

NECROPOLITICAL SCREENS: DIGITAL IMAGE, PROPRIETY, RACIALIZATION

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How are racism, colonialism, classism, and exploitation re/produced in images today? This will be my main question. What is the image's "relation to the imperial, colonial, necropolitical and racial line that cuts global neoliberal capitalism from within and heavily conditions contemporary necropolitical capitalist production" and its financialized/digital images?¹

My attempt here is to radicalize the status of images of the digital (financial) mode of production.²

Much like the novel in the 19th century—that as a cultural form allowed the spreading of colonialism despite the monstrous history of racial slavery's violence, which gave rise to supremacist orders of modernity in the Americas and the imperial capitalist world—the digital image, albeit floats, sustains the race/class/colonial/exploitative divide. This may sound as a pretty doubtful statement; given all is floating, digital, *laisse-faire*, borderless?

One of the hypotheses I share is that every period of capitalism developed its proper form of extreme re/production. Capitalism is always extreme, and we have to redefine, reformulate what is it that this extreme entails. Technology provides a direct boost to capitalism.

NFT

What if we start this analysis with something so banal and idiotic, but involving so much money, that it can stand as a symbol of the hyper-financialization we live in? The digital world produces millions of images, but now non-fungible tokens (NFT) stored on a digital ledger, called a blockchain,³ can certify the ownership of a digital image—some of which are sold at absurd prices. This notion of ownership is all what this non-interchangeability is about. A token's ID is generated on a blockchain and cannot be modified; the ownership of such a token thus amounts to buying its singular and unique ID. This unique ID is what a NFT is all about. What is bought and owned is a token (a term from casino or gaming chips), showing remarkably that the ID of an image is all that matters in the casino-like neoliberal capitalism; casino capitalism is another description of the persistent financial

roulette that recompenses speculation of global capital. The NFT ensures that the digital image's provenance can be traced, differentiating it from all subsequent copies. It is my property; it is my trophy. In some cases it comes to cost an insane amount of money to own the ID (and one form of the roulette is that often those spending most on buying NFTs are those who invested the most in the NFT infrastructure; it is thus a crypto pyramid schema); the hype is multiplied by the amount of money invested to buy it and causing the NFT's underlying digital image to spread around virally. Reproductions of these digital items (images, videos, and other types of digital files) are available for anyone to attain. Still, it has only one owner, though the more the NFT digital item is seen, the more the hype around it rises, and the next sale may result in a significant profit. What is bought or sold is a code, not the image in itself. The greater the demand, the greater the next profit.

Before the arrival of NFTs, blockchain technology's first application was a cryptocurrency, Bitcoin. What is important in the debates surrounding the NFTs, is that their rising power in the digital/immaterial world is inevitably connected to a real energy-intensive usage and, therefore, environmental devastation. Johannes Sedlmeir opposes the thesis of devastation, nevertheless he and his colleagues affirm in their analysis that "the redundancy underlying all types of blockchain technology can make blockchain-based IT solutions considerably more energy-intensive than a non-blockchain, centralized alternative."⁴

In summary, NFTs are not only devastating for the environment but make a mockery of the concept of free digital sharing. The concept of the NFT is centered on ownership and private property, tightly connected to the art market and the stock market. In short, it is all about money and profit. Money, on the other hand, represents a political neoliberal project of necro-sovereignty and pure domination. Today, money is printed in such a quantity that it really is paper, better to say just information, digital numbers, impregnated with power, violence, legislatures, and ultimately lives ousted; it is a balloon—however, when blown it is not empty but bloody.

The becoming NFT of a digital image means acquiring a digital trophy in very close proximity to all other necrocapitalist trophies. Instead of discussing what Pasi Väliäho calls "biopolitical screens,"⁵ I suggest to talk about necropolitical screens.

FROM MARXISM TO INSURGENT BLACK MARXISM

We can tackle the topic of propriety from two sides; the research by Andreas Wittel⁶ is a good start. Wittel is a Marxist. We are as well, though seeing that the most pertinent thought of thinking and doing is the Black thought (it is revolutionary and invincible in the demands to rethink all the notions through an optic of the Black body, history, and futurity)—we are gravitating toward an Insurgent Black Marxism. In general, the codified academic white world is stuck today. Black and POC people are here to be drained, to be sucked from everything they know. In the past, colonialism and racial slavery wanted their flesh and labor. Today, the white neoliberal regime of necro-power wants not only their flesh but also their soul.

