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Bachelor's thesis in FILM2205

Supervisor: Eva Bakøy

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### Abstrakt

Denne bacheloroppgaven har som mål å utforske reaksjonen til og problematiseringen av internettutviklingen i 90-tallets Japan slik representert i animeserien *Serial Experiments: Lain* (Nakamura 1998). Dette gjøres ved å både vurdere serien sin posisjon i science fiction sjangeren via en filmteoretisk analyse av filmsjangeren for å forstå deler av historikken og konteksten som ledet til seriens skapelse, og for å forstå hvordan serien fokuserer på å kommentere på den reelle teknologiske utviklingen som skjedde i samtiden. Videre blir dette som en basis for å vurdere hvorvidt kritisk den stiller seg til den såkalte Japanske internettrevolusjonen på midten av 1990-tallet. Metoden baserer seg på funn gjort av andre filmhistorikere, teoretikere og forfattere innenfor sjanger og stilanalyse av både science fiction generelt, og *Serial Experiments: Lain* (Nakamura 1998) spesifikt. I tillegg er hoveddelen av oppgaven en vurdering og problematisering av Renè Descartes sin identitetsfilosofi, og Jean Baudrillard sin postmodernistiske filosofi rundt simulasjon og virkelighetsoppfatning, og hvordan det kan bli applisert til serien sin diskusjon rundt den psykologiske og identitetsmessige effekten av internettbbrukere.

### Abstract

This bachelor thesis project aims to explore how the anime series *Serial Experiments: Lain* (Nakamura 1998) acts as a vehicle for the greater reaction and problematization of Internet development in 1990s Japan. This will be achieved by first evaluating the series' position within the science fiction genre by utilizing a film theoretical genre analysis to understand the historical context that led to the creation of the series, as well as how the series breaks away from typical science fiction and cyberpunk narratives to instead comment on the actual, contemporary technological developments of the time. This will serve as a basis to evaluate how critical the series is towards the so-called Japanese internet revolution of the mid-1990s. The method is based on findings made by other film historians, theorists and writers focused

on genre and style analysis for both science fiction media generally, as well as *Serial Experiments: Lain* (Nakamura 1998) specifically. The main analysis of the project is an evaluation and problematization of Cartesian identity philosophy, and Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern work on simulation and perception of reality, and how the work of these men can be applied to how the series examines the effects the Internet has on its users’ psychology and understanding of identity.

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## 1. Introduction - setting the scene

The history of technological development in Japan has put the country in a fairly interesting and unique position in modern history. After a post-war economic boom that economists described as a miracle, Japan entered “the lost decade” of the 1990s, characterized by a major economic recession that the country is arguably still recovering from. It was, however, during this time Japan saw another major cultural and societal shift happen. The advent of home computers caused a revolution for the country that would forever change its modern societal structure. As a result of this digitization of industry, communication, national identity and personal connections, an understandable reaction started to appear in Japanese movies and TV shows, trying to discuss and dissect this radical shift, as well as ponder where Japan

would be headed in the future. This bachelor's project intends to investigate this exact reaction by analyzing a piece of Japanese media that is explicit in its description of certain technological anxieties. To do this I will be analyzing the anime series *Serial Experiments: Lain* created by producer Yasuyuki Ueda, written by Chiaki J. Konaka and directed by Ryūtarō Nakamura (1998). In fact, *Serial Experiments: Lain* (referred to from here on out as *SE:L*) was released only a year after the initial peak for sales in Japanese home computers during the 1990s, placing it squarely amid the Japanese Internet revolution's unfolding. According to Ken Coats and Carin Holroyd's book *Japan and the Internet Revolution* (2003), Japanese Internet users skyrocketed in the years from 1997 to 2002; from under 8 million to nearly 50 million (36). This means that by 2002 nearly 60% of Japanese households owned a computer (28). Similarly, by 1998, around 80% of Japanese firms had become digitized, strongly suggesting the abrupt advent of a new era for the country. The immediacy of technological scepticism in the chosen series then reflect a very peculiar moment in time not only for Japanese film history, but global history considering the state of the modern world. Despite its more avant and supernatural aspects *SE:L* is recognized as highly predictive of modern Internet society.

It is partially due to this predictive nature that *SE:L* has garnered long-standing cultural recognition and gained a cult classic status for horror and cyberpunk enthusiasts. As Lain talks about wishing everyone would connect with her in the Wired, it's difficult not to reflect on the state of our global interconnectivity via the Internet, where the vast majority of people seem to be consistently "wired" to digital influences. Loneliness and loss of identity are topics heavily discussed, problems modern youth too are encountering today as well to a larger recognition than before (Holmes 2023, 58-59). The themes and problems present in *SE:L* are therefore uncomfortably relatable to modern audiences, especially in a post-covid world. For the sake of clarification, analyzing a series like *SE:L* in comparison to a film is a difficult undertaking. It is impossible to holistically approach an entire 13 episode series for this project, however *SE:L* is so interwoven and complex in its storytelling and structure that selecting only one or two episodes for analysis would make for a incomplete and unsatisfying analysis.

