

# Epistemology of a Pleat: Blockchain, Feminism, *Charlie's Angels*

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**S**ATOSHI NAKAMOTO'S PSEUDONYMOUS INTRODUCTION TO CRYPTOCURRENCY INTRODUCES the question of the 'third party' in its first sentence as a critical dependency for current financial systems: 'Commerce on the Internet has come to rely almost exclusively on financial institutions serving as trusted third parties to process electronic payments' (1). Such a reliance, involving trust, is secured and determined by 'mediation' (1) in the form of a third party (for example a bank which holds the ledgers that record particular transactions). As such this third party, and the need for trust, detracts from the simplicity and economy of a transaction as 'cost of mediation increases transaction costs' and 'financial institutions cannot avoid mediating disputes' (1). In aesthetic schemes the 'cost' of mediation is incurred by introduction of a material object into a notional or notational system—for example, the 'lossy' or imperfect reproduction of audio and audio-visual media across several generations, the blurry reproduction associated with photocopies, the mechanics of analogue reproduction itself. In both cases, mediation takes on a critical function, one of triangulation, holding apart the two parties of a transaction as a necessary third.

Nakamoto's invention of Bitcoin promises in place of trust and mediation 'cryptographic proof' which would through the recording of the blockchain—a serial and unique representation of transactions held openly rather than in the covert triangle of mediation—remove the need for trust, and therefore mediation,

or mediation, and therefore trust. Nick Land's 'Crypto-Current' focuses even more closely on the email message that introduced Nakamoto's essay, which Land characterises as a 'short text' with 'the status of a Pre-Socratic fragment' (1356), and one which notably also guarantees that the 'new electronic cash system [is] fully peer-to-peer, with no trusted third party' (Nakamoto quoted by Land, 1355).

Land locates in this fragment 'The great conceptual themes of *anonymity* and *singularity*' (1356) that are realised in the technology of peer-to-peer exchanges without trust or mediation, in particular the way blockchain identifies transactions serially and uniquely rather than by parties or by trusted intermediary, and of course in Nakamoto's own pseudonymous presence as 'author'. Land redefines the trusted third party of financial transactions as 'quasi-transcendent overseers'. Such pungent terminology explains perhaps why Benjamin Bratton notes that Bitcoin 'is... the monetary platform of choice of secessionist projects for which the metaphysical expulsion of externalities is the paramount program, as important if not more than the disintermediation of central banks' (336).

The question of what is external to a transaction, then, is a 'metaphysical' one to the extent that 'disintermediation' is a goal or a good for establishing independence from established transactional modes, an independence characterised as 'secessionist projects'. Bitcoin introduced the idea of a 'disintermediation' to describe the literal process by which blockchain records an open ledger of transactions, a facility that promises the evacuation of the third term, the 'trust' or the 'third party' required for transactions to proceed before its innovative peer-to-peer option presented itself, an evacuation of the principle of mediation in transactions.

In a recent interview, Sianne Ngai refers to cryptocurrency derivatives as one of a series of possible 'gimmicks':

What could be more central to the aesthetic culture of mature crisis-prone capitalism, for instance, than the fundamentally overrated, extravagantly impoverished, simultaneously overperforming and underperforming gimmick? In which our perception of dissatisfying form is affectively sutured to an aesthetic judgment that explicitly diagnoses an object's false promise of value? From the stainless-steel banana slicer to the cryptocurrency derivative, or the operatic leitmotif to the readymade artwork, the gimmick's negative aesthetic form lies latent in every capitalist artefact. It is what we call things when we are uncertain if they are historically backward or just as problematically advanced, if they are wonders or tricks. Most crucially, the gimmick

strikes us as both working too little and working too hard. (Manning 121-2)

Here, Ngai's 'theory of the gimmick' identifies the 'cryptocurrency derivative' as a gimmick, one whose 'negative aesthetic form lies latent in every capitalist artefact' (122). The derivative itself, a form of contract between parties that takes as its foundation an underlying financial asset (such as a cryptocurrency) reintroduces the disintermediated peer-to-peer transaction into mediation. As such, it perfectly encompasses the historical equivocation implicit in the gimmick (too soon, too late, as Meaghan Morris might put it).<sup>1</sup> That same equivocation lies in the current status of cryptocurrencies and blockchain as well, which appears as a particularly telling gimmick in the most recent reboot of *Charlie's Angels* (2019). Examining its appearance in the context of the franchise's longer history can elucidate one particular form of this historical shuffle.