In a long analysis, Wittel focuses not only on labor, value, and resistance, but also on property. He refers to Ronald V. Bittig's work from the 1990s, in which the latter identified changes regarding media technology. To put it short. Before the advance of digital technology, no idea of sharing and creative commons existed, and mass media were all in the service of capital. However, Wittel says that despite the idea of the common and sharing, and against our expectation, digital technology did not produce better conditions. The expectations were high but the end is not promising.

Wittel explains, relying on Bittig, that the reproducibility of the digital product is limitless at a very low cost. It is also widely distributed, and it is difficult to prevent its use.

In fact, most intellectual property is non-rival, meaning they can be used by one person without preventing other people from using the same goods. Digital objects, however, are not only non-rival; they are also abundant by nature. Therefore, all attempts to rescue the idea of copyright via digital rights are absurd in the sense that they create artificial scarcity. They turn objects that are abundant into legally scarce goods. To put it ironically: In the digital age only the creation of artificial scarcity can feed capitalist accumulation.⁷

And here is what happened with NFTs: they produced a bypass or another type of scarcity by redefining the images only through their ownership “uniqueness.” It is a sort of an upgrade of the Occidental modernist obsession with the signature of the artwork, that in the digital times is replaced by the ownership. This is what we see with the NFTs today; they are made into scarce objects by

centering only on the ID that is proprietary, and not the artist's signature. The content does not have any meaning. It is the form that matters—not of the (art)work but the form of private property that has always been a fetish in capitalism: what has always been at stake is a signature, but this time the signature of ownership takes center stage.

Next come the three features of property that are useful for the present analysis. First, Wittel states that what “we can learn from Marx is that property is not a natural right. It is a historic product. Property relations are subject to specific historic conditions.”⁸ This is the first point exposed by Wittel which should come as no surprise given that capital's tendency, in the end, is to relate to itself only; it is a psychotic machine that has no relation to anything other than itself.

Second, as Wittel explains,

Marx's perspective on property is innovative and very distinct from liberal political theorists, as he does not focus on the relationship between a person and an object. Instead Marx conceptualizes property as a relation that one person establishes to other people with respect to commodities. So, fundamentally, property relations are an expression of social relations. In capitalism property is based on the antagonism between capital and wage-labor. It is based on the accumulation of profit on the side of those who own the means of production. [...] As such capitalist private property is not so much about the ownership of things, but about the right to exclude others from using them. Dismantling the widespread myth that private property is justly earned by those who are intelligent and willing to work hard while the rest are 'lazy rascals', Marx comes up with an alternative explanation on the origin of property: “Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in defence of property [...] In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the greater part.”⁹

Again, if we compare this to NFTs, the ownership of the ID allows the owner to claim his trophy, and excludes all the others from having it. It is about naked property, and the whole idea of contemporary art in the Occident is in the last instance about property. Moreover, is not the state of reasoning of the NFTs' owners, insipidly childish?

Third, Wittel exposes that Marx was differentiating between personal and private property. But is this differentiation sustainable? We know that the regime of property, as elaborated by Marx, is historically changing. Property emerged with slave trade as Cheryl I. Harris has argued;¹⁰ the system of chattel slavery was premised upon the appropriation of indigenous land, black slaves as objects of property. Race and property are connected in order to establish and maintain racial and economic subordination.¹¹ Though looking historically precise, these connections are becoming more abstracted. It is an abstraction of this relationship that is maintained until these very days. It is more than an interaction between race and property. Abstraction is fundamental, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has shown,¹² and is coming as a winner together with financialization. Personal propriety in chattel slavery lived from the extraction of life from the black body, men and women. Property laws protected the regimes of colonial ownership over black bodies. In fact, “racial subjects and modern property laws are produced through one another in the colonial context.”¹³

We see that personal property is private property, it is not differentiated from it and therefore cannot be set apart as a benign state of property, as in Wittel’s analysis, because within the racial regime of chattel slavery, the slave was attached directly to the slave master, and was refused a proper life, personality, and humanity to the extent that proves that personal property of the slave is a blood-sucking private property, where the blood is literally sucked by the white master from other human beings to live and make profit.