The structure of this thesis project will start by clarifying the thesis question, then a brief discussion around the method and theory that will be used to analyze the series. Then, after a plot summary of the show, there will be an extensive, multi-part analysis of the series

utilizing the different theoretical perspectives I will establish. This main section is broken down into separate sections to make the entire analysis easier to navigate with clarity and structure in mind. Lastly, there will be a conclusion summarizing the findings in the analysis to answer the research question more concisely.

## **2. Research question and clarification**

In more concrete terms the thesis question for this bachelor's project is as following:

***What dangers do the development of the Internet symbolize in the 1990s Japanese techno-horror Serial Experiments: Lain.***

To be clear this paper is focusing on *the reaction* to Japan's digitization present in *SE:L*, and less so the specifics surrounding the history of real-world Japan's government legislation and the growth of national tech companies. The history is naturally important and somewhat relevant for future discussions around the series, but the core focus will be on the series itself and how it problematizes the radical increase of Internet accessibility in the mass commercial market, and the interpretations and predictions of where Japan would be headed following such societal upheaval.

## **3. Method and Theory**

This thesis project will start with a film theoretical perspective focusing on the genre theory of the science fiction and cyberpunk genre, which will be explored in greater detail in its separate part connecting *SE:L* directly to the genre theory by exploring its setting and protagonist. This helps to lay the groundwork for understanding the philosophical angles chosen for the main analysis. Understanding how *SE:L* both integrates and breaks science fiction and cyberpunk tropes is important to better understand what the series is communicating. This part will primarily utilize Christine Cornea's meditation on the science fiction genre and Daniel Riha's exploration of the Cyberpunk subgenre.

As stated, how our concept of identity is affected and impacted by the advent of computerized technology is one of the core themes that *SE:L* problematizes. The theory and method chosen to realize this analysis are then centered around exactly these philosophical



and psychological aspects. According to postmodern philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard, the conception and development of digital technology have created a shifting sense of reality for the human race. In *Terminal Identity*, where Baudrillard's ideas and thoughts are heavily reflected upon, author Bukatman states:

*“There has arisen a cultural crisis of visibility and control over a new electronically defined reality. It has become increasingly difficult to separate the human from the technological, and this is true rhetorically and phenomenologically”* (Bukatman 1993, 2)

Although this analysis will avoid an explicit film phenomenological angle, the point to note here is that computerized technology has penetrated every facet of our modern-day lives, affecting how we perceive and interact with the world. Core to Baudrillard's philosophy is the concept and recognition of *simulation and simulacra*. Bukatman applies this to how we view images, stating that as we go through Baudrillard's “four stages of image”; the image itself goes from being a reflection of reality (stage 1), to no longer bearing any relation to reality whatsoever (stage 4). The fourth stage is described as “the hallmark of the age of postmodernism and simulation” (Bukatman 1993, 98-99). Bukatman further applies this to the digital spaces we occupy, claiming that such “terminal spaces” are distinct representations of reality that has created its own “terminal culture”. This in turn reflects upon how we understand and interact with the real world until the barrier between simulation and reality is impossible to recognize (Bukatman 1993, 107).

The philosophy of Renè Descartes has also once more become relevant in the digital age, as expressed by Steven Holme's retrospective analysis of *SE:L*. Descartes's philosophy surrounding identity, referred to as Cartesian identity, is primarily focused on the mind-body problem, stating that the “mind is immaterial and distinct from the body, and consequently the self, the “I”, is a discrete singularity” (Holmes 2023, 52). Steven Holmes argues that in the digital age, our sense of self, the singular “I”, has become abstracted when occupying digital spaces. He states that the Internet allows for a bifurcation of the mind which allows for multiple senses of self to exist at once. He writes further that:

*“The classical Cartesian self identifies itself in being able to think and reflect on itself; it is this capacity for reflection and thought which creates the impression of a singular, unified, and comprehensible whole.”* (Holmes 2023, 57)

Digital environments disrupt this mode of categorizing the self, as we now have computerized identities that are entirely separate from our body and mind. This not only impacts our level of empathy when spreading information and interacting with others online, but entirely breaks our connection of self as our behavior warps when navigating digital spaces. We are no longer entirely ourselves when logged on the Internet, as the physical and technological limitations hinder a complete reproduction of existence. Life becomes compressed and simulated, while information flows endlessly and is mostly out of our control, allowing for our digitized egos to alter radically from our real-life behavior. The Internet allows us the freedom to craft separate identities, while having technological barriers that keep the physical and digital selves entirely separate. As Holmes writes, the doubles present in *SE:L* aren't "a mythological doppelgänger or a body-double; this is a double that emerges out of digital environments specifically" (Holmes 2023, 57-58). For the main analysis part of the thesis there are examples drawn from multiple episodes of the series, some more extensive than others. The theory is present all throughout the series, as it can easily function as one long text with greater arcs rather than one broken into individual, episodic arcs.

