflatness outweighed the lust for direct sexual gratification brought by pornographic content.

Post-‘melodramatic turn’ ‘girl games’ express such hyperflat haptics thoroughly as each “vertical” narrative branch stands in contradiction with the game’s “horizontal” ‘route architecture,’ e.g. every girl is the ‘one true love,’ ‘soul mate’ or ‘destiny’ insofar as she can be stacked or displayed along with every other ‘one true loves,’ ‘soul mates’ and ‘destinies’ (Azuma, 2009, p.84-85). There is something to be said, here, about our own relation with the computer interface as viewers-turned-users. According to Friedberg (2009), “computer interfaces may have been designed to become dyadic partners in a metaphysical relationship, but complaints about the awkwardness of this liaison have targeted the interface” (p.231). And she goes on to quote Brenda Laurel: “Using computers is like going to the movie theater and having to watch the projector instead of the film” (p.231). Indeed, the metaphysical in ‘girl games’ — often figured literally by inserting cosmic/supernatural plot points — not only exposes the “projector” (the game’s system and mechanics) but encourages you to *take it to pieces*. This paradox channels what Azuma (2009) calls a “desire for the grand nonnarrative” (p.105), envisioned as a collective, imaginary database where the elements of *otaku* subculture are stored; a deep inner layer of atomized attributes, lacking “the structures and ideologies (‘grand narratives’) that used to characterize modern society” (p.xvi). And while Azuma also contends that “the rising interest in drama that occurred in the 1990s is not essentially different from the rising interest in cat ears and maid costumes” (p.79), it is enlightening to explore the postmodern, post-cinematic nature of *nakige* and *utsuge* in relation to their modern, cinematic root: the melodrama.

Ben Singer (2001) defines the melodrama as a “cluster concept” (p.44) that “contains works constructed out of many different combinations of a set of primary features: pathos, emotionalism, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative form, and graphic sensationalism” (p.58). While excessive showcases of pity and emotion are well-known traits of the melodramatic mode, its preference for “nonclassical narrative mechanics” (Singer, 2001, p.46) that defy logical cause-and-effect is less often recognized (although this has traditionally been the genre’s most criticized feature). Still, the melodrama’s narrative “disjointedness” — “outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, *deus ex machina* resolutions, and episodic strings of action” (Singer, 2001, p.46) —, resulting from its predisposition to favor visceral sensation over causative storylines, resonates deeply with ‘girl games.’ More so because, as Franklin Melendez (2004) indicates, the melodrama shares this characteristic with other “body genre” such as pornography and horror, which primarily “strive to move the spectator

[...] either to tears, terror, sexual arousal, or some mixture of all three” (p.414).

In other words, because “melodramatic excess is a question of the body, of physical responses” (Singer, 2001, p.40), the mixture of melodrama and pornography (and, in some cases, horror) is not surprising. Nevertheless, ‘girl games’ embrace the tearjerker and the bathetic while stripping them to their skeleton, making way for the enjoyment of the netherworldly game mechanism that generates the melodrama’s system (Azuma, 2009, p.79). This is why even (supposedly) linear narratives and characters are themselves the result of combining a preexisting set of well-codified stock characters, scenarios and bodily features deployed from the *otaku* database. *Nakige* and *utsuge* may, subsequently, fail to constitute a profound literary or filmic experience — they remain, after all, insistently superficial (flat) —, but instead achieve a “formula, without a worldview or a message, that effectively manipulates emotion” (Azuma, 2009, p.79; **Fig.2**).

Such a two-faced consumption of ‘girl games’ (melodrama vs. database) is already present in its scene design, where “a screen and a plot, which seem unitary on the surface outer layer, are just an aggregate of meaningless fragments in the deep inner layer” (Azuma, 2009, p.83). In fact, the recycling of backgrounds and character sprites (a remediation of the cell animation technique typical of Japanese anime), as well as voice data and soundtracks, has prompted the computer savvy, software-cracking consumers of ‘girl games’ (the *otaku*) to extract these encrypted files before they are rendered into unitary scenes (Azuma, 2009, p.80). It is even possible to find freeware applications and hacking tutorials on the internet designed to extract this “raw material” from VNs, so users can create new stories using “the exact same data as the original but [...] changing the combinations and modes of expression” (Azuma, 2009, p.83; **Fig.3**).

Based on the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics framework (Hunnicke et al, 2001), I argue that while narrative and eroticism are, at face value, the predominant “fun” factors in ‘girl games’, there is an underlying aesthetic experience closer to ‘game as reverse engineering,’ i.e. “analyzing a subject system to create representations of the system at a higher level of abstraction” (Garg & Jindal, 2009, p.186); or, in simpler terms, “going backwards through the development cycle” (Warden *apud* Garg & Jindal, 2009, p.186). The pleasure in *nakige* and *utsuge* results from the co-experience of two seemingly contradictory kinds of “fun.” On one level, the experience of ‘being moved’ by melodrama, that is, “being manipulated, victimized, deprived of critical distance” (Affron, 1991, p.99), translating into an accordingly passive gameplay; on the other, the experience of moving and manipulating, e.g. the proactive cracking into the game’s mechanics to create derivative artifacts such as GMVs (“game music videos”), transplant the game from one operating system to another, make translation patches, or any other variation on the original work that involves “taking apart an object to see how it works in order to duplicate or enhance the object” (Garg & Jindal, 2009, p.186).