Let us continue with Cheryl I. Harris’ bold statement in the middle of the 2020:

It is a commonplace that the property system in the United States is intimately tied to race. Beginning with Eric Williams’ 1944 classic, *Capitalism and Slavery*, generations of historians have marshaled evidence and retold the story that built the foundations of modern society through slavery. While the framework of settler colonialism is of more recent vintage, the insight that colonialism is a system of racialized domination and economic exploitation is an idea that goes back at least as far as Du Bois. Yet, these fundamental truths resist remembering. The relationship between present forms of property and this history often is presented as unfortunate but too remote in time to factor in any significant way into the

present. This can be attributed to the perennial question of the contemporary relevance of historical events at one level. Still, temporal remoteness may not be the only reason that the racial foundations of property remain so persistently obscure.¹⁴

Property is key, and with it, we see a direct relation to class and race and gender. These lines are constitutive.

Historically, Harris says, “Black bodies were cast as living currency around which were built valuation systems, insurance, financial products, banking institutions, and other forms of financialization central to the development of racial capitalism.”¹⁵ As Harris shows, the Black bodies as living currency were abstracted and adorned with a raceless facade all the time.¹⁶ The art of work is continuously adorned not with proprietary relations but with inventiveness, creativity. That the NFTs have nothing to do with anything other than the financialization of capital is a myth that has a lot to do precisely with the institution of property, which is central to capitalism and has its foundation in racial slavery and colonialism. It is, as stated by Harris, based on the “intersecting systems of domination and extraction.”¹⁷ But what is more, as Harris quotes Toni Morrison’s statement from 2016, “in America today, post-civil-rights legislation, white people’s conviction of their natural superiority is being lost. Rapidly lost. There are ‘people of color’ everywhere, threatening to erase this long-understood definition of America. [...] The threat is frightening.”¹⁸

Harris is exact that the racial element should be connected to class as well. “Poor and working-class whites suffer greatly in all areas; the gap between them and wealthier whites is profound and, by all metrics, growing.”¹⁹ Therefore, on the other side, you have an army of those like artists on the verge of existence, jobless.

In the film *Get Out!* (2017) Jordan Peele²⁰ produces a “sunken space” as a metaphor for both the literal history of slavery as well as for cultural appropriation and the use of social niceties to enforce social hierarchies. The film visualizes this sunken space as a free fall in which, under the hypnosis of the white predator, the black victim’s consciousness is separated from the control of a proper body.

Such sunken space produces a sunken image; the NFT is a sunken image of contemporary art in the sunken space of the financial necrocapitalism, and they seem to work so well together.

All these energy nodes that connect images come short when we think of these relations.

To sum up, all the images, from operative to moving and non-human generated images, are coming to a short end without the view of their other side, the racialized images and the trophy images.

THE EMBLEMATIC IMAGE OF THE DIGITAL NECROCAPITALIST MODE OF PRODUCTION

What is then the emblematic image of the digital necrocapitalist mode of production? It is not a cinematic image, nor a virtual image, nor a militant image, not even a commodity image, less an NFT. I argue that the emblematic image of the time we live in is the trophy image.²¹ It implies that the historical formats of global capitalism ground their regime of affect, vision, and perception not in the space-time paradigm but in the violent and direct modes of governmentality and dispossession. The outcome is the following display: *the trophy-image—without time—erased space—racialized form.*²²

In conceptualizing the trophy image, I found its main elaboration in Suwendrini Perera's text "Dead Exposures: Trophy Bodies and Violent Visibilities of the Nonhuman,"²³ where she brilliantly depicts the status of the non-human, of racialization, and of freedom. To articulate the trophy image Perera employs a concept of a trophy body. The trophy is produced via digital devices (phones and computers) of the digital financial capitalist mode of production. The trophy image is an outcome of colonialism and presently involves coloniality and racialization processes, implying that the colonial/racial divide is at the center of the Western biopolitical machine that has thus been transformed into a necropolitical one.

The trophy images as selfies circulated worldwide in 2004, depicting the trophy bodies of Abu Ghraib and their "symbolic, ideological and affective refractions across other spaces, sites, temporalities."²⁴ During the war in Iraq, which began in March 2003, personnel of the United States Army and the Central Intelligence Agency committed a number of human rights violations (including physical and sexual abuse, torture, rape, sodomy, and murder) against detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These abuses were revealed in reports published in late 2003 by Amnesty International and the Associated Press.