#### **4. Serial Experiments: Lain**

*Serial Experiments: Lain* is a Japanese "contemporary cyberpunk" anime series that originally ran from July to September 1998. The series was created and co-produced by Yasuyuki Ueda, written by Chiaki J. Konaka, directed by Ryūtarō Nakamura, and animated by the animation studio Triangle Staff. All episodes are titled "*Layer XX: [Title]*".

*Lain* follows the titular character Lain Iwakura, a 14-year-old highschooler, as she becomes increasingly involved with the Wired; the in-universe version of the Internet. The first episode details the suicide of one of her classmates, Yomoda Chisa, who sends e-mails to her classmates after dying. Chisa announces that there's no need for a body anymore, that God is inside the Wired, and specifically asks Lain to join her. The other classmates, such as her friend Alice (Arisu), dismiss them as prank e-mails. Lain, however, asks her father to upgrade her home computer, called a Navi. In the following episodes, Lain becomes increasingly involved in the Wired as she receives messages telling her "If you stay in a place like this, you might not be able to connect" (Layer 01: Weird, 04:58 - 05:04). This leads her to invest more time and resources to enhance her Navi into a supercomputer until it eventually

swallows her entire room. In *Layer 04: Religion*, glowing monitors and gassy cooling chambers surround her desk. By *Layer 12: Landscape* she's limp on the floor, buried in wires, almost an extension of the Navi.

As the series progresses Lain tries to investigate a secret, conspiratorial group of hackers called the Knights of the Eastern Calculus (or just the Knights). The Knights are influencing both the Wired and the real world in an attempt to fulfill what they claim to be a prophecy, which is later revealed to be the initiation of Protocol 7 - the next version of the Wired where users would be able to connect without any devices (Layer 09: Protocol, 20:52 - 21:20). Lain also finds out that there exist multiple versions of herself inside the Wired. These other Lains are referred to as the confident "Wired Lain" and the destructive "Evil Lain" (Konaka 1999), resulting in a three-way split in Lain's identity. These other Lains cause great anxiety for her, as Evil Lain starts spreading rumors about Alice. In the final few episodes, Lain is confronted by "the God of the Wired". His real name is Masami Eiri, a tech-developer who also committed suicide to get rid of his material body. He tells her that she was created digitally and that her purpose is to unite the real world and the Wired.

The final two episodes of the series, titled *Layer 12: Landscape*, and *Layer 13: Ego* respectively, Lain realizes that she has the power to do anything, acting as an omniscient god, which includes the rewriting of peoples memories. To Lain, memories are like data that can be altered. After a final confrontation with Alice and Eiri however, she decides to erase herself from everyone's collective memory (referred to as ALL RESET). This also effectively deletes herself and the other Lains. In *Layer 13: Ego* life has returned to normal, without any memories of Lain's existence.

#### **4.1. Lain in the Context of Science Fiction and Cyberpunk**

In *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality*, author Christine Cornea opens by admitting the uncertainty of what constitutes as science fiction. Not because none of the definitions are applicable - rather the opposite. She brings up several serviceable, albeit limiting definitions coined by various scholars. Darko Suvin perspective of SF as "cognitive estrangement" - literature which "defamiliarises reality and encourages the reader to contemplate upon the known world from a distanced perspective", and Isaac Asimov focus on SF as a way to reconcile with society's technological progression (Cornea 2007, 2-3)

makes more sense coupled together, rather than viewed separately. Looking at *SE:L*, it's a rather unique piece of science fiction media. Instead of describing a far-distant future of space travel and alien encounters, *SE:L* is defined by its contemporary setting where the source of the viewer's estrangement is navigating the psychological relationship between modernity and technological advancements. Cornea also compares SF and Horror, using Vivian Sobchack's words to differentiate between the two; SF cultivates intrigue, while horror cultivates fear (2007, 7). As this thesis will explore, the boundaries of the two genres aren't rigid when discussing *SE:L*. Even though the show is more *disturbing* than outright *scary*, there is an ever-present strangeness in the world in *SE:L*.

