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From the Confessional Booth to Digital Enclosures: Absolution as Cultural Technique

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Abstract

This article examines the confessional booth as an architected space that, by serving as a geo-epistemological enclosure, prefigures digital forms of data capture and production. In conversation with critical scholarship about 'confessional culture,' it analyzes how confessionals and digital enclosures embody different historical iterations of a cultural technique that promises *absolution* – understood as a cleansing process of transparent exposure. It argues that, with digital enclosures, the renunciative self-mortification that lies at the heart of classic Christian confession is reprogrammed into what Byung-Chul Han calls a 'pornographic self-presentation.' The self-death dealt by the confessional thus becomes an apparently voluntary self-exploitation for the social media subject. In both cases, however, absolution governs via rituals of cathartic transparency, submitting interiority to processes of legible exteriorization and articulating the subject via an exhibitive logic that blurs the boundaries between communicative freedom and compulsory self-exposure.

Keywords

confessional, data capture, digital enclosure, digital exposure, self-exposure, transparency

> The bright lights of the city penetrated the translucent walls of the immense glass building and dimly revealed its internal structure. Wang thought that if the architect had intended to express a feeling about the universe, the design was a success: The more transparent something was, the more mysterious it seemed.
>
> – Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*

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'*The Dark Box*.' That's how Cornwell (2014), the author of several scandalous pop histories of the Roman Catholic Church, refers to the confessional booth. While Cornwell's history focuses on how this 'dark box' provides an illegible space in which priests can exploit and abuse their penitents, the book's title also subtly hints at the confessional's place within a cultural technique of truth production – one that specializes in the isolation of an exclusive space in which data can be discovered and purified. In its darkness and isolation, the booth operates as a sensory deprivation chamber that brings the noetic faculties to life. As a box, it cordons off a space of observation and analysis – an enclosure which reveals inner truths about the penitent that would otherwise remain hidden (and that, by implication, remain inaccessible to all those excluded from that space and its rituals). An elegant paradox thus lies at the root of the confessional booth as a cultural technique: the dark box leads to enlightened transcendence.

Cultural criticism is increasingly fond of juxtaposing the present technological milieu with that of medieval Europe. Joel Kotkin, who is representative of this trend, writes, 'The medieval church may have exercised enormous sway over what people believed to be true and proper, but it had nothing like today's tools for monitoring private actions and thoughts' (Kotkin, 2020: 38). While it is undeniably true that the Latin Church of the Middle Ages did not enjoy the benefits of networked digital information technology, describing the modern infosphere as a 'high-tech middle age' (Sakaiya, 1985) or 'digital feudalism' (Koenig, 2018) obscures media-technical affordances that may traverse these remote eras. From its medieval origins, the confessional booth prefigured contemporary forms of what Andrejevic (2007) calls 'digital enclosure' by serving as a geo-epistemological enclosure that anticipates digital data capture and production. This enclosure not only represents a digitizing impulse within pre-digital methods of information capture; it also clarifies a key feature of digitality's impulse toward the discovery, translation, and extraction of data. Both forms of enclosure experiment with human subjectivity by creating enclosures that stimulate metasensory data discovery and production (see Packer, 2013: 298).

While many critical scholars have analyzed various aspects of our 'confessional culture' (e.g. Debrabander, 2020; Taylor, 2009; Tell, 2012), typically by drawing on Foucault's later writings on the technologies of the self (Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012; Esmonde and Jette, 2020; Foucault, 1988; Lewis, 2018), that work stops short of analyzing the concrete epistemology of confessional space and its current analogues (see Pridmore and Wang, 2018). In conversation with these scholars, as well as with others writing about surveillance technology and algorithmic governance (e.g. Harcourt, 2015; Noble, 2018), we analyze how confessionals and digital enclosures embody different historical iterations of a cultural technique that promises *absolution* – that is, a cleansing process of transparent exposure. This cultural technique approaches concealed emotional, psychological, or spiritual states as a standing-reserve of pre-processed information, the successful mining of which requires constant experiments in subject mobilization and data capture. Yet with digital enclosures the renunciative self-mortification that lies at the heart of classic Christian confession (see Foucault 2000: 310–11) is reprogrammed into what Han (2021: 29) calls a 'pornographic self-presentation.' The self-death dealt by the dark box thus becomes an apparently voluntary self-exploitation for the social media subject, whose constant enclosure engenders experiments in entrepreneurial transparency. In both cases, however, absolution governs via rituals of cathartic transparency,

submitting interiority to processes of legible exteriorization and articulating the subject via an exhibitive logic that blurs the boundaries between communicative freedom and compulsory self-exposure.

