

Eight poor copies (electric speech)

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Abstract

This article emerges from a series of phone calls with the visual artist Beth Emily Richards in anticipation of her exhibition Poor Copy at The Northern Charter in Newcastle and Jerwood Arts London in 2018. A gossipy piece, it draws lines of connection between telephones, telepathic cats, urban legends and 'King of Pop' Michael Jackson's apparent visitation to Devon in 2003. This visit which, as lore goes, is also contested forms the basis for Richards' subsequent show and sustained engagement with contemporary mythmaking. Calling up lovers of the telephone Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous and Avital Ronell, celebrity impersonators and television illusionists, this article writes in and through the mystics of 'electric speech'. The outmoded phone call is engaged as both a 'conduit for thought' and a poor copy – the line is cut or stalked, or a story is interrupted or interfered with – revealing a forensic fascination with the sinister and the unknown.

Phone calls

It is 2018 and it is as if FaceTime and WhatsApp were never invented. The Devon-based visual artist Beth Emily Richards and I are on the phone again talking about Michael Jackson's penis.

Anxiety presents itself to anyone waiting for a phone to ring, am I right? Even if you have arranged the call and you know the person calling. Even if you know it will not be bad news. And then, when you are on the phone, and it is happening it is like you can never forget you are on the phone. Like, there is something totally nostalgic, self-conscious, embarrassing and pretentious about being on the phone in 2018 that feels like a performance. Like an Andy-Warhol-on-the-phone-to-Brigit-Berlin *impersonation*. Or a Jacques-Derrida-on-the-phone-to-Hélène-Cixous *tribute act*. Suspended in real time ('Hello, From the Other Side'); you and all the ghosts of other telephones (like, red ones with actual spiral leads and receivers) are on the line, *performing*, listening, almost always holding in a pee.

I am writing about the phone call, here, because I think there is something intrinsically distinctive about the phone call as an experience 'both distant and inside one's head' (Jackson 2017: 142) that speaks to the experience of Beth Emily Richards' exhibition *Poor Copy* at The Northern Charter in Newcastle in April 2018. A reworking of which was also later staged at Jerwood Arts London in September that same year. While the phone call became the prime conduit for my communication with Richards leading up to the exhibition, it also becomes, more generatively, a way of re-orientating oneself (particularly one's ears, but also one's bladder) to history, objects and things.

1. Poor archives

Poor Copy builds on Richards' art practice and sustained engagement with contemporary myth-making in respect to practices of tribute and re-enactment, suspension of disbelief, the veracity of photography's documentary qualities, pop cultural icons, celebrity and fame. The exhibition is an archive of found documents, evidencing a set of peculiar yet interrelated narratives related to Michael Jackson, the King of Pop's unexpected visit to Devon, England on two separate occasions. This includes a speech at the local Exeter Football Club in 2003 organized by the TV personality, illusionist and celebrity 'spoon-bender' Uri Geller; and an earlier gig in the nearby town of Barnstaple in 1999. Although Richards tells me that, regarding the latter, it is not entirely certain whether it was *the real* Jackson or in fact an impersonator.

The exhibition's title *Poor Copy* points to the notion of a deprived repetition. This is instanced through the various low-fi and amateur archival components that make up this show, including a fan-made banner with the text 'Welcome to Exeter Michael'; shaky YouTube footage of Jackson's visit to Exeter Football Club from Uri Geller's point of view; a poorly captured photograph of an alleged Jackson concert in the nearby town of Barnstaple accompanied by a text-to-voice e-mail correspondence about that concert with someone who was there; and a video of a microfiche machine scanning local newspaper articles related to both of Jackson's visitations.

The materials in the exhibition have been selected and occasionally filmed and edited with little transformation of the source material. The materials have been assembled as fragments, which reproduce an archive of evidence. There is a forensic sensibility to this exhibition, which is perhaps not only because we are talking about Michael Jackson (a suspect figure), but because archives and phone calls seem to always suggest that some crime has been committed – some scandal or forgery – a copy maybe? Or, in the case of Michael Jackson, something more sinister.

