

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Confessions: A Fictional Overhaul of Saint Augustine

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This project looks at the architectures of confession, the discourses they contain, and the relationships of power that they animate. I created this installation as a spatial and textual investigation of these discourses. I am interested in the transgressive and how it is psychologically reconciled through cultural constructions. This project is not about inverting the confessional in an anachronistic attempt to undermine religious structures of power, but to investigate the very human practice of mediating what one thinks is transgressive and the socially constructed technologies that enable that mediation. How does one cope with memories of having transgressed one's ethical or moral system? Where is contemporary confession practiced and what technologies facilitate its existence?

What do I do when I feel bad about what I did?

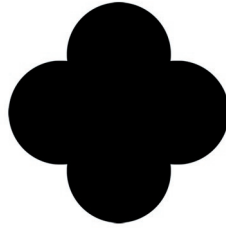
A Brief History of the Confessional

Within my project I use the character of St. Augustine as a popular and familiar essayist who clearly accepts and posthumously reinforces the power constructions of the confessional. Using his perspective as a point of reference, I have created a series of fictional confessions that stem from his personal history, published writings (primarily *Confessions*), and Catholic worldview. These confessions, though formed from the Augustinian perspective, are written in the tone and style of the confessional's contemporary analogs: text messages, blogs, chat rooms, and instant messages. I situated these confessions within a reading space (an abstraction of a one-sided confessional) where the reader actively participates in the construction of the Augustinian identity. The audio, which corresponds to the speed at which the reader reads, is a randomized processing of sexualized sounds that resists the enclosed space of the "private confessional." This is all in an attempt to raise reading to a heightened level of embodiment, so that reading becomes a self-aware and almost shameful act. In the contemporary art world, I find an inundation of artists working with video and its installed architecture, but I see a lack of spaces articulated for the ubiquitous practice of reading. This project asserts the possibilities of textual installation as an open avenue of artistic inquiry and practice.

Foucault's analysis of the confessional in the "History of Sexuality: an Introduction" reveals that the confessional was not intended to squelch transgressive discourses, particularly sexual transgression, but to very particularly and acutely

control how and where they occur¹. This specifically articulated discourse is at the core of my investigation. Confession in a religious context, although generally and conceptually instituted within the New Testament, was formally codified into Catholic practice as integral to the Sacrament of Penance through a series of institutional interpretations and reifications. Most of these engagements surrounded the practice of “private confession.” As a sacrament, private confession was instituted by Tertullian in the 3rd century at the Council of Trent. The contemporary image of private confession remains, due to its various representations within popular culture such as film, as the solitary confessor divulging transgressive behaviors to the priest through the screen of the tenebristically lit confessional booth. The priest then prescribes penance, which upon its completion will render the confessor absolved from sins committed (absolution leads to the final state of the sacrament which is satisfaction). Along with the codification of confession, penitential discipline also introduced the concept of tariff penance, which is the assignment of particular penance by the priest to the specific sins confessed. These changes affected the increased focus on confession enacted through the categorizing, cataloguing, and measuring of sins.

Although rarely used today except in more liturgical practices, the confessional booth has been employed as an architecture that embodies the structures of power that Catholic doctrine suggests. The priest acts as a mediator between God and humanity, with humanity being represented by the confessor. The priest and the subject confessing (the confessor) sit in a bisected chamber that is traditionally divided by a quatrefoil-patterned screen. (The quatrefoil is a four-orbed shape that is an abstraction of the cross.)



quatrefoil

This screen functions to keep (or presents to keep) the identity of the confessor obscure from the priest. This obscuring provides some sense of safety through the suggestion of anonymity. This screen also functions as the boundary between priest and confessor, sacred and profane, pure and guilty, powerful and powerless. It physically separates spaces of power. The screen is traditionally formed by the repetition of quatrefoil shaped extrusions. The absence of the abstracted cross, repeated across a field provides the separation of power as well as the membrane through which confession is given and the confessor absolved. Language, memories, sins, and absolution flow through the patterning of cross-shaped holes.