In the coming pages, we tackle this problem by first reviewing the political evolution of the medieval and early modern confessional; next we examine the importance of sensorial experiments to the discovery and communication of penitential data; then we describe the politics of transparency inherent in absolution before reflecting, in conclusion, on the state of contemporary self-purification among the spreading enclosures of digital technology.

Enclosing Confession

In confession, as Catholics are taught, the penitent begins by telling the priest how many weeks, months, or even years have elapsed since the last confession. He or she confesses all mortal sins and the number of times each was committed since the last confession, then says the Act of Contrition, a prayer for the repentance of those sins. The priest may ask some clarifying questions as to the nature of the confessed sins and may also offer spiritual counsel. The penitent is obliged to feel genuine remorse for having offended God and to declare 'to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.' Absolution is not administered unless the confession is 'humble, complete and accompanied by firm purpose of amendment' (Pope John Paul II, 1996). If it is possible for the penitent to make reparation to the people he or she has wronged, then it is important to do so. The priest then assigns a penance and says the words of absolution, which relieve the penitent of the guilt for the sins he or she has confessed.[1] For approximately two centuries, this processual interaction took place within the confessional box, an iconic booth-like piece of church furniture that contains a dividing panel. This panel physically separates the penitent, who kneels on a kneeling bench in the dark, from the confessor, who sits in the light. Set in the panel is a grille, in some instances adorned with a curtain, which allows for verbal communication and, theoretically, obscures the faces of penitent and confessor from one another.

Although many devout Catholics born before 1970 were accustomed to entering the box frequently, private confession to a priest (auricular confession) evolved only gradually and late in the first millennium, in remote monasteries and convents that had survived the barbarian invasions and the breakdown of civil society in the Latin West (Cornwell, 2014: xxiv). It was not until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the decree of Pope Innocent III that, on pain of excommunication, all Western Christians were expected to confess their sins to a priest and to receive the Eucharist at least once a year (Lateran IV, 1990: 245). In the legislation of Lateran IV, argues Chloë Taylor, 'the power of absolution is firmly attributed to the priest and not primarily to the contrition in an individual's soul and the direct intervention of God' (Taylor, 2009: 55). Although examination of conscience, or interior states of contrition, remained an essential feature of the devout soul's journey to God, regular confession to a priest was rendered necessary for the forgiveness of sin and, if done properly, sufficient to that end. As Robert Bernasconi comments, 'Priests who had formerly said 'May God forgive you' now said 'I absolve you'' (Bernasconi, 1988: 86). Centuries later, and in response to doctrinal

challenges by the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545–63) reaffirmed the confession of all mortal sins 'to the priest alone' and defended the existing praxis of requiring a full enumeration of all mortal and venial sins, which was encouraged by confessors through their questioning of the penitent (Denzinger, 2012: 1706ff.).

It was in this context that the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Charles Borromeo, (probably) invented and commissioned the first wooden confessional booths.[2] With this device, Church authorities 'clearly intended to regulate the physical execution of the confession' (de Boer, 2001: 91). However, the primary significance of the design was not to alter the traditional ritual but to reinforce the formal conduct of confession to show the confessor in his guise as judge, with the penitent kneeling before him in an attitude of contrition and humility. Eye contact between the confessor and the penitent was to be avoided, hence the grille and curtain that adorned the panel dividing the confessor and penitent. Although the confessor and penitent communicated at close quarters, they were not meant to see one another, though, to be sure, an attentive confessor would have known who was entering the confessional next or recognized the penitent's voice.

Sensory Deprivation in the Dark Box

One reason for avoiding eye contact, of course, is that the confessional is supposed to blind the penitent. In this sense, the confessional functions as a kind of sensory deprivation chamber. The penitent's blindness disrupts the visual space of the confessional, creating the kind of compensatory sensory environment that makes noetic searching possible. Because the confessional is stripped of conventional visuality, the blind penitent falls into the all-encompassing space of the acoustic. The domineering, unidirectional gaze of the visual is replaced by acoustic space, which, as Marshall McLuhan points out, 'has no center, and no margins, since we hear from all directions simultaneously' (McLuhan, 1967: 17; see also Cavell, 2002). The confessional, therefore, does not exactly help the penitent 'look for' sin as much as it displaces predominant human sensory arrangements. Setting aside, for the moment, how the visual geography of this enclosure positions the confessor vis-à-vis the penitent, its foreclosure of visual searching forces the penitent to apprehend sin from all sides and 'from the margins,' enlivening the penitent's quest for fuller noetic disclosure.