While Cornea and Sobchack seemingly wants to keep horror and SF separate, the subgenre of cyberpunk essentially bridges the gap between the two. Author Daniel Riha describes cyberpunk as a subgenre of SF that "mixes up the technophilia of cyberculture with the antiestablishment attitude of punk, resulting in a number of recognizable characteristics in its texts, including 'hybrid' identities, dystopian futures, and a focus on technology" (Riha 2012, 210). *SE:L* is one of the more frequently recognized pieces of contemporary cyberpunk partially due to the real life context of late-90s Japan. As stated, due to the rapid and radical technological developments made as Japan exited its 1980s golden economic age, modern-day Japan resembles the descriptions of the futuristic society made by cyberpunk visionaries decades prior. *SE:L* then breach the border between the fantastical and the plausible, as the nation's actual digitalization reflects the on-screen SF aspects. Or as Riha puts it; "Cyberpunk models a near-future society in which technology is more advanced, a depiction of a society we can easily imagine our own one becoming" (212).

With this rather lenient definition in mind, one could argue that - especially with time - the cyberpunk label has become increasingly nonspecific (Myerson 2020, 366). *SE:L* is quite unlike the Japanese genre classics that were released prior. From the animated high-tech wasteland of *Akira* (Otomo 1988), to the techno-utopic take on future metropolises in *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii 1995), to the twisted metal body horror of the experimental *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Tsukamoto 1989) - and are even further removed from American foundations for the genre like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* novel (1984), and Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* (1982). *SE:L* might fall relatively squarely within the cyberpunk genre, but the show still lacks a grand-scale apocalyptic setting and centers around the life of a young teenage girl - a far cry from the usual masculine protagonists of classic cyberpunk novels. On a similiar note,

while typical cyberpunk imagery such as neon lights of busy streets and anti-establishment hackers are present to some extent, the setting of *SE:L* switches out a sprawling techno-metropolis for a naturalistic world parallel to our own, inhabited by everyday people. The representation of hackers in *SE:L* especially is interesting, for while it works to tie it closer to the more typical worlds and aesthetics of cyberpunk, their presence in the text almost act like thematic red herrings. This is to say that although they may represent problems for the characters in the series, the thematic focus is not on the hackers or their actions. By sidelining the importance of such an iconic archetype for the genre, *SE:L* not only manages to avoid typical irritations audiences encounter with the hacker trope (Rosewarne 2016, 119-121), but also pushes the genre into new, equally morbid and exciting directions. Important to note too is that cyberpunk may not rely on explicit terror, but the genre's skepticism towards technological progression fuels a very poignant anxiety of future development and possible apocalypse. Writers Elmo Gonzaga and Susan Napier both pinpoint the 1990s economic recession as an influential factor for modern Japanese cyberpunk narratives. Not only did it drill a very realistic uncertainty for a stable economic future for Japan into the mind of the population (Napier 2002, 420), but the advent of mass-market computerized technology enabled more people to escape into the realm of the Internet to escape these increasingly problematic real-world circumstances (Gonzaga 2002, 40).

In one interview about *SE:L*, producer Ueda states that the Wired was only intended as a means for the characters in the series to interact and battle ideas. The Wired was conceived as a literary vehicle, one used to host the shows themes, and denies that it was any sort of reaction to how the Internet was becoming more developed and accessible in Japan. Based on Napier and Holmes' interpretations and analysis of the show, it's clear that the creators still struck a chord with audiences, whether they intended to or not. The Wired could naturally be interpreted as nothing more than an in-universe communicative medium, but the show itself problematizes this aspect and the nature and potential of the Wired's connectivity to such an extent that it becomes hard to believe that the showrunners simply saw it as an afterthought. In *Layer 04: Religion* Lain's father tells her "When it's all said and done, the Wired is just a medium for communication and the transfer of information. You mustn't confuse it with the real world" (17:20), seemingly mirroring the showrunners idea of the Wired. Lain's response however reflects the heavier implications of a digital society; "The border between the two isn't all that clear. I'll be able to transfer myself into it pretty soon. In full range. Full motion.

I'll translate myself into it" (17:44). *SE:L*'s interpretation of the Internet/the Wired then is a chaotic and unadulterated landscape, possibly reflecting the PUNK in cyberpunk most directly. It is a digital wild west open for hackers and anarchists to run freemason-esque cults of influence. It's perhaps a far cry from how the real world Internet is generally perceived now, with its content restrictions, ad spaces and site moderations. Still each episode opens with a moment of teasing insanity; "Present day! Present time!" an electronic voice reads, proclaiming that the events taking place in the show are not even contained within the comfort of a *suggested* near-future.