It is a dark chamber of secrets, and within this safe place, the secrets that torment and incite guilt can be divulged and absolved. The confessional structure occludes the confessor from the site of the public (others in the church) and yet exists as a publicly fixed structure. This relationship between public and private space is key as the Catholic church articulates its power within the gaze of the public: every time one goes to confession, it not only implicates him/herself in the discourse of power, but serves as a public reification of the Church's authoritative position. Following the act of confession, the penance prescribed by the priest (usually prayers) is carried out inside the church within the public's view. It is worth mentioning that what is ultimately at stake is redemption. Within Catholicism, one attains salvation (the

attaining of heaven rather than hell) through the adherence to and practice of the sacraments, of which confession is only one.

Contemporary Confession

Due to several cultural evolutions, the Church Universal no longer holds the power over the popular psyche that it once did. In a psychoanalytic perspective, one can attempt to trace the utilitarian and psychological formations, some would argue the necessity, of confession as the primary mediation of the transgressive. Freud saw confession as an attempt at reconciliation that the ego undertakes in order to settle the difference between the superego and the id². This is spatially and conceptually represented within confessional practice: when one feels guilt, one seeks a higher power, or a construct of higher power to absolve the wrongdoing and prescribe some penance for sin, and thereby alleviate the motivational guilt. As morality becomes less conscripted culturally, the transgressive becomes a personal space, which is intimately related to the public sphere. The connection between space and the mediation of the transgressive seems to be present in all confessional forms. The public eye, as enabled by new technologies, has arguably taken the place of the priesthood. The priest has evolved into a polymorphous entity, the countless millions who are always and never watching: the generalized other. And this generalized other is the new locus of power. Confession still functions in the contemporary psyche, it has just channeled itself into new architectures and modalities.

Contemporary Confessional Analogues

In the 1990's, America saw talk shows and call in radio shows take on a curiously confessional tone (with Jerry Springer as a Jewish priest?). MTV's the

Real World, started using a separate confessional room which subsisted of a single camera in front of which a character could confess his or her secrets to the viewing public. The influx of digital technologies has provided even newer confessional forms: blogs, social software, chat rooms, text and instant messaging. Even cell phones can function similarly to confessional structures in that they use the screen to provide an ambiguous anonymity from which an interpersonal discourse is enacted. For the purposes of this project, I am going to unpack two of the most pertinent digital cultural formations: chat rooms and blogs.

The virtual construction of a chat room, based off of who can and who cannot read the textual intercourse contained within its “walls,” is similar to the spaces of power created by the confessional architecture. The text within is a privileged discourse. The architecture (confessional or chat room) is a controlled space that restricts and allows access based on a user’s identity. Chat rooms are often directed by a mediator that functions in similar ways to a priest. This person has the power to control what is said, how often one speaks, and sets the general tone of the chat. Similarly to the confessional, a chat room provides this ambiguous anonymity based on a screen or interface. In the confessional it is the quatrefoil pattern that both allows and obscures sight, and within the chat room, it is the multiplicity of computer screens that allows interaction via the avatar, or the projected identity of the user (depending on the structure of the chat, this can be a graphical avatar, or its textual equivalent, the screen name.) There is no fundamental similarity between the avatar and the identity that controls it in the same way that the person confessing can present himself/herself to be other than they truly “are”. The construction of the self, or projected self, occurs through the text that is projected literally onto the screen, and figuratively onto the writer and reader. There is an unstated rule that one “ought”

to resemble their screen-name (through profiles, textual tone, style, voice, etc.) as closely as possible, but again we find that transgressing this rule offers the possibility for transgressive engagement. Lurking in chat rooms, falsely presenting an identity, soliciting sex through an altered identity: all these act as a subversion of the assumed power construction of the chat room.

Historically, the confessional has often become a center for sexual exploits and propositioning, which provides another tracing as digital technology not only becomes a site for mediating the transgressive, but also the site of its enabling. The place I commit my sins is often the same place I confess them as the transgressive is enabled by the prohibition of itself. Discourse within chat rooms is eroticized through subverting the same relationships of power that make the traditional confessional effective in mediating guilt. The screen provides an ambiguous anonymity that enables erotic engagement as the inscribed relationships of power or modes of discourse are transgressed.