That sensorial arrangement is, at the same time, consistent with the modulation of confessional experience into a positivized state that allows for measurement and quantification. By diminishing not only the role of visuality but also that of nonverbal communication in general, the booth articulates a bias for a digital rather than an analogical mode of communication – for codes that can be broken down into discrete units and therefore reduced to a codebook or rulebook, in contrast to codes whose meaning is highly dependent on context. Sins are to be inventoried, sorted according to type (mortal or venial), and then verbally itemized to the priest in exchange for quantified compensation (penance). Compensation typically takes the form of a certain number of prayers, fasting, the giving of alms, a way of the Cross, or a rosary, each of which entails a quantifiable procedure and can be determined by amount. Given the lack of conventional visuality, the digital coding of noetic monitoring and disclosure is essential to the act of contrition, as is the allocation of penance. Reconciliation can thus be said to consist in a verbal-quantifiable, biunivocal,

input-output procedure (i.e. a certain number of a certain type of discretely confessed sins is equivalent to and yields a certain number of a certain type of discretely assigned penalties). Counting, however, is different from nonlogical modes of recounting such as comparison, similarity, or direct connection to what is represented. As Han succinctly puts it: 'Numbers do not *recount* anything about the self' (Han, 2017: 60). Recounting one's subjective intentions or motives, giving an account of one's sins, while allowed, perhaps even encouraged by certain confessors, is technically dispensable to the confessional process. That superfluity is echoed by the partitioned acoustic enclosure, which facilitates the translation of the noetically searching self into quantifiable data.

Historians of ideas have theorized the epistemological and symbolic significance of the confessional booth as both a symptom and inductor of a shift in notions of subjectivity and self-consciousness (see Bossy, 1975: 21–38, 1985: 45–50, 127ff.). Phillip Cary, for instance, suggests that Roman Catholic confession following Lateran IV produced an interiority which slowly but surely supplanted Augustine's conception of the inner self as a vast palace courtyard with Locke's account of the self as a private, dark room, an 'empty cabinet' (Cary, 2000: 5, 122–4). According to Meyers (1996), 'the entire history of penance until the late twentieth century has been a matter of 'moving indoors,'' of the increased privatization of confession (p. 7). Following Bernasconi, it could be argued that the advent of the booth prompted or redoubled this move indoors. For when, in the 16th century, the confessional booth became mandatory for hearing confession, the transition towards an interior space of the soul found its physical analog in the penitent's location inside a wooden cubicle:

> [The booth's introduction] reflected a transformation in the understanding of confession which was itself symptomatic of a transformation in human self-understanding. Sin was becoming less a matter of submission to God's law and more a question of the sinner's relation to his or her own conscience, albeit a conscience informed by that law. The confessional box corresponds at an architectural level to that change and allowed penitent and priest to reenact conscience's own internal dialogue with itself. (Bernasconi, 1988: 78)

Isolation in the dark prompts a heightened sense of interiority, which encourages an image of the soul as an essentially disembodied interior. In the small, architected space, penitents turn inward and introspect, scrupulously examining their consciences – those innermost thoughts known only to themselves and God – before sharing secrets and recollected motivations with a confessor. Interiority, in other words, was not destined to be left to the autonomous introspection of individual penitents but was figured by the construction of a booth mirroring the liberal model of the soul. Implicit in this spatialization of the soul is a high-resolution monitoring of psychic states, which, under the right conditions of mediation, can achieve epistemo-spiritual transparency. Confinement, lighting, and hierarchical division 'extend' the noetic eye while 'amputating' or diminishing the penitent's bodily senses. Indeed, from the 16th century onwards, absolution of sins requires relative enclosure within architected spaces at once small and dark. With the introduction of the box, self-disclosure comes to entail, as a condition of possibility, an organization of space that allows penitents to discover their subjective intentions and, subsequently, to process (e.g. to enumerate, sort) and articulate the object of their search.

The discovery, capture, and elimination of sin, however, is not only an epistemological technique – not only a matter of contracting subjectivity – but also a political process, one that operates what Bernhard Siegert refers to as the primordial, 'nomological' function of the door. As a container vessel for the sacrament of reconciliation, it sets off a space from an outside in order to establish a juridical-religious order (Siegert, 2012). Like doors and thresholds, the confessional processes the guiding difference of architecture, that between inside and outside, tying it to the distinction between sin and absolution and thereby reconfiguring an enunciative-penitential space in ways that structure not only asymmetries of knowledge (between inside and outside) but also asymmetrical relations of control over access to reconciliation. To step into the confessional booth thus means 'to subject oneself to the law of a symbolic order, a law that is established by means of the distinction of inside and outside' but also by a partition that assigns parts or roles to appropriate places (Siegert, 2012: 10).

