PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

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CHAPTER 6
IN LAG OF KNOWLEDGE

THE VIDEO ESSAY AS PARAPRAXIS

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In the preface to the enlarged version of *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell points out a banal yet fundamental predicament of his philosophical engagement with film, namely the fact that "in speaking of a moment or sequence from a film we, as we might put it, cannot *quote* the thing we are speaking of" (1979: ix). The advent of digital film formats and the fact that editing software, once reserved for professional filmmakers, which has now become easily accessible to every owner of a computer seem to have solved Cavell's problem. Film, once famously described by Raymond Bellour as an ultimately "unattainable text" (2000: 21–7), has become, thanks to digital formats, more at hand than ever before. The success and extreme proliferation, in recent years, of the genre of the video essay (or videographic essay or audiovisual essay)[1] is a result of this new "attainability" of the filmic text which allows for an engagement with cinema in which the object of study has finally become quotable. Instead of being a mere object for analysis which needs to be translated into (and is thus continuously missed) by the written text, the video essay uses film as the very tool of its own analysis. Rather than thinking *about*, the video essay is thinking *with* film, and is thus a prime example for what a "practical aesthetics" of film in the digital age could mean.

As a booming strand of film studies video essays have become part of academic research as well as film criticism or expression of personal cinephilia. They are found as "Special Features" on DVD editions and as additional content on film streaming platforms. They are collected in specialized YouTube and Vimeo channels and featured in film magazines, exclusively devoted to this format, like *[In-]Transition* or *The Cine-Files*.

It would, however, be a mistake to take the contemporary video essay as a new phenomenon only. Rather, it is also a continuation and reemergence of essayistic film practices already extensively deployed by filmmakers such as Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Harun Farocki and can be traced further back to surrealist avant-garde cinema in the 1930s or Dziga Vertov's radical investigations of the medium in the 1920s. What is new is how broadly popular the form has become, since digitalization has not only facilitated the access to film history and its artifacts but has also made the transition from consumer to producer easier: the smartphones in our pockets serve as portable movie screens and double as film cameras, making potential directors out of us all.

I will not attempt a survey on the rapidly evolving history (or rather: histories) of the audiovisual essay and its manifold theoretical implications, since they have already been

outlined much more thoroughly by other scholars (cf. Baptista 2016; Grizzaffi 2017; Pantenburg 2019) and in particular by the extensive work of film theorist and video essayist Catherine Grant in her numerous video essays and publications on the subject, collected in her blog *Film Studies for Free* and on her Vimeo channel *Audiovisualcy. An Online Forum for Videographic Film Studies*.

Instead, I aim to focus on one particular aspect in video essayistic practice which seems more crucial to me, while video essays have become more professional due to better digital equipment. Namely, I am interested in what new forms of disruptions and frustrations the new technologies confront us with when looking at films and how these disruptions can serve as critical practices in the video essay. In contrast to the common assumption that digital devices increase and facilitate our consumption of audiovisual content, I would argue that while providing broader access to film and film history they also install new and intricate forms of interference or "unattainability" which are worth being analyzed. Picking up on Catherine Grant's discussion of the different "affordances" of digital technology for video essayistic practice (2014), I would claim that—rather paradoxically—some of its most interesting offerings are precisely the ways in which digital technology makes film viewing not easier but more difficult.

Dealing with Lag

It has happened to all of us: we are streaming a sports game, we are watching the latest episode of our favorite drama series on our iPad, and we are getting to the grand finale, the players are approaching the finish line—and then, all of a sudden, the image comes to a halt. The ball is suspended in mid-air, the lips of the two protagonists cannot meet. The effect, commonly referred to as "lag" (or "buffering") is as ubiquitous as it is annoying. Caused by slow connection speed which hinders the stream of digital content to catch up with our consumption of it, the moving images comes to a sudden halt. Similarly, a corrupted file or a software error can suddenly turn the movie classic we are so fond of into an unrecognizable pulp of glittering pixels. What could be more infuriating to the cinephile's eye? Yet at the same time and totally by accident, these moments of irritating interruption produce their own form of beauty. As the novelist Tom McCarthy pointed out: "[A]ll these blocks of color and movement collaging in every which arrangement— it becomes this really avant-garde piece of visual art. The interruption is a wonderful moment and it's not nothing, it's something much more interesting than the other thing" (2014: 55).

My question is thus: Can moments like these be taken as the starting point for an analysis of film? And could the video essay be a form not only to think *with* film but also to think *with* these new tools that we use and get interrupted by when watching and analyzing film today? "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts," Friedrich Nietzsche famously wrote in one of his typewriter letters (2003: 18). Meant as expressing his own frustration over the unreliability of the often dysfunctional machine, the aphorism has since become a "leitmotif" for media theory after Friedrich

Kittler (cf. 1999: xxxi). Picking up on Nietzsche (and Kittler), I argue that the video essay may render this interaction *with* and interruption *by* the working tools of film viewing visible by dealing with interferences such as "lag" no longer as accidents which are foreign to film experience but as productive new encounters with cinema and its history.

In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey already outlined the potential of practices like pause and interruption for film analysis in her concept of "delayed viewing"—a practice that is deeply intertwined with the change in film formatting. As Mulvey argues, the possibility to stop a film when watched on a DVD satisfies a desire of the movie audience, turning them from passive into "possessive" spectators (2006: 161–80). The cinematic experience, once elusive and ephemeral due to its particular technological dispositive which was controlled by the operator in theater, is now in the hands of the viewer. With digital formats, every spectator becomes operator, able to stop, rewind, replay, slow down, or speed up the film at his or her own discretion.