The latest of a long line of revivals, *Charlie's Angels* (2019) pivots its plot around blockchain as a transformational entity. The rollout of a novel clean energy source, named Calisto, is compromised when the technology is rushed to market despite knowledge of a 'flaw' in the blockchain that is inherent to Calisto's design. This flaw means that the energy generated by Calisto breaches its border, mysteriously and muddily affecting those around it rather than furnishing the 'clean energy' it promised. Although the flaw is a known issue and a half-hearted whistle-blower tries to prevent the rollout of Calisto, a sinister upper manager-sleazy huckster called Peter Fleming appeals to the narcissism of Callista's presiding entrepreneur Alexander Brok and it is launched. Calisto, more, is an object, a small, designed puzzle-like 'thing,' which, as Fleming sleazily reminds us, can be produced in pastels 'for the ladies'. His characterisation is oddly antique, a kind of anti-feminist condescension that brings the 2019-era franchise back to its 1970s origin story, where three capable women, alienated within the LAPD, were lured away to become private detectives. Cue the Angels, then, who sort things out with a manic energy borrowed more from the 2000s reboot rather than the moodier 1970s original, and in the process recruit the tremulous whistle-blower to the Angel sorority.

Fleming's argument in favour of launching the flawed version of Calisto is all about timing. Analogising its launch to the invention of the lightbulb, he pushes the date to ensure Calisto is the first mover, that is the first version of this energy source that goes to market. This pressure perfectly encapsulates its gimmick status as historical perplexity. The 'first to market' principle undermines the very notion of novelty, because it can only mean there are several different versions of the same

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<sup>1</sup> See her magisterial analysis of these tropes as constitutive of historical parsing in *Too Soon, Too Late*.

thing, vying for attention in a famously distracted economy. As such, its novelty is its gimmick, and the launch is made with just the kind of wonder and trickery that a gimmick promises as Calisto is cued to demonstrate power beyond the grid by lighting the building housing the launch on its own gimmicky grunt.

Even this brief plot summary shows how blockchain is in evidence as a kind of master trope for lateral connection and Calisto as an object to stand for contemporaneity itself. Such historical marking through gimmickry is not new to the franchise. From its televisual debut in 1976 the *Charlie's Angels* franchise has been plotting and exploiting a representation of the world that made explicit the infrastructure that supports communication and which as such structures, embodies, and facilitates inequalities of power. Their agency, headed by the enigmatic, and presumably pseudonymous Charlie Townsend, dealt with acts of criminal malfeasance by relying on the capacities of the trio: each Angel was a virtuoso as well as an all-rounder, prized for their physique, or their intellect, or their nous, and all three. The series and reboots introduced new Angels but maintained these formal elements: the women were differentiated in terms of their prowess, easily functioned as a cohort or collegiate (no 'cat-fights' or rivalry beyond what might be expected in a lightweight sororal context); they were frequently in danger and always on the side of the angels, if not strict adherents to legal or ethical mandates—a remnant of the noir origins of this sunnyside-up, Californian fantasy. Their contact with Charlie was always mediated by Charlie's *aide-de-camp* or third-party intermediary, Bosley, whose value, we learn in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003) is that 'he connects us to Charlie'. This act is simultaneously accomplished by the use of another gimmick, a speaker, out of which Charlie's (i.e. John Forsythe's) voice issued while Charlie himself never appeared.