In facilitating control over resources and structuring the terms of access, the confessional sacrifices the insistence on absolute contrition to the goal of augmenting the power of priests. In the Roman Catholic Church, all sacraments are regarded as instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, but confession differs from the other sacraments in two interrelated respects. First, it is a purgation in that, like an appendectomy, 'it surgically extracts toxic material, rather than elevating or consecrating a material thing' (Murphy, 2015: 624). In the operating theater of the confessional, the priest surgically probes in order to cut out and destroy the toxic material of sin, thereby removing the chain of the penitent to his or her sin. Second, as Adrienne von Speyr suggests, in confession the priest has to assess and decide whether to forgive the sins of the penitent. The apostles and their descendants, she writes, were required 'to serve . . . as persons having insight of their own. Their understanding and will were used as tools for the Spirit's action and in union with him' (von Speyr, 1985: 63–4). There is something 'jurisdictional' or juridical about the act of absolving sins that is not present in any of the other six sacraments.[3] Once posited, noetic acumen and interest in psychic states were honed through the sorts of 'casuistic' soul-searching required by canon law. Within those procedural strictures, Tentler (1977) relates, confessions had to be 'complete' to have any value, 'aggravating circumstances' needed to be accounted for, and 'motives are also important' (pp. 109, 119). In coordination with ecclesiastical law, the confessional booth traces a relationship between what Andrejevic (2007) describes as 'a material, spatial process' and a 'metaphorical process of information enclosure,' a networked-bureaucratic structure that overlays the confessional space, setting its terms of use and access, posing restrictive and exclusive disjunctions, and legitimating the view of priestly absolution as a judicial act (p. 304). There is, of course, another 'network' effect at play: priests who knew their penitents and remembered their previous confession could also identify other persons involved in the admissions of sin; these persons could then be better probed during their own confessions, enabling a more comprehensive monitoring of sinners (Tentler, 1977: 82ff.).

Data Absolution

According to Boyle (2003), since the turn of the 21st century we have witnessed a 'second enclosure' movement – one which seeks to monitor and control data rather than

traditional physical resources like land and commodities. Whereas Karl Marx lamented capital's capture and 'enclosure' of public land, critical scholars of digital technology have turned their attention to how digital corporations are perfecting the art of enclosing – and hence capturing, analyzing, storing, and selling – user data. In this kind of 'digital enclosure,' the production of physical space is largely infrastructural: for Andrejevic, 'The physical process of enclosure – the creation of ubiquitous, always-on networked spaces – becomes a precondition for the rapid expansion of information enclosure. Collecting increasingly fine-grained information about consumers, viewers, and citizens requires building interactive networks that make the collection process automatic and cost efficient' (Andrejevic, 2007: 307–8). The distribution of portable sensors, especially in the form of smart phones (but which increasingly include numerous appliances and objects that were previously 'dumb'), has demanded a conceptual revision of the geography of enclosure. Now, regardless of whether we are sitting in our bedrooms or taking a hike, digital sensors are monitoring, enclosing, and datafying our activities. This serves the purpose, ultimately, of constantly reimagining every person, interaction, and movement as a convergence of circumstances and motivations that can be decoded via increasingly granular surveillance. And because 'the sensor wants to sense everything,' there is no practical end to the ways in which objects and circumstances can be observed, broken down, and analyzed vis-à-vis ostensibly related phenomena (Reeves, 2019). The mobile, always-on sensor, therefore, gives the prospect of constant discovery – it strives to reveal the mysteries of biological, sociological, and environmental phenomena by monitoring human subjects as they make thousands of micro-decisions each day (see Andrejevic, 2015; Hong, 2020).

This approach bypasses human subjectivity by automating data capture, allowing the human mystery to disclose its secrets via a monitored sequence of tasks, movements, communications, and reactions. The confessional's sedentary method of meta-subjective data capture, therefore, gives way to a sensor-driven strategy that capitalizes on mobility to lay its subject bare. Despite their different spatial logics, however, these methods both serve as *enclosures of absolution*, in that they enfold three complementary impulses: first, they strive to un-conceal hidden domains of reality and translate them into data; second, they facilitate the pure communication of those data (much of which are insensible to the unaugmented human subject); and third, in doing so these enclosures offer absolution: they lay the subject bare in a cleansing process of transparent exposure. This process depends on an ethic of transparency which is rooted in the imperative that everything – every movement, state, propensity, affect, etc. – must lie open, ready, and available for capture and classification (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Hall, 2015; Lake, 2017; Pasquale, 2015; Rouvroy, 2013; Thatcher et al., 2016; Zuboff, 2015). That ethic entails both the systematic discovery of subjective inner space – interiority – and the compulsion to self-expose and self-illuminate. Such a conjunction is necessary for transforming the singularities of existence into positivized things (e.g. a psychographic consumer profile) or factual states (e.g. sin), which can be quantified, analyzed, and steered. To be sure, the confessional apparatus and digital spaces of enclosure encourage a mapping of the previously unknown interior, but the ethic of transparency ultimately exploits that interiority with a view to its utter exteriorization, to de-interiorizing that which would otherwise withdraw or conceal itself. Data-collecting software surrounds users like a

giant mirrored glass pavilion (Han 2021: 22; Harcourt, 2015: 108) or 'one-way mirror' (Pasquale, 2015: 9), promising transparency in personal and consumer interactions while leaving them open to a thorough penetration by state and corporate institutions. As an enclosure protocol, transparency enjoins sensors and priests, penitents and digital inhabitants, to evert inwardness and transform it into information. It strives to drag everything hidden and secret out into the open – even to have it manifest in trackable behavior – where it can be subordinated to a calculable and controllable process of illumination.

