

Oliver Hull
endless oceaning-image

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**CREATIVE
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Surface is the exterior of a thing. It is also, in general, the site of our contact with the things of this world. Our semi-permeable membrane of a skin reaches out and meets with the more or less permeable skin of another. The ocean surface is a most permeable membrane, requiring a relatively minute force in order to break through it. The surface is the originary separation, that defines not only a tactile limit, but also a visual one: it is here that the problem of images begin, for they rest on the surface, but they hide this surface with their apparent depth. They are the screen: that which both conceals and displays.

The fascination that *surface*, this artwork, holds, is related to this problem: the problem of apparent depth. We do not break the skin in this particular image of the ocean. It serves instead as a double of the surface of the image that we cannot move beyond from our position in the gallery, or in front of the screen. It is not a recording of the surface of the ocean, it is a simulation: weather reports from the surface of the sea above the Mariana trench generate and create this image. It is a 'live' image. It is, however, also a multiple of the image: The Mariana trench is the site of much imaginary speculation, but also the production of images itself. Visions come to us from David Attenborough¹ and James Cameron's image-fuelled exploration of this site – Cameron's obsession with deep sea exploration, ongoing since the fiction film *The Abyss*² filmed in 1989 and culminating in producing and starring in his own film *Deepsea Challenge 3D*³, results in a circularity of image-ness. Cameron's quest, with his cameras and submarines, is to see into the depths, to return what was hidden to the ultimate surface of the apparent; of the image.

Pierre Klossowski, in his work *Living currency*⁴, defines the simulacra as a 'willed reproduction of a non-willed phantasm'. It is an image or a form that is created to satisfy an obsession of the impulses. In *Living Currency*, this impulse is one of a sexual nature. While Cameron's penetration of the deep is not without a possible sexual aspect, I prefer to simply suggest that the phantasm, the obsessional image, generated from Cameron's impulse to explore these depths, whatever it may be, finds its fulfillment in simulacra. But, the accusation could be made, are we not here confusing a technology of simulation with a conception of it?

¹ BBC. 2017. Blue Planet II.

² Cameron, James. 1989. *The Abyss*. 20th Century Fox. Los Angeles, California.

³ Cameron, James. 2014. *Deepsea challenge 3D*. National Geographic. Washington D.C. <http://www.deepseachallenge.com/>

⁴ Klossowski, Pierre. 2017. Edited by Daniel W. Smith, Nicolae Morar and Vernon W. Cisney. Bloomsbury: London.

Here it is appropriate to bring yet another double, another simulation, into our scope; one that broaches both the technology and the conception, and opens onto this artwork. For *Surface* is designed to resemble the ocean of the fictional planet Solaris, already doubled (or tripled?) in Lem's oringary novel⁵ and then in Soderbergh⁶ and Tarkovsky's⁷ subsequent films. In Solaris, the eponymous planet, skipping the program of evolution, becomes a whole 'single cell' organism, and demonstrates intelligent calculation, with the ability to create at will from its planet-wide sea anything it requires, which mostly involves stabilising its orbit. Yet the planet, despite its apparent intelligence, remains frustratingly unable or unwilling to communicate with the scientists researching it. Eventually, as more invasive scanning of the planet is used, it seems to become aware of its human interlocutors, but instead of any indirect communication through words or abstractions, the planet, with its near omnipotence, instead makes their dreams a reality, assuming their deepest (and often darkest) desires are what they really want. So doing, the planet generates simulations of dead loves and hidden passions. Recreates them as whole, living beings, yet made of denser matter than any human.

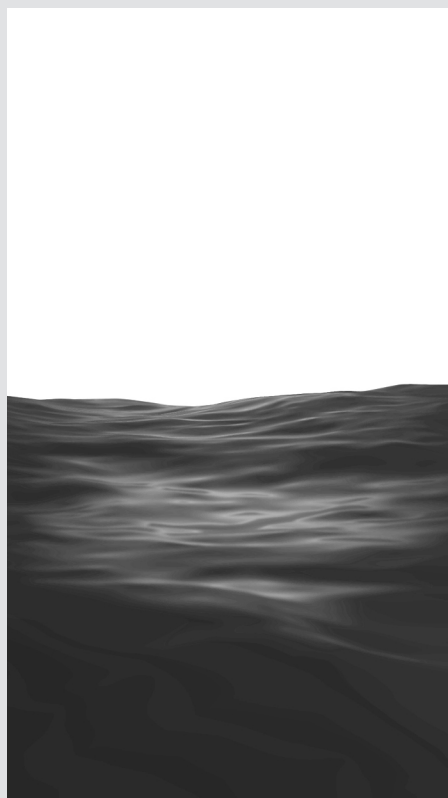
This simulation is explicitly sexual in the novel and films, but it coincides with Cameron's own search in many ways: Here these researches seek out an unknown, and find that what they were looking for was not what they ostensibly sought, but instead the image of a fulfillment: a simulacra. It is in his acting out of his images, and his imaging of his acts, that Cameron's impulses are fulfilled: it is in simulation that it reaches its culmination. The desire, that this artwork offers a parallel simulation of, is the frustrated desire to go beyond the surface, beyond the image, or perhaps to become it.