Lain differs greatly from the female protagonists found in archetypical cyberpunk literature too; like the "cartoon-like dominatrix" Molly in *Neuromancer* (Riha 2012, 218). She is childlike, physically weak, and emotionally timid. Still she has a strong curiosity for the Wired, and has a great and seemingly inert technological prowess which allows her to upgrade her Navi into a powerful computer. Compared to the machismo punks and hypersexed women of other cyberpunk (Rheia 2012, 218), you'd get the impression Lain barely even has a pulse for the majority of her screen time. Her blank stare is practically as synonymous with the show as the glowing CRT screens infecting her room. Eyes are generally a recurring motif in the show, similar to other cyberpunk media such as *Bladerunner* (1982). This focus on eyes makes the viewer reflect on Lain's status as real or artificial - human or software - as well as the series comments on identity and sense of self. She is a protagonist reflecting the disillusioned generation of post-recession Japan, technically skilled but emotionally vacant which allows her to escape to a seemingly utopic cyberspace. A place of escape, a place where a body is but an afterthought.

## **4.2. The Wired simulation: Terminal identity in Lain**

"To die is to merely abandon the flesh" Lain says in *Layer 10: Love* (03:56), mirroring Chisa and Eiri's claims that there is a life made possible inside the Wired, free from the responsibilities and mortality of the physical world. This echoes the "long live the new flesh" motto in Cronenberg's techno-horror classic *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983), discussed by Bukatman who says "terror must be overcome, the attachment to the body surrendered." (97) Showrunner Ueda says Lain was written as a 14 year old girl to try and reflect the values of a younger generation, not because technology are hard on kids but rather the opposite, it's the age humans are most easily prone to learning. Napier however problemizes this, saying that

Lain's status as a child - a girl at that - highlights a growing "distrust and alienation between generations, and a privileging of the feminine" (424). We can see this both in relation to Lain and her dysfunctional and emotionally distant home, as well as her character design. Napier believes Lain's iconic bear-themed attire reflects an escapist desire (432), perhaps a means for Lain to cultivate a known and recognized identity she can latch onto - one of innocence and cuteness. Konaka himself has stated that the bear suit comforts and supports Lain, that it's "like a shield" (Konaka 1999). This idea is backed up in *Layer 13: Ego* when Lain's father proclaims that "you don't need to wear that anymore" (18:06). Lain looks down and smiles, visibly relieved with finding some sort of conclusion to her intense and prolonged identity crisis throughout the series. This moment too reflects Bukatman's writing on terminal space as *SE:L* channels Baudrillard's conception of simulation. In the final episode Lain only exists in an imaginary space, completely disconnected from reality; "the *digital* has replaced the *tactile*" (107).

Referring to one of the many hallucinatory scenes in *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983), Bukatman writes "the 'real' cinematic image is unreliable." He describes the film as a portrayal of "image addiction" in a very literal form, a film that blends the cinematic image with diegetic reality, hallucination, and psychosis. He speaks of "decayed boundaries" between the real and the imagined, confusing "the real with the image and the image with the hallucination." (Bukatman 1994, 90-91), A very similar lack of clarity impacts the cinematic signifiers throughout *SE:L*. The viewer is rarely assured of what events are supposed to be real, imagined, or contained within the realm of the Wired. The series is purposefully structured to be difficult to parse, forcing you to submit to how the plot unfurls in experimental, sometimes seemingly random ways. This somehow both heightens the disparity between the Wired and the real world and equalizes them, as both planes bleed into each other, causing a confusing mix of digitized and physical reality. In *Layer 04: Religion*, when a preschooler is shot by a Phantoma player confusing her for an enemy, she's seen moments later covered in a white blanket - presumed dead. It remains unclear if this event is contained completely within the Wired or not, is it her body or her avatar that was murdered in panic? "These unbound hallucinations jeopardize the very status of the image: we must believe everything and nothing, equally" (Bukatman 1993, 91).

Holmes highlights other moments of uncertainty, such as how Chisa keeps appearing for Lain despite her suicide early in the first episode. He ties this aspect up to the idea of the