However, that proceduralization of transparency – the way in which interiority is discovered, exteriorized, and processed as usable information – is not just an end in itself but constitutes a method of behavioral regulation. As both ethic and *dispositif*, transparency does not instantiate repressive power, nor does it discipline the subject through coercion or prohibition; rather, it is a system-preserving power that, as Han writes of the neoliberal regime, assumes 'a smart, friendly form,' one that activates, motivates, and optimizes rather than inhibiting or repressing (Han, 2021: 17).[4] Yet ultimately, even within 'friendly' enclosures of absolution, users are *compelled* to communicate according to relevant protocols. As we have already outlined, the structured time/space of Roman Catholic confession has evolved as the Church has reimagined how the state of the soul relates to penitents' ability to recall and process sin. This evolution has resulted in a legal restructuring of confessional protocols – of when, where, and how frequently to confess. To be sure, confessants willingly submit to this system of compulsory communication; practicing Catholics voluntarily choose to enter the confessional space, thereby consenting to adhere to the legally prescribed strictures and performative norms of absolution. But that should not detract from the fact that legal and social regulations are thus primed to place penitents into that space of absolution, where confession becomes compulsory.

Still, the choice to seek reconciliation – to enter into a discrete confessional space/time and defer a subjectivizing process to the discretionary power of a priest – clarifies the so-called 'voluntary' nature of digital enclosures and their mechanisms of absolution. While theorists such as Terranova (2013), Citton (2017: 64–6), and Han (2021: 15–20) astutely recognize the relationship between self-exploitation and social media, there seems little reason to emphasize the 'voluntary' nature of these contemporary practices of self-exposure and self-exploitation. As Gandini (2015a, 2015b) highlights in his work on self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy, for many people online self-exposure is a desperate, aspirational response to the increasing precarity of neoliberalism's so-called gig economy (see also Scolere, 2019). Beyond any 'felt freedom' that may enchant or enthrall some social media users, knowledge workers on the periphery of prosperous societies self-disclose to promote their personal brands in a bid to better their chances of securing gainful employment within a material system that extracts economic value from low-cost or free labor in computer-mediated networks.

Even for those who do not post to brand themselves for the possibility of getting a living-wage job, the noncompulsory status of online exposure of the self remains questionable. Bernard Harcourt, for example, argues that our eager embrace of digital communication technologies – from Google to Instagram to webcam videos – reveals the emergence of an *expository society* which shapes our subjectivity regardless of whether we explicitly decide to immerse ourselves in the digital world or enter social media relations. Expository power, he argues, produces meaning and narrativizes meaning-making

through the application of a 'doppelgänger logic' (Harcourt, 2015: 147), which continuously and automatically creates digital surrogates that follow us around like data-based doubles, carrying traces of our past and predicting our futures. There is, however, a parallel logic at work in the case of individuals who appear to desire social recognition and attention in the form of 'likes,' 'retweets,' 'swipes,' 'favorites,' and 'shares' on social media. Such persons must first be persuaded and seduced to express themselves virtually through mechanisms that, in turn, deliver them as digital surrogates made up of browser and purchase histories, social media posts, Fitbit records, and other digital traces. Unlike a concrete prison, which disciplines subjects by inculcating a threat of menacing visibility, digital technologies reward individuals for exhibiting their intimate lives online and submitting their personal space to both human and algorithmic others. And yet, like incarcerated criminals who become assimilated into prison culture, people tend to adapt to and accept this condition. Han's 'felt freedom' is thus a result of the fact that digital technology exercises power, first, by fashioning the kinds of subjects who feel compelled to self-expose and whose resulting compulsion is at once misidentified as freedom and experienced as a source of pleasure.