2. Poor stories

Poor stories are good stories. Like all good stories on the phone, there are three protagonists in this one: Michael Jackson, Uri Geller (who Richards tells me invites Jackson to Exeter as a publicity stunt) and Jackson's bodyguard Matt Fiddes. Richards also informs me that Fiddes organized the Barnstaple concert, and later produced a Channel 4 documentary *The Jacksons Are Coming* (2008), as well as selling stories to several tabloid newspapers about allegedly donating his sperm to the pop star for reproductive purposes.

The YouTube footage of Michael Jackson's journey to Exeter and subsequent speech presents a scene of stifling chaos. The King of Pop's arrival at the station is met with crowds of fans screaming, pushing and shoving, to get closer. This chaotic scene is heightened by Geller's shaky-camera documenting of this event and repeatedly pleading with the fans from behind the camera – '[h]onour him/you're crushing him' – with only the rare glimpse of Jackson's arm or profile as he leaves London Paddington station and later arrives at Exeter Football Club. The disorientating video embellishes the chaos and the sense of hype around celebrity, as hysterical fans push and sway, confusion feels its way across the visible crowd and out of the screen.

On the phone, Richards tells me that Jackson's empty and clearly affected '[w]e have come here to support the children with AIDS' speech, which Richards insists clearly shows Jackson has no idea where he is in the world, leaves the crowds at the football club baffled and questioning whether it was in fact 'the real Jackson'. Nevertheless, the uncertainty of whether these events took place or not is what constitute the real point of fascination in Richards' show. While *Poor Copy* suggests that the Exeter appearance was 'the real Jackson' and the Barnstaple concert was a hoax, Richards tells me that the public nevertheless questioned the authenticity of both events.

Rather than attempting to point to any totalizing narrative, the exhibition *Poor Copy* maintains a productive ambiguity. By refusing to categorize or substantiate the evidence, the scrambled narrative points to possibility. Methodologically, this archive merits a comparison to William Burroughs' cut-ups' in the way that it is constitutive of re-assembled fragments of a greater narrative. This is also what distinguishes it from fake news. In regard to his assemblage texts, Burroughs claimed, '[w]hen you cut into the present, the future leaks out' (1986: n.pag.). These are the material conditions of the poor story. It is also from here that we might find a connection between poor stories, urban myths and the folkloric concept of ostension, which is when real life happenings parallel the events told in urban myths and folklore.

On the phone, as the past and also the future *leak out*, I remind Richards of another poor story in which Jackson plays one of the three main protagonists:

Terrorists have attacked New York City. So Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando pile into a car and get the heck out of there, stopping at fast food joints as they trek across the country. (Izadi 2016: n.pag.)

This urban legend, recounted here in the *Washington Post* in 2016, is based around the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York's Twin Towers, and has since worked its way into a short story published in *The New Yorker*

by popular novelist Zadie Smith titled 'Escape from New York' (2015), as well as into a cancelled Sky Arts series in 2017 titled *Urban Myth* in which a White actor named Joseph Fiennes plays Michael Jackson. As we have seen, *Poor Copy* – the title of Richards' show – draws its inspiration from another questionable story about Jackson, which in turn becomes a real-life art show (and phone call) about Jackson's alleged visit to Devon. The expansive relations across these events suggest that whether fake or not, poor stories often lead to real consequences.

3. Poor-becomings

An elusive figure of late capitalism, particularly in his deteriorated state (both in terms of his health and reputation) towards the end of his life in 2009, Michael Jackson was for much of his later career, in a state of poor-becoming.