Let's look into details, and I repeat, *the trophy-image—without time—erased space—racialized form.* The absence of time depicts a condition of immobilization rather than an erasure

of time. According to Perera, trophy bodies are characterized by their condition of being seized, caught, captured, affixed, and immobilized within the violent regimes of visibility and power. As they are crafted within an order of bodies “as political flesh and affect,”²⁵ trophy bodies are the product of complex economies (visual, discursive, aesthetic, and scientific) that situate them as a specific genre among an exemplary brand of the nonhuman.²⁶

Further, space is not a zero, as it was in the 1990s, nor is it subtracted, as Alain Badiou would say. On the contrary, it is quite literally an erased space that mirrors necrocapitalism’s persistent erasure of history and people. Again, this is not the end of history but rather its performative, administrative procedure of erasure. The form is racialized, which means that it is no longer constituted as solely temporal or spatial, but that (art, life, the social, aesthetic, etc.) forms are re/produced through continuous regimes and conditions of racialization in relation to propriety, racial slavery, and colonialism. Thus, we may ask what about the processes of subjectivation that are an outcome of the (trophy/racializing) image’s order.²⁷

The answer is the wretched (of the world), with a direct reference to Fanon.²⁸ The scheme can therefore be supplemented as follows: *the trophy-image—without time—erased space—racialized form—the wretched (the superfluous and the disposable)*.²⁹

Within violent processes of dehumanization, we see figures of “disidentification” rather than “relations of resemblance” to the human. In the last instance, the result of the processes of racialization is a flesh having the status of a political flesh—a flesh that does not establish a limit but rather is the limit of any capitalist neoliberal politics.³⁰

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- 1 Marina Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture: Image, Racialization, History*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Aneta Stojnić and Miško Šuvaković (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13.
- 2 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production."
- 3 A blockchain is a digital, public ledger that records online transactions in a way that makes it difficult if not impossible to change, hack, or cheat the system. "A blockchain is essentially a digital ledger of transactions that is duplicated and distributed across the entire network of computer systems on the *blockchain*." "What is Blockchain?" Euromoney Learning, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.euromoney.com/learning/blockchain-explained/what-is-blockchain>.
- 4 Johannes Sedlmeir, Hans Ulrich Buhl, Gilbert Fridgen, and Robert Keller, "The Energy Consumption of Blockchain Technology: Beyond Myth," *Bus Inf Syst Eng* 62, no. 6 (2020): 600, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12599-020-00656-x>.
- 5 Pasi Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (London: MIT Press, 2014).
- 6 Andreas Wittel, "Digital Marx: Toward a Political Economy of Distributed Media," *tripleC* 10, no. 2 (2012): 313–333.
- 7 Wittel, "Digital Marx," 328.
- 8 Wittel, "Digital Marx," 328.
- 9 Wittel, "Digital Marx," 329.
- 10 Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.
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- 12 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017), 225–240.
- 13 Brenna Bhandar, "Introduction: Property, Law, and Race in the Colony," in *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.
- 14 Cheryl I. Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," *Harvard Law Review Forum* 134, no. 1 (2020): 8, available at <https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/134-Harv.-L.-Rev.-F.-1-2.pdf>.
- 15 Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," 1n1.
- 16 Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," 1–2.
- 17 Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," 2.
- 18 Toni Morrison quoted in Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," 5. See as well Toni Morrison, "Making America White Again." *The New Yorker*, November 21, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/making-america-white-again>.
- 19 Harris, "Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*," 6.
- 20 Jordan Peele, dir., *Get Out!* (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2017).
- 21 I first presented this thesis at an international conference in 2015; see Marina Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies, and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," lecture at the international conference "Image, Racialization, History," September 25, 2015, Belgrade, Serbia, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDM_Li7Rcak. See also Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production."
- 22 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," 25.
- 23 Suvendrini Perera, "Dead Exposures: Trophy Bodies and Violent Visibilities of the Nonhuman," *borderlands* 13, no. 1 (2014): 1–26.
- 24 Perera, "Dead Exposures," 1.
- 25 Allen Feldman quoted in Perera, "Dead Exposures," 2.
- 26 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," 26.
- 27 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," 26.
- 28 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004). Originally published as *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961).
- 29 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," 26.
- 30 Gržinić, "Racialized Bodies and the Digital (Financial) Mode of Production," 26.