Yet it is not necessary any actual software cracking takes place, as the 'girl game's narrative disjointedness already implies that "reproducibility operates as one of the dominant signs of pleasure in the genre" (Melendez, 2004, p.406). Mediation, embodied in the presence of the mechanism and the technology's own materiality, becomes erotically invested through the game's apparatus of repetition and interruption: not only its 'route architecture' and fragmented scene design, but also its segmented narrative flow in a rhythm determined by the minimalist clicking of the mouse buttons that is, nonetheless, absolutely necessary for the game's progression (story-wise, but also for the rotation and unlocking of visual and auditory cues). As Melendez (2004) asserts, this requiring of the viewer-turned-user's physical contact relates closely to the consumption of commodities (p.406), in this case, that of "time commercialized through segmentation" (p.409) found originally in television and video. In VN's "fractured post-Cartesian" (Friedberg, 2009, p.235) screen-based system, and in 'girl games' in particular, pleasure may thus be encoded in the "modes of (re)production" (Melendez, 2004, 410), but such pleasure can only be experienced by (literally) brushing the bodily against the mechanical (Melendez, 2004, p.420). This can be achieved by penetrating the game to extract and manipulate its files, and/or by simply clicking the buttons and gazing at the screen (Melendez recalls Roland Barthes's account of his own voluptuousness towards the photographic camera's click). In turn, the game "mimic[s] bodily pleasure at the cost of exposing the very limitations of the medium" (Melendez, 2004, 419), palpable in the frozen CGs and moans atomized into separate sound clips. That is why, despite their supposedly passive gameplay, the experience of playing 'girl games' is not interchangeable with watching prerecorded play-throughs, like one watches a movie.

At stake, then, is a "vacillation between a surrender to the optical illusion produced by the machine and an awareness of the technology's materiality" (Melendez, 2004, p.414). In CGs, it is a common practice to show first-person POV by equating the viewer's field of vision with the screen; but this closeness is, more often than not, subtly disturbed by the illustration depicting the main character's profile, shoulders or nape (**Fig.4**). This contradictory simultaneity of seeing vicariously and detachably seeing through, of being possessed while possessing, is a good visual metaphor for what Melendez (2004) suggests be read "as part of an interaction, a negotiation between different pleasures and different modes of viewing not necessarily locked into a static subject/object relationship" (p.413). To be sure, the outlines of surrender and awareness in 'girl games' resist clear polarization, as surrender can become awareness and awareness might result in surrender. Not only is passive surrender to the flat, morbidly arrested spectacle (of emotion, sex, horror) on the computer screen exciting precisely because such "arrestedness" and flatness are what is being (re)presented, but in the end such surrendering nonetheless involves a distinct bodily awareness (tears, arousal, fear); one that, if momentarily, eclipses the object

and reinstalls us as embodied, historical subjects (Melendez, 2004, p.416).

On the other hand, the phantasmatic horizon of dismantling the (erotically invested) mechanism — by going backwards to create derivative works, or moving onwards to experience the machine's corporality — is the “database-ization” of pleasure. In other words, this brush of bodily (immediacy) and mechanical (mediation) at once screens against the traumatic reality of the database — the invisible (inner) electronic system underneath the visible (outer) narrative —, and interfaces it for the “pervert” player who, in truth, “longs for the very rule of the Law” (Žižek, 1998, 203). (An interesting counterpoint could be made with the Lacanian concept of ‘love beyond Law’ — as a “feminine sublimation of drives into love” (Žižek, 1995, para. 2) — and post-‘melodramatic turn’ ‘girl games’; especially considering how *otaku* are largely regarded, in Japanese society, as “feminized” males). Such an unresolved, vacillating position is, of course, a cul-de-sac; but this very ambivalence becomes the decisive turn-on in ‘girl games.’

## CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the architectonics of desire in Japanese ‘girl games’ is inseparable from the phenomenological and techno-phantasmatic experience of the computer screen as a mediating devise. Their aesthetics are the product of a unique history shaped by technological and market constraints, eventually leading to a multilayered enjoyment founded upon the encounter of bodily immediacy and mechanical mediation, surrender and awareness, manipulating and being manipulated. ‘Girl games’ can be understood as system abstractions of cinematic melodrama, drawing from its narrative “disjointedness” (shared with other ‘body genre’ like pornography and horror) to create metaphysical love stories consumed via fragmented scene designs and ‘route architecture’. This aspect relates closely to the concept of ‘reverse engineering,’ often taking place literally within the ‘girl game’ fandom where users versed in software-cracking extract the ‘games’ files to create derivative works, or design applications and tutorials that allow others to do so. But ‘reverse engineering’ is, most of all, palpable in the games’ post-cinematic, post-Cartesian apparatus, where the unrepresentable system brushes against the viewer-turned-user’s own corporality. The seemingly unitary plots, scenes and characters — which are, in truth, visible tokens of an “anonymous/statistical/collective” (Azuma, 2009, p.107) database lacking any comprehensive metanarrative — pulse rhythmically (through repetition/interruption) under our gaze and fingers, eliciting visceral reactions such as tears, arousal, or fear. Ultimately, the goal of ‘girl games’ is the expression — and erotization — of postmodern hyperflat haptics: looking at the “thoroughly planar” screen and from above it, at the great electronic beyond where “our gaze and subjectivity is not just flattened and decentered, it is databased and computerized” (Li, 2012, p.216).

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