Hence, while there is certainly conceptual power in the classic distinction between (1) prohibitive, disciplinary power and (2) productive power aimed at 'voluntary,' liberal subject formation (see Foucault, 2007), the expository nature of the enclosure demonstrates how our current methods of absolution are only voluntary in the most abstract and legalistic sense.[5] Just as the juridical rhythm of church life aimed at getting penitents into the confessional as a space of compulsory self-exposure, the temporal and spatial disruptions of the digital enclosure are creating a modulating time/space of self-exposure – one in which transparency operates as currency and the compulsion to self-expose is a basic condition of social and economic life. The quest for absolution thus takes on a centrifugal valence, as cultural trends of self-exploration and self-exposure open up new spatiotemporal realms of voluntary compulsion – seeing, hearing, banking, bleeding, eating, breathing, secreting, sleeping, bathing. New revelations lead to new voluntary compulsions, and hence to iterations of the self that are constantly updated according to slowly obsolescing disclosures of inhibition and freedom. As has been argued in much of the literature on media obsolescence and technological change, 'new' media matter most when they become invisible, as a habitual part of everyday life (Acland, 2007; Striphas, 2009). That habit-formation, argues Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, is increasingly understood as addiction, which leads to the continuing need for new media to trigger change – to be 'updated to remain the same,' as the book's title goes. Smartphones and the confessional alike obviate the need for torture chambers and other technologies of enforced self-transparency because, as Chun (2016) proposes (with perhaps an excess of mathematical assuredness), 'Habit + Crisis = Update' (p. 63). Our certainties are endlessly challenged by digital enclosures, which in turn makes change inherent to their functioning.

Transparency and Self-Exposure

While Han argues that this state of affairs indicates a 'transparency society,' it is also indicative of a purity society. The moral purity sought in the confessional is mirrored by the communicative purity churned out by the digital compulsion to express oneself. Yet

the purity offered by the confessional, on the one hand, and by the digital enclosure, on the other, are rooted in different ontologies of transparency. According to Foucault, Christian confession is ultimately aimed at mortification: 'a renunciation of this world and of oneself, a kind of everyday death' (Foucault, 2000: 310–11; see also Goffman, 1961: 21). This everyday death, which is predicated on bringing one's desires and actions into conformity with the will of God, is aimed at providing a cleansing revelation of the subject's true being. Enclosed confession, from this point of view, mortifies the subject by cleansing the persistent ontological distortions that the subject has come to identify with its true self. Once this deep spiritual disorientation has been discovered and spoken/expelled, the mortified subject is refilled and replenished by a God who demands transparency as a condition of this cleansing union. The transparency produced by the dark box is the transparency of self-death: one must become transparent to die, and one must die to be reborn.

This cleansing process is mirrored in the production of the social media subject, whose enclosures facilitate an entrepreneurial transparency. The digital enclosure does not demand the self-mortification of everyday death, in which transparency is the ontological precondition of unity with God; it demands, instead, what Han (2021) calls a 'pornographic self-presentation,' in which subjects 'communicate not because of compulsion from outside but because of an inner need – that is, where the fear of having to forsake one's private and intimate sphere gives way to the need shamelessly to expose it, where freedom and control become indistinguishable' (p. 29). If the dark box facilitates transparency via an ascetically torturous interaction between penitent and confessor, the digital enclosure lays the subject bare by mobilizing it in networks of scrutiny and shameless self-presentation. Thrust into domains of commercialized self-promotion, the subject becomes itself to the extent that it effectively removes the obstacles to its own circulation. Barriers to circulation are barriers to transparency – thus, as Han points out:

> Things become transparent when they . . . allow themselves to be enveloped by smooth flows of capital, communication, and information without offering any resistance. Actions become transparent when they subordinate themselves to a calculable and controllable process. . . . Images become transparent when they are deprived of any hermeneutic depth, even of meaning, and thus become pornographic. (Han, 2021: 33–4).

Like its Latin counterpart, this pornographic transparency arises from an environment that removes, as much as possible, the precarious noise of semiosis in favor of calculability and standardization. However, while the digital enclosure might indeed follow its predecessor in disclosing a needful emptiness, its goal is not to correct the mortified will via the infiltration of God; transparency, for the social media subject, is achieved by pornographic rituals of self-purification that make way for the roomy spirit of digitization. One can then proceed to cleanse oneself and one's environment of unintelligibility, embarking on a journey of self-discovery via algorithmically overdetermined rituals of self-presentation.

Although animated by a feeling of freedom, this 'pornographic self-presentation' also reflects, at a perhaps more fundamental affective level, an inner need conditioned by the aloneness and alienation characteristic of digital life (Ettlinger, 2018; see also Ingraham

and Reeves, 2016) and buttressed by habit-forming vectors of distraction and sadness (Lovink, 2019; see also Chun, 2016). These obsessive attempts to expose oneself, without the distortions or veils of shame, are predicated on a theoretical continuity of identity and communication whereby one's true self can only find its absolute expression in the purity of pornographic exposure. This 'smart, friendly' form of digital power demands that we purify our transmissions; it reads and appraises conscious and unconscious thoughts and, therefore, thrives on what Jean Baudrillard describes as the *ecstasy of communication*, a phenomenon 'when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication,' when the subject 'becomes [i.e. is *reduced* to] a pure screen, a pure absorption, and re-absorption surface of the influent networks' (Baudrillard, 1988: 27, 2012: 26).