As Amelie Hastie reminds us, the precession of historical and historicised media, including the waning aura of the movie star, was a staple concern of television as a medium and *Charlie's Angels* in particular; of Ida Lupino's appearance in one episode she writes that 'Entangled in the story of this fictional character is a history and language of classical Hollywood film, demonstrated, too, by Lupino's very appearance' (54). Both of McG's *Charlie's Angels* reboots feature elaborate jokes about the reboot as such; in *Charlie's Angels* (2000) a parody reboot of T. J. Hooker is playing on the small screen in the airplane cabin where the film begins; in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003) a winking conversation about a problematic sequel (with twelve writers) takes place while a television set is precariously held by Alex Munday (Lucy Liu), a comically referential and gimmicky, slapstick setup that recapitulates the kinetic energy and obsolete technology around which the earlier film's own references revolved: the physical battle foreshortened by the television as bulky impediment to smooth action. As impediment it reintroduces as well the question of mediation. Such a

preoccupation spans the various incarnations of the series where versions of the same speaker are presented to introduce Charlie's voice into the *mise-en-scène*. Charlie's anonymity and singularity are an anchoring device for the franchise, creating interest but not paranoid suspicion as such. With one exception all the interlocution between Charlie and his Angels takes place with the anchoring mediation of a Western Electric Bell System Speakerphone, a model that debuted in 1958 and was a fixture on desks of the 1960s and 1970s at least.<sup>2</sup> On the television series it is embellished with a Bell proprietary trademark; a plastic facsimile of the speaker was used in press kits to promote the *Full Throttle* sequel in 2003, seven years after the demise of Western Electric itself.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the speakerphone is instructive, because it demonstrates how the franchise invested in technological gimmickry. If its founding premise was the gimmick of female action heroes, a developing genre of primetime drama in the mid-1970s (*Police Woman*, *The Bionic Woman*), that gimmick remained unexpectedly productive in Banks' overtly feminist rescripting of the story for 2019. For example, instead of just Angels being fungible, in 2019 one Bosley has become many Bosleys, intermediaries of more than one sex and more than one ethnic presentation. A feminist ethos is an explicit weapon deployed by the Angels as enunciated by Sabina (Kristen Stewart) in the opening line 'I think women can do anything'. The story revolutionises the ethos of the earlier versions however by introducing a problem within the system itself: it turns out that criminality is located within, rather than exterior to the Townsend Agency. After an appropriate set of diversions and false leads, one Bosley is revealed to have mediated between the Angels and Charlie in such a way as to introduce a flaw into the Agency system, a problem not unlike the metaphorical blockchain flaw that threatens the contenance of Calisto.

The gimmick-object Calisto and its blockchain flaw return in the guise of plot. A flaw within the agency produces the effect a flaw in the object does, of incontinent energy with lethal effects. At the same time, the productive value of a material mediation or third term, a trusted intermediary has been undermined. Although no description for Calisto's flaw is provided it is surely one of historicity or timing. The premise of blockchain is that it records transactions sequentially, in their order of occurrence. As temporal order is the organising premise temporal disorder is its logical disordering event, a flaw and disruption that could be understood topographically as akin to a pleat, where the past is folded up into the

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<sup>2</sup> In the least remembered reboot, the 2011 ABC series, a period-appropriate speaker was used in place of the Western Electric speakerphone. I have spotted the Western Electric speakerphone on a desk in the first season of the television series *Peyton Place* (1964). See the historical record of Western Systems telephony here:

<[https://beatriceco.com/bti/porticus/bell/the\\_bell\\_system\\_telephone\\_story.html](https://beatriceco.com/bti/porticus/bell/the_bell_system_telephone_story.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> See <<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/charlies-angels-full-throttle-press-82817008>>.

present. Such a pleated temporality is at the heart of the gimmick's temporal ambiguity too—whether the gimmick is 'historically backward or just as problematically advanced' (Manning 122) and contests the status of the premise of blockchain, a clean, unmediated connection implied by the fantasy Calisto materialises, of the 'metaphysical expulsion of externalities'. The pleat-flaw of Calisto brings its operations back into the logic of mediation and as Ngai writes of the gimmick 'there is disappointment precisely because euphoria comes before. The gimmick lets us down—self-corrects our overestimation of its abilities—only because it has also managed to pump us up' (481).

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