The idea of 'the real Jackson' seems totally arbitrary given Jackson's skin bleached and surgically manipulated face. A foundation that could no longer withstand the number of surgeries. 'The man in the mirror' was in fact a stranger like no other. As film scholar Cynthia Fuchs notes in her essay 'Michael Jackson's penis', another forensic account of Jackson's life, '[b]lack or white, male or female, young or old, sexed or not, Jackson's image refuses knowable, previously constituted subjectivities' (1995: 17). While Black lives in the United States and beyond are subjected to heightened policing, surveillance and scrutiny, Jackson's transformation marks an ambiguous escape from perceptive and subjective capture yet remains ethically dubious. These ambiguities, too, are mirrored in the narratives around which the exhibition *Poor Copy* operates. In another essay on Jackson 'Dead man in the mirror', Michael Mario Albrecht writes that discourses on Jackson occupy a 'liminal space' with 'unanswered and unanswerable questions' (2013: 712). Jackson's refusal of age, gender, race and sexuality 'maintains a productive ambiguity and leaves open the possibility that those identity categories might be recontextualized in different ways' (Albrecht 2013: 712). This is also how such figures wind up targets for gossip, scandal, and exaggeration – the recipe for any good poor story.

As a poor copy, Jackson is rendered so unbelievable, so *unreal*, that his presence always already renders an absence. Ontologically speaking, Jackson's mere existence – as a poor copy – is always already questionable. Referring to the vast number of billboards advertising Jackson's *This is it* tour, which never came to fruition due to his premature death at the age of 50, Jeremy Gilbert writes: '[t]he actuality of Michael Jackson seemed to have been not merely distorted, but overwhelmed, drowned in the sea of its own images' (2009: 138). Gilbert is talking here about a kind of Baudrillardian simulacrum, which has no reference to the 'real' world. In hyperreality, according to Baudrillard (1994), there are no real objects, only simulacrum. What Gilbert suggests, however, is that Jackson proves this theory wrong. Seeping through the simulacrum of the mass-marketed glossy Jackson was his 'terrifyingly real sexuality', as well as his body and 'its visual incapacity to submit to endless modification due to the too-frequent plastic surgery [...] becoming symbolic not of the submersion of the Real, but of its stubborn and irrevocable return' (Gilbert 2009: 139). For Gilbert, this is the real abstraction of Michael Jackson.

4. Poor evidence

On the phone, returning to these events at Exeter and Barnstaple, Richards also warns me that while poststructuralist methods are useful for exposing the instability of the archive, the truth nevertheless sometimes just shows up. In the video of the microfiche scanner, there is a point when the camera lingers for 'too long' over an image of Jackson in *The Echo*, next to which are the words 'Love Is Michael's Dream' and an advert which reads 'Like to Work with Children?' In contrast to the mechanical scanning of the microfiche, and given the allegations of child abuse against Jackson, this lingering feels perverse, obsessive, awkward and too suggestive. And yet to not loiter around such tacky evidence (in this case, the haptic relation between a photograph and an advert) would also be to conceal the ways that poor evidence, like poor stories, sometimes just show up, and on appearing, have real consequences.

5. Poor images

A poor copy is an image constructed in your head while you are on the phone. It is Beth Emily Richards holding her phone up to a photograph of a Michael Jackson impersonator on a stage in Barnstaple, Devon for me to listen

too, which could in fact be any photograph of Michael Jackson, real or fictional, on any stage, anywhere, at any time.

The title of the show *Poor Copy* consequently bears relation to the title of Hito Steyerl's much-disseminated essay 'In defense of the poor image' (2009), which explores the valence of the low-fi digital image and its circulation in the age of the internet. For Steyerl, the poor image is 'a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image [...] compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution' (2009: n.pag.). There are a number of low-fi images in Richards' exhibition, both digital and analogue, that resemble this description. As an archive composed of images and texts, and as a story that instigates a series of becomings (or what might just be other stories), *Poor Copy* similarly 'builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates' (2009: n.pag.). But while Steyerl's essay privileges the visual capacities of digital images online, there is something about Richards' *Poor Copy* that draws attention to the aural qualities of images. The invitation to put on a headset and look at a photograph encased in a transparent Perspex box is not the only suggestion that we might listen to these objects. While for Steyerl '[t]he poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image' (2009: n.pag.), with a poor copy there is no original. 'This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original", but on the transience of the copy' (Steyerl 2009: n.pag.) and the possibilities this opens up around questions of truth, fiction and the archive...if we just listen in.