fantastical instead, saying “Whether these visions are hallucinations or supernatural is unclear, keeping the series rooted in uncertainty and wonder” (Holmes 2023, 61). This hallucinatory nature extends to how the world is presented in *SE:L*. Despite dealing with the globality and interconnectivity of the Wired, most of the episodes recycle the same mundane spaces; Lain's home, her empty street, her school, and sometimes the nightclub Cyberia. Napier defines the show simply as a “home drama invaded by the surreality of cyberculture” (Napier 2002, 430). The show feels strangely contained, a mix of desolation and claustrophobia makes the scenes reminiscent of post-apocalypse, there’s rarely any sign of *geniune* life in this world. Even Lain’s household is noticeably idle. Her parents and sister are usually home, but they usually occupy the same static tasks, almost creating an illusion of typical home-life. In a physical world without much to offer, it becomes easy to sympathize with Lain for wanting to escape to the excitement of the Wired’s simulated spaces. This Baudrillain idea of simulation and simulacra can be extended to the show's discussion of the necessity of bodies. Eiri has entered a state of “terminal identity” after committing suicide, becoming a simulated existence with a discarded reference point to reality, reflecting Baudrillard’s four phases of the image. Lain too is simulated, born of the Wired with no proper relation to the real world. It’s possible then to see Lain having “attained the status of pure image”, as Bukatman also characterizes Max from *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1982), an image that “no longer retains any connection with the ‘real’ and which is therefore a perfect Baudrillain simulation” (Bukatman 1993, 97). As Baudrillard states; “All our machines are screens. We too have become screens, and the interactivity of men has become the interactivity of screens” (Bukatman 1993, 103). Lain and Eiri are both screens, and we must approach them as if they are real and not real at once, the border between reality and simulation has become impossible to dissect as the Wired’s influence becomes more and more invading in the physical world.

Through this idea of “terminal identity”, then, *SE:L* also proposes that there is a sort of life beyond death. Versions of ourselves exist within the memories of others, kept eternal through physical - and now digital - vessels such as images and video, or in a word; data. By seeing human beings as applications, potentially malleable to memory deletion similar to how one would delete a file on a computer, the final episode of Lain doesn’t just see Lain’s suicide, but her total and complete erasure from everyone's collective memory. “If you don’t remember something, it never happened.” (Layer 13: Ego, 08:43) Alice says halfway through the episode, being the only person left with any kind of memory of the ALL RESET. “If you



aren't remembered, you never existed" she continues with a smile of understanding and compassion for Lain's decision. As Napier highlights this is illustrated as a comfort in *SE:L*, which might seem disturbingly ironic at the face of it, because it ultimately depicts the erasure of a young girl (Napier 2002, 432). This isn't necessarily the case however, Lain is still alive in some capacity and still a part of this world through the Wired, she's just been "erased from the record" - aka been given a blank slate to start over. Lain's simultaneous existence and non-existence also nullify the borders between reality and simulation and make the existence of characters in this world inherently strange.

Lain realizes in the final moment before ALL RESET that the only way she knows to make Alice happy - which is her core motivation for most of the show - is to delete herself from the collective un/conscious. Lain herself would likely argue that this is death, that people only exist within the confounds of memory (Layer 13: Ego, 00:36), yet the final scene shows she's still a physical entity in the world when talking with Alice again. ALL RESET doesn't represent total death and erasure as much as it signals rebirth. Lain is now aware and understands her powers, realizing her status as a God/Angel (Layer 13: Ego, 15:54), and utilizes them to achieve total freedom (Napier 2002, 432). If what Bukatman and Baudrillard says about terminal identity and simulation is true and that the Internet accelerated humanity into the age of simulation; a reality permeated by digital spaces that's abstracted our own identity, concept of existence, and understanding of what is real, then the idea of erasing oneself from that record completely might be seen as an attractive fantasy.

### **4.3. The split ego: Descartes and Lain**

Holmes problematizes the philosophy of René Descartes when discussing Lain's fractured ego. Cartesian identity states that "the 'I' is a discrete singularity" (Holmes 2023, 52), but this becomes abstracted in digital spaces. The Internet allows oneself to exist at multiple points at once, creating what Holmes calls "doubles" (Holmes 2023, 57). Although these "doubles" might not be holistic, they still spread influence independently from the thinking self, and might influence each other equally. Most people don't act identically online as they do in the real world; we use different online personas to represent ourselves - essentially crafting new, sometimes idealized identities. Lain's digital identity, Wired Lain, is also idealized. Whereas Childish Lain is meek and timid, Wired Lain is noticeably brash and confident, allowing Lain to inhabit a complete opposite of her known identity. There are multiple scenes where she

suddenly shifts personality from Childish Lain to Wired Lain while still occupying the same space, where it's unclear if this is a ghost-like possession or if it's Lain's idealized online persona influencing her real-life behavior. This escalates with the introduction of Evil Lain as well, discussed in the next section. As the series progresses Lain too becomes unsure of not only *who* she is, but *what and where* she is as her doubles continue to act on her behalf inside the Wired, making her lose control and autonomy over her actions and how other people perceive her. In *Layer 13: Ego*'s cold open Lain addresses the viewer directly, echoing this frustration and confusion brought on by her fractured sense of self and terminal identity; "I'm confused again. Am I here? Or am I there? Over there [the Wired], I'm everywhere. I know that. I'm connected there, after all- right? But where is the real me?" (Layer 13: Ego, 00:00 - 00:27).