This generalized, non-coercive obligation to hyper-expressivity and meta-sensorial legibility is the techno-ethical context framing the active communication and willing self-disclosure of enclosed subjects. To be sure, the injunction is implemented in, and thus conditioned by, existing psychosocial or socio-economic contexts. These carry with them a set of built-in tendencies, each of which exerts its own subjectivizing, rhetorical force – for example, compulsive achievement and optimization in the case of neoliberalism, reconciliation and atonement for the practicing Catholic. There is, however, a common, motivational substrate to these tendencies, which is 'embodied' in the ecstatic-transparent enclosure: namely, the absorption of inhabitants' 'specific competences, their creative, innovative and communicative energies' – their desires, personal peculiarities, and individualistic drives for self-realization – in geo-epistemological arrangements of elaboration and communication (Berardi, 2009: 78). In both digital and pre-digital enclosures of absolution, 'the soul itself is,' in Franco Berardi's felicitous phrase, 'put to work' (Berardi, 2009: 116).

Despite the general compulsion to pornographic expressivity and self-exposure, there are important technical-environmental differences separating the absolutizing mortification of the confessional booth from that of the digital enclosure. On the one hand, the decision-making affordances of priests and algorithms are not superposable. Priests enjoy discretionary power to grant or refuse absolution (in most cases), to assign penance, to behave formulaically or engage in spiritually formative discussion, but the exercise of that power is delimited by the local time and space of the confession. Unlike ubiquitous digital networks which continuously and automatically collect, process, and transmit data at ever-increasing speeds and over ever-greater distances, the hearing and absolution of sins is a discrete, volitional, and, one would hope, circumspect process. And while the potential for abuse is neither impossible nor unheard of (indeed, the selling of indulgences played no small part in Martin Luther's uprising against the Roman Catholic Church), it is nevertheless restrained, albeit imperfectly, by peremptory orders stipulating impartiality. Although no two penitents are identical, from a priestly perspective, all penitents – from First Confession onward, and regardless of identity markers – are to be rendered equally exposed, equally transparent, and equally mortified in the process of administering an ecclesiastical declaration of forgiveness. These technical and programmatic limitations of priestly absolution are a far cry from today's big-data-driven digital environments, where decision-making about data (when and where to collect it, from what sources, for what purpose, etc.) has been taken over by algorithms and there

is no 'invisible hand,' religious or secular, ensuring that profit-driven corporate strategies will deliver fairness or improve the quality of life (Pasquale, 2015: 2). Within this 'ecosystem of algorithmic power' (Noble, 2018: 13), the neoliberal structures that undergird much of contemporary America are baked into algorithmic design by rapidly growing tech companies, which provide those structures the opportunity to proliferate at a correlative rate. The pervasive abuse of big and personalized data gathering affect those most vulnerable disproportionately, reproducing systems of inequality as well as the biases in classification that perpetuate them (Benjamin, 2019; Ettlinger, 2023; Eubanks, 2017; Jefferson, 2020; Noble, 2018). The result is a punitive, profit-driven, algorithmically enabled enclosure that deploys a range of discriminatory designs which reproduce and amplify social divisions.

On the other hand, the confessional and digital enclosures instantiate different regimes of visibility, different configurations of an ecstasy which manifest in the all-too-visible. From a technical perspective, this difference is mainly a function of infrastructure. Both types of enclosure constitute what John Durham Peters refers to as infrastructural media – force-amplifying systems of mediation that, while large in structure, may be small in their interface (Peters, 2015: 30ff.). As gateways or thresholds to bigger and submerged systems, interfaces not only mediate between different realities but also conceal their underlying physical and organizational structures and facilities, effectively rendering them invisible: penitents in partitioned, wooden cubicles do not directly interact with or see the core architecture of canon law's fixed-rule governance, just as the smart-city shopper or smart-apartment dweller does not see the fiber optic cables, servers, algorithms, billions of lines of code, and so on that make possible a life of digitized, networked interactivity. All the same, there is a differentiated interface effect separating the digital sensor from the confessional's walls and dividing panel: sensors, unlike their analog counterparts, realize the radically contingent relation between information and its materiality (see Galloway, 2012: 20–3). If, as McKenzie Wark argues, the ontological promise of information is to escape the bounds of any *particular* materiality, then that promise is only fully realized in and through the digital infrastructure (Wark, 2012: 143–4). In both the confessional and the digital enclosure an 'ontology of visibility' is in effect, such that a being's level of existence is measured by the quantity and quality of its inscription, yet only in the latter is the interface of that visibility – its interactive recording surface – freed from its geophysical constraints. Sensors thus allow for a miniaturized yet vast network, at once microcosmic and environmentally immersive, but above all invisible. These combined technical affordances, however, do not so much obsolesce the confessional as they allow for its delocalized remediation. Or rather, if the confessional as an apparatus becomes obsolete, the promise of absolution is only fully realized in the transparency of digital enclosures. The confessional, then, does not disappear but becomes microscopic and ecologically concealed.