⁵ Lem, Stanislaw. 1970. *Solaris*. Berkley: New York.

⁶ Soderbergh, Steven. 2002. *Solaris*. 20th Century Fox. Los Angeles, California.

⁷ Tarkovsky, Andrei. 1972. *Solaris*. Soviet Union.





We begin to see then, what lies in the apparent depth of this shifting form of wavelets and swells in *Surface*. It is not the order of simulacra that Baudrillard describes, the hiding of a profound reality behind signs, but the very profound creation of simulacra, that emerge from this liquid chasm, full to the brim, that fulfill our obsessions.

The appearance of simulacra are common (if we follow Klossowski, they are omnipresent) but they never cease to fascinate us. There are some further instances of simulation that might help us to gather what sort of phantasmagoria to see beneath the shifting surface of the waves in *Surface*. In Andrei Tarkovsky's film, *Mirror*⁸, doubles are constantly appearing and disappearing, though usually in the image of the mirror, or in the dream-image. A particular scene that bears focusing in on shows the young Ignat, a semi-autobiographical version of Tarkovsky - and this is where we can begin to sense the simulacra entering into this film - speaking to an aged lady, who we sense is a ghost, another double, drinking tea at the table in a house his father has just departed from. She asks him to read from a notebook. Ignat does so. It is a text regarding the identity of Russia. He then hears the doorbell and goes to answer it. The person at the door claims to have the wrong house and leaves. Ignat returns to the room, but the lady has, as the ghost she clearly was, disappeared from the room. Then we approach the table backwards, looking at Ignat. The camera switches to his point of view, and approaches the table, slowly, almost languidly, in one of Tarkovsky's seemingly endless tracking shots, all this as the condensation just as one might find beneath a recently moved hot cup of tea, slowly evaporates from the place where the lady had been sitting.

⁸Tarkovsky, Andrei. 1975. *Mirror*. Soviet Union.

The second scene that is worth considering is from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*⁹, the scene at the Twinkies that occurs near the beginning of this film and that sets the tone for this incredible cinematic odyssey, which, while widely renowned, it has lost none of its extraordinary power. There are two men sitting at a table in the Twinkies, and one of them explains that he asked the other there as he has had a dream – a dream about this specific twinkies.

He asked the man there because he was afraid. He describes seeing the invited man stand beside the till, and his sudden realisation that there is a 'man out the back' who is 'doing it'. He hopes he never sees a face like this man's 'anywhere outside of a dream'. The other man gets up to pay, and stands beside the counter exactly where the dreamer had previously indicated he would. This begins the period in which this prophecy fulfills itself. The dreamer starts to sweat, realising what is happening, the music builds to the inevitable jump scare. Yet when finally the dreamer dies – of pure fear and shock – we also, despite all the warnings, and even a prediction, are also terrified.

I normally don't hold much by Stephen King as a theorist, but I trust a man who has spent his life in the realms of horror and fiction to elucidate this experience clearly. He explains three kinds of horror, and describes the last and worst one as, "terror," the experience you encounter "when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute. It's when the lights go out and you feel something behind you, you hear it, you feel its breath against your ear, but when you turn around, there's nothing there..."¹⁰ King's description

⁹ Lynch, David. 2001. *Mulholland Drive*. Universal Pictures. Los Angeles, California.

¹⁰ King, Steven. January 13 2014. Facebook post.

is an uncannily accurate description of these two scenes. Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* may again offer us some clues. This is the terror that comes from these two scenes, in the replacement of things by their double, it is the terror of simulation. Yet it is of no importance, as Lynch's filmmaking reminds us, that we already know what is going to happen, indeed it is often even more horrifying to realise the inexorable nature of this doubling, its perpetual recurrence. Yet King's description leaves us unhappy. What is the terror of the double? Why does it affect us so? This is where Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* may again offer us some clues. The book is not ostensibly terrifying, yet running through it is a sense of ineffability and unknowability. It seems Lem wrote the book as a warning against believing too strongly that we were and are able to know ourselves completely and that we are therefore qualified to judge the life of other things. It is terrifying not because you stare into some or other possibility, stare into the sun, or into a void, but rather because something vast and unknowable is staring back at you – and it knows you better than you know yourself. These texts all play this out to some degree or other. They generate the vision of desire, always eluding the grasp, but also always there. The push and the limit of our ability to see and to know. Horror gives us this experience, and it can come in many forms: from the depths, just not only of the ocean.

Graham Mathwin
May 2018

Oliver Hull's work examines the poetic and political interplay between images and natural landscapes taking the form of digital media, sculpture and installation. Hull has recently exhibited at Firstdraft (NSW), Hobiennale (TAS) Success (WA); Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (NL) The Institute of Jamais vu (UK) UDSTILLINGSSTEDET Q (DK) and Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun, Leeds (UK). Oliver lives and works in Naarm Melbourne on the unceded sovereign land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

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