#### **4.4. The Online Empathy Problem**

Napier concludes her piece unsure of what *SE:L* is actually trying to say, whether its conclusions are ones of hope or despair. A strong argument can be made for the message of the series highlighting the necessity of real, genuine - and perhaps most importantly - physical human connections. Lain's motivations as the series progresses become increasingly directed towards the validation, acceptance, and happiness of her friend Alice. Still Lain also seems conflicted, maybe even jealous of what Alice seemingly has that she lacks; a normal, happy, and sociable life. This conflict reaches its climax during *Layer 08: Rumors* when Lain confronts Evil Lain, who's been stalking Alice and spreading rumors about her in the Wired. "Why are you acting like the part of me that I hate?" she asks herself before reaching for Evil Lain's neck (Layer 08: Rumors, 17:00-17:35). Lain's potential envy - the part of her that she despises - leads her double to try and sabotage Alice's life as a separate, independent persona. Where Wired Lain is Lain's online confidence personified, Evil Lain is her lack of empathy personified. In *Layer 12: Landscape* she gets visited by Alice, where it's made clear that Lain now has rewritten everyone's memories in an attempt to rectify Evil Lain's doings. After being questioned by an alarmed Alice, Lain tells her that she did this to avoid hurting. Lain, caught up in the excitement of her newfound abilities, tells Alice that she was her first and truest friend, the only person to befriend her without "connecting" with her. She asks her to connect in the Wired so they can both discard their bodies. Alice objects and challenges Lain on this, reaching out and holding her cheek. "Your body is cold, but you are alive Lain", she

says as she puts Lain's heart to her chest, feeling her beating heart (Layer 12: Landscape, 17:20-17:27).

As Holmes argues, this scene might be key to understanding what *SE:L* is trying to convey and is treated as a possible solution to the influence the Wired has on the world/Lain (Holmes 2023, 54-55). We *do* need bodies, hearts, and body heat to be truly able to connect, not digitally but physically - and the advent of the Internet has estranged our understanding of "connecting" to others. In a Baudrillain sense, our concept of making connections has too become simulated through the Internet, a bastardation of physical reality. When Lain shows doubt towards Eiri's remarks, driven by the genuine compassion she has for her friend she's treated as if there is a bug in her programming, reflecting Eiri's ideological position of devaluing the physical in favor of the digital (Layer 12: Landscape, 18:43). The scene concludes with Lain denying Eiri's position; "without a body you wouldn't understand" (Layer 12: Landscape, 20:22) she says while embracing Alice's body, a simple yet powerful act of technological defiance.

This arguably also challenges Holmes' reading of how the show portrays real vs. online friendships. He asserts that in a real-world context the lines are blurred and that it's increasingly difficult to say which kind of friendship is more impactful or important (Holmes 2023, 62). While Lain is seen slipping into the Wired through the comfort of having others to talk to, these friends are revealed to be members of the Knights who seek to enable Lain's addiction to the Wired, and as far as the viewer is concerned Lain doesn't have many other friends to speak of besides Alice and her classmates. This makes her only online friends exploitative and manipulative, a fear many internet users have when interacting with others. The concept of stranger danger is for many people stronger when occupying digital spaces, due to the partial anonymity of being able to conceal and alter your identity. Lain ultimately chooses to side with her real-world physical friend, as Alice doesn't have ulterior motives for associating with her. However, this doesn't hinder the ALL RESET, as Lain initiates it not *despite of*, but *because of* her connection to Alice. This decision reflects a general skepticism towards "net-pals" that goes deeper than remarks made by side characters in the show. Lain's shortlived association with the Knights isn't, as Holmes describes, a "poor and superficial" online friendship (Holmes 2023, 65) rather they are directly exploitative and manipulative towards Lain as the prospect of their prophecy. The problem of disingenuous online relationships might be fundamental, Lain's "emotional temperament" (Holmes 2023, 65) is

more likely just a reaction to unveiling the curtains of who she thought were real online friends.