Blogs function as diaristic textual constructions (often written in a personal tone, accompanied by specific times and dates). These diaristic text entries resemble confessions in tone as well as style. The difference between the traditional confessional and the blog is the location of the priest or mediator. The public eye, everyone and no one, replaces the priest as the mediator for the confession. When we open our "sins" to the public eye, we have in effect confessed our sins to the public gaze, and this normalizes the behavior. It reflects the basic compulsion to tell secrets. It normalizes the experience and alleviates the guilt of having committed, and kept secret, the sin. The accumulation of blog entries over time presents an identity, and as readers, we are asked to reconstruct a stable identity (of the writer) through the reading of these texts.

Similarly to the confessional screen, these texts present an identity while simultaneously being occluded by the limitations of language itself to accurately, and completely contain and represent that identity. The screen provides the global access to the text, but concurrently enables the opportunity for the falsification of an identity. Every author has the choice to write autobiographically or fictionally, but because blogs are assumed to be autobiographical in nature, they provide the opportunity to question the simple division between the two. When compared to other textual media, blogs provide a form where relatively unpolished, often poorly thought out rants, raves, and confessions find a new appeal. This provides a personal tone to the blog that often draws readers into the text. The limited attention spans for reading on the Internet find the shorter text blocks engaging as blogs often propel a prolonged engagement, often daily interaction, with the text. The act of reading the personal thoughts of someone else becomes on some level a reversal of the confessional: as readers we become the priest and allow the confessor (blog author) to construct their identity through our reading. This assures the author of a stable identity through the creation of an artifact while concurrently assuring readers that such an identity is possible.

I am not suggesting that there are overarching linear trajectories through which to trace the evolution of confessional architectures, nor do I find a clear mapping from which to make didactic claims about religion, technology, and relationships of power. But each mode does function in similar and dissimilar ways to its predecessor and this offers the possibility of generalized tracings:

1. The transgressive, although constructed through external influences (parents, organizations of power, popular opinion, etc.) is still mediated and processed within the confessor.
2. Mediation or absolution, although still experienced within the mind of

the confessor is provided externally through interaction with some larger system of power, which legitimates the alleviation of guilt (penance).

3. Communication (that takes place within blogs, chatrooms, instant messages, and text messages) of the transgressive is still separated by some type of screen. This screen affords a multiplicity of ambiguous interactions. The body has been subsumed to the identity, the screen name, the phone number, and this avatar provides the safety that the confessional screen once did.
4. In all these social and religious architectures, text and orality remain consistent. Language is the construct through which the discourses of confession are performed.

In his book, *Confession, Sexuality, Sin, and the Subject*, Peter Tambling comments on how all autobiographical writings, including philosophical writings, or writing where the first person is utilized, are confessions in that they attempt to create a stabilized identity in the sight of the reader (the “I”) ³. The act of writing is about the construction of ideas, ideologies, identities, and arguments in the same way that an oral confession is about the construction of a stabilized sense of self. By confessing that I stole a cow, I declare myself not to be (or desire not to be) the kind of person that would steal a cow. And I make this presentation of myself through a confession of negative identity in the site of God and the priest. This initially confused me in that if confession were about the construction of an identity, why would the confessional screen attempt to obscure facial recognition (however ineffectively) by the priest? Although I don’t have a concise theory regarding this, I feel that the confessional screen functioned in similar ways to the textual interface in all of its manifestations from the page to the computer screen. In general, writing is about

the construction of an idea, and reading is about the reception of that constructed idea. The myth of a fixed and stable identity (or idea) is made possible and practical through its representation on a screen. The screen hides in order to construct. The screen is about allowing transmission while simultaneously preventing a complete recognition (which would destabilize the definable identity). This also reinforces the Catholic dualism of mind=good, body=bad by devaluing the necessity of facial or bodily recognition. It is an impartial recognition that facilitates confession. This idea, almost Platonic in nature, seems to be a cerebral fantasy that drives the world. The idea that we can directly and clearly communicate through language and text, that our meanings and emotions are understood, seems to be like masturbating in the non-existent body of the other (writer).

When you tell me I can't, it just makes me want to do it more.

ENDNOTES

¹Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) 61-62.

²Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) 756-758.

³Jeremy Tambling, *Sexuality, Sin, and the Subject* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990) 185.