6. Poor communication

While there are no actual phones or depictions of phones in this show, there is something about the exhibition that commands that you listen. Jacques Derrida says that on the phone we say 'infinitely more' (Prenowitz 2008: 125). It is thus not unintentional that the phone be the main conduit for our communication around *Poor Copy*.

In an essay titled 'Derrida on the line', Sarah Jackson (2017) (another Jackson in this story) writes about the multiple references to the telephone that echo in and around Jacques Derrida's work and specifically his communication with proclaimed lover of the telephone Hélène Cixous. Jackson's essay, structured as a phone call to Jacques Derrida, affectively inhabits the phone call as a 'poetico-technical invention', signalling that the phone is a conduit for 'thought itself' (2017: 142). Jackson also reminds us that Sigmund Freud said that the unconscious is structured like a telephone, and that the telephone is a medium for analysis, while also paying attention to the uncanny mechanisms of the telephone in terms of the ways it can cause 'interference in thinking and writing' (Jackson 2017: 142).

7. Dogs

At one point during one of our hour-long phone calls I hear a dog bark down the line. From its low gruff, it sounds to me like a medium-to-large-size dog, like, maybe a Labrador. I had not expected there to be a dog in this story. If there were to be any animals it would be Michael Jackson's pet chimpanzee Bubbles or Hélène Cixous' cat, which is always around, apparently, in her conversations with Derrida. Tracing the cat back to Alexander Graham Bell's patenting of the telephone, Jackson writes, 'as far as I can see it, cats are always stalking the line' (2017: 156).

After talking to her dog, Richards apologizes for the interruption and explains that some neighbours were passing the house, and that it was the neighbours who had caused her dog to bark. It makes absolute sense that in our conversations about *Poor Copy*, it would be a dog rather than a cat stalking our line. If the cat is a copy – '[t]hey communicate telepathically: telepathicatilly' (Jackson 2017: 157) – then the dog is a poor copy.

8. Michael Jacques-son as poor concept

Unlike the copy, which renders a subordinate imitation or impersonation, the poor copy is an expansive archive, is a repetition with a difference (Deleuze 2001). It is the becoming-Jacques-son of Jacques Derrida, Michael Jackson and Sarah Jackson in this story. It is a silly or confused idea, really, where history and theory maybe 'just misses the point' or fails to match up... The line cuts out, a dog barks, or a child falls over. Life, truth and the future leak out...on the diagonal. The poor copy subverts an archive (or a subjectivity, in the case of Michael Jackson) from within. It is the becoming-Jacques-son of the poor copy. It is the stalking of something (an idea) or

someone (Michael) ungraspable, in process and only partially knowable and constituted. It is the affirmative expansion of an idea, as Jackson remarks (or was it Cixous?) in regard to the telephone, that is 'both distant and inside one's head' (2017: 142).

On paying attention here to my telephone calls with Richards, I am also saying that this exhibition is telling us something about listening to the unknown. A kind of listening that you do on the phone. The kind of attention that falls in between self-conscious analysis (I am speaking on the phone and it is 2018) and daydreaming. Or the kind of attention that gets interrupted by a dog.

The phone call, what Avital Ronell (1989) called 'electric speech', and which I have in some ways called-back here as poor copy, is not only a nostalgic metaphor or excuse for some fancy theorizing (but it could also be ...); it is the means through which Beth Emily Richards and I communicated across distance, and through which *Poor Copy* the show communicates with a whole host of characters, pop icons, bodyguards, illusionists and drag-theorists.

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