Conclusion: Constant Confessions

Ultimately, digital media like smart phones, wearable technology, and all manner of smart objects will not so much kill the confessional (as sedentary form and cultural technique) as remediate it in a context of constant connectivity, obsessive information

capture, instantaneous transmission, and automated processing. Instead of killing the technique of confession, such technical affordances bring about what McLuhan would call the 'closure' or 'completion' of absolution, of both meta-subjective data collection and transparent self-exposure (McLuhan, 1962: 4). One does not have to go to a particular place, at a certain time, and conscientiously examine one's inner states in order to confess. With the coming of the digital, enclosures of absolution become, for the first time, spatiotemporally absolutized, while the act of confession is modulated from an intentional act undertaken by a motivated subject to a remotely controlled environment of interactive monitoring networks. Confession is thus transformed into an automated and permanent state of ecstatic self-display. Digital enclosures thereby render confession invisible and indestructible, simultaneously reducing the would-be subject (or could-have-been penitent) to a measurable, calculable, and legible set of highly operable data flows.

In this context, Martin Heidegger's charge that modern technologies do not bring to light the nature they depend on but rather transform it unrecognizably gains new purchase. Whereas premodern *technē* was a poetic mode of revealing, of bringing something into appearance or letting it appear, '[the] revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*],' a mode that alters how we see the world by subsuming it under the material and conceptual command of technically ordered and arranged objects (Heidegger, 1977: 14). This challenging, Heidegger adds, reduces elements of a situation to 'standing-reserve,' putting to nature 'the unreasonable demand that it supply the energy that can be extracted and stored as such' (Heidegger, 1977: 14). This is exactly what digital enclosures do, with the added affordance that they also make this demand of the subject-cum-inhabitant, collecting and storing every mouse click and screen swipe, every purchase, every contact, every movement. In that process, enclosures reduce users to commodifiable standing-data-reserves – data generators that belong to a virtual geography of communication infrastructure.

Enclosures of absolution, with their geographical experiments in total disclosure, follow this logic of frantic datafication (despite the uneven effects of this logic). In obedience to their logics, we cease to measure ourselves vis-à-vis the unknown mysteries of that which escapes calculation; we strive, instead, toward the cyclical (and cynical) revelation and solution of these mysteries. We search for ourselves, and confess our discoveries, according to the measure of the instruments of calculability that enclose our environments. Yet these enclosures of absolution may indicate an even bleaker situation. They do not merely make things appear, but they themselves appear as that which remains unknown. Their manifestness is the new mysteriousness, an apparent-interactive interface that reveals while concealing a black box-like infrastructure. On this view, then, digital enclosures would be the new unknown ones, the nomoï of a computational confessional space within which and against which the user as standing-reserve would come to know and purify itself.[6]

Notes

1. Penances imposed by Catholic confessors today are comparatively mild. These penances are, however, remnants of harsh self-mortification that once included fasts, pilgrimage, exile, and

self-flagellation. It also used to be widely taught that in the case of mortal sins, grave sins that kill the soul and are deserving of Hell, absolution lifted the dire penalty of eternal punishment. Today Catholics are commonly told that absolution reconciles them to God's love.

2. For Borromeo's text on the design of the wooden booths, see Robert Sénécal (2000). On the probability that Borromeo invented the confessional and that Milan was the first diocese to adopt it, see de Boer (2001: 90–91).
3. Aquinas traces this jurisdictional quality, and the institution of confession itself, to the episode in which Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, to bind and to loose, thereby seemingly conferring a jurisdictional office on Peter (and, by extension, his descendants) (Mt 16:19). (Aquinas, 1981: III, q.84, a.3, ad1, and q.84, a.7). See von Speyr for an alternative origin of the sacrament of confession, which relates to the upper room, when the risen Jesus said to the disciples, 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you' (John 20:21) (von Speyr, 1985: 83).
4. Han's conceptual term for this smart, friendly form of power is neoliberal or digital psychopolitics (see Han, 2017: 1–15).
5. The classic examples, of course, are the sketches of a 'security' society drawn by Foucault and the 'control' society described by Deleuze, both of which emphasize a historical and conceptual evolution from earlier geographies of power (see Deleuze, 1992).
6. On the concept of the nomos of the cloud, see Bratton (2016: 19–40).

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