In *Layer 08: Rumors*, after Lain's confrontation with Evil Lain, Eiri manifests in front of her and says "You've watched what they [everyone] didn't want others to see. You've told everyone about it, that's all. It was the right thing to do. The Wired's information should be shared, shouldn't it?" (Layer 08: Rumors, 18:17-18:30). Holmes focuses on this aspect of the show, referring to the empathy problem of digital spaces. "The narrative emphasizes that the problem is not that Lain specifically has given in to spreading rumors online; the problem rather is the ease which people take on the persona of a disinterested, disembodied voyeur in virtual spaces" (Holmes 2023, 56). As Holmes pinpoints, the few users *inside* the Wired are disembodied, dehumanized and strange, usually reduced to one or two body parts. Users made of eyes and ears reflect Internet user's ability to "lurk" in the digital waters, roam freely and anonymously as their anonymous avatar, picking up data and gaining impressions of others without ever making their presence known - "The flow of information doesn't always go both ways" (Layer 09: Protocol, 06:34). Meanwhile, others are just floating mouths (Layer 08: Rumors, 09:18-10:03), symbolizing the urge to spread endless amounts of information across the Internet - regardless of importance. As the show asks, what good is information if it isn't being shared? Holmes ties this dehumanization of users in the Wired to a noticeable decrease in empathy among real life young adults. The disembodiment among users in the Wired leads us to fill in the gaps ourselves. Instead of relying on more holistic "audiovisual cues" from others, we have to rely on individual aspects, such as text, individual images, or tempered-with videos. The increased discussion around cyberbullying has spread awareness of how the Internet warps our perception of others, and how it can remove feelings of sympathy among (especially anonymous) users, but *SE:L* managed to pinpoint this danger while the Internet was still developing (Holmes 2023, 68).

## 5. Conclusion

With the development of powerful artificial intelligence software in recent times as well as the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people's mental health, the core questions *Serial Experiments: Lain* asks around identity in a digitized age feel as relevant as when it was first released, nearly three full decades ago. To summarize the findings in this project and tie it back to the thesis statement; *SE:L* is by all means strongly critical of the development of

the Internet. As explored these dangers are based on philosophical and psychological anxieties rather than clear-cut, physical dangers. What makes *SE:L* such a dense text for analysis is how the series interconnects these critiques, as one issue influences the next. Mainly though, *SE:L* questions how the development of the Internet will affect humans' relationships with themselves and each other by pushing ideas of identity, memory, and connectivity into strange and abstract areas. For *SE:L*, the Internet is a vehicle for people to lose their sense of self, showcased quite literally in Lain's digital doubles, as well as a machine that can in a sense devour a person as they become increasingly connected, both psychologically and physically. It is however also a place for people to unite behind a cause and seek connection across physical limitations, although in the series these connections allow for conspiratorial in-groups to form as well. The in-group in question, The Knights, is an unconventional group of hackers in the world of fiction, more reminiscent of a cult of influence than individual anti-establishment activists or simple trolls. They, along with other users of the Wired present in the series, also reinforce the fear that the Internet will diminish the empathy of its users as it abstracts our understanding of other people when we no longer get a holistic sense of them *being there*. The Internet compresses interactions into anonymous chatboxes and video clips, soundbites, and media posts that remove ways for people to genuinely connect. The core principle of "connecting to the Wired" that gets repeated like a mantra throughout the show ends up sounding ironic, as - according to the show - there's an intrinsic value to the physical bodies we've been granted. The Internet indeed allows for connection within terminal spaces free from the limitations brought on by being contained to a body, but *SE:L* argues that it's a faulty replacement of real physical connections. The ultimate danger the Internet represents for *SE:L* is then its power to de-evaluate the physical. Discarding the real as it tries to abstract and replace material existence for a simulated, digital one. To surmise, *SE:L* asks us to question how we view and understand our own identity and sense of self, and how we interact with other people as the terminal spaces we now find commonplace abstract our understanding of reality.

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## 7. Filmography

*Akira*. Directed by Katsuhiro Otomo. 1988; Japan: Toho. 2 hr 4 min.

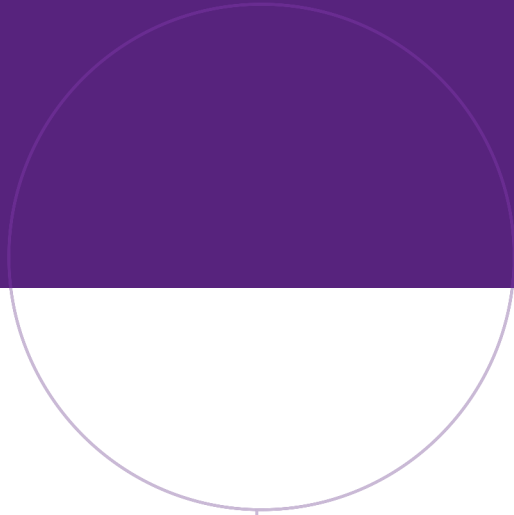
*Bladerunner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1982; USA: Warner Bros.. 1 hr 57 min.

*Ghost in the Shell*. Directed by Mamoru Oshii. 1995; Japan: Shochiku. 1 hr 57 min.

Nakamura, Ryūtarō. *Serial Experiments Lain*. TV Tokyo, 1998.

*Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. Directed by Shinya Tsukamoto. 1989; Japan: Kaijyu Theatre. 1 hr 7 min.

*Videodrome*. Directed by David Cronenberg. 1983; Canada: Universal Pictures. 1 hr 29 mins.



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