What makes Mulvey's concept so fascinating is that it encompasses both the fetishistic pleasure *in* and the destructive annihilation *of* cinematic experience. The ability to replay certain scenes from a film holds the promise of prolonged and supposedly inexhaustible enjoyment. At the same time however, the very practice of stopping, repeating, and delaying a film puts into question its very properties: a paused film is no longer a film. The act of fetishistic inspection is at the same time an aggressive dissection which literally stops the moving image dead. In accordance with this ambivalence, delayed viewing brings to our attention something that is undeniably part of the actual film while at the same time invisible when watched as intended, as a moving image. D. H. Miller, in his *Hidden Hitchcock* for example, uses delayed viewing in order to unearth details planted in films by Alfred Hitchcock that could never be seen in cinema but which only become visible when clicking through the films on your computer frame by frame. Miller calls this practice a "too-close viewing" (2016: 4)—a term that already points out how problematic and questionable its findings might be.

All the same, precisely because delayed viewing is an excessive strategy which renders the "normal" movie consumption impossible, it can serve a critical function. As Mulvey points out, ideologies at play, for example, in Classical Hollywood become subverted simply by slowing the films down:

> The smooth linearity and forward movement of the story become jagged and uneven, undermining the male protagonist's command over the action. The process of identification, usually kept in place by the relation between plot and character, suspense and transcendence, loses its hold over the spectator. And the loss of ego and self-consciousness that has been, for so long, one of the pleasures of the movies gives way to an alert scrutiny and scanning of the screen, lying in wait, as it were, to capture a favorite or hitherto unseen detail. With the weakening of narrative and its effects, the aesthetic of the film begins to become "feminized," with the shift in spectatorial power relations dwelling on pose, stillness, lighting and the choreography of character and camera. (2006: 165)

Inviting Contingence

Delayed viewing as critical practice with its potential to subvert normative readings of films can be seen at use in large numbers of video essays, and it is not surprising that Laura Mulvey's concept (alongside Raymond Bellours notion of the "unattainable text") has served as a starting point for theorizing the genre (cf. Baptista 2016: 11; Grizzaffi 2017: 32–5).

However, I would propose to go even further and include even more contingent forms of delay as critical tools. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, in Mulvey's delayed viewing "there is something very determined and controlled about this 'individual' access to contingency" (Doane 2007: 23). As Doane points out, pausing and slowing down of DVDs has in fact already become an "institutionally authorized form of contemporary spectatorship" (23). In contrast to this, she is far more interested in "unstructured and unanticipated" moments of contingency "outside of or beyond that of the shot, the editing, the narrative of the film" but which are nonetheless "certainly a part of the experience of a film" (18). Doane mentions in particular the experimental films by Bill Morrison with their chronicling of the deterioration and destruction of nitrate film stock and how Morrison's films turn those very material changes—which are no longer controlled nor intended by any human actor—into an artistic investigation of the film medium per se (cf. Herzogenrath 2018).

But while Doane seems to reserve such encounters with contingency only to the analogue film material and sees the digital as mostly "antithetical to . . . the fascination with contingency" (20), I would rather extend her argument onto phenomena that are even more unstable and can be attributed to the film even less as corpus but which result from the new viewing technologies themselves. As I would argue, it is precisely in phenomena like "lag" that we encounter events of contingency which are even less fixed (and thus even less controllable) than the deteriorations of analogue film material but which are nonetheless inscribing themselves into our film experience. But at the same time the status of these disruptions and deformations in relation to the "original" film are even more unclear.

We can easily imagine how a cinephile might cherish a particular worn-out analogue film copy of, let's say, Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* for its faded colors or intricate scratches. And although such a copy would not be considered as reference for a restoration of the film in question, it would undoubtedly be granted cinematic value. It is however certainly much more unlikely that we would have similar acceptance for a corrupted digital version of that film which is highly pixelated, glitched, and disfigured by lag effects. Accidents like these are also less "shareable" with other viewers because they are not materially part of the distorted movie—in contrast to the marks on analogue film strip—but result from an individual interaction between data, software, and hardware and that can therefore never be fully reproduced. Digital distortions occurring only within a series of translations and remediations (film stock being scanned and turned into digital data, which then gets copied, compressed, streamed, and played back) thus seem to have nothing to do with the "original" film.[2] Nonetheless, as I would argue,

it is precisely because these distorted film images lag/lack authority they can become surprisingly revealing.

Illegitimate Offspring

As I was recently rewatching the 1957 melodrama *Peyton Place*, the image at one point, due to an interruption in the stream of digital data, stuttered and disintegrated into blocks of pixels. It was a scene in which Constance MacKenzie—one of the main characters and played by the film's star Lana Turner—just got up from her desk in order to greet her housekeeper, Nellie. Instead of a glamorous star body, my device showed Lana Turner as split into two ghosts, one with parts of her body already disappearing, while the other, even more uncannily, only consisted in dress, legs, and arms with an empty spot where the face would have been. Luckily, I reacted quickly enough to at least capture a screenshot of this fleeting and irretrievable moment (Figure 7.1).

It struck me how this image, inadvertently, serves as a metaphor for so many of the film's concerns. The digital lag produced what Walter Benjamin describes as a dialectical *Denkbild*: "when thought comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, there appears the dialectical image" (Benjamin 1999: 475).

As I have outlined in a different context, the narrative of Grace Metalious's scandalous 1956 novel *Peyton Place* about infidelity and illegitimacy in a conservative New England town is mirrored by a sprawling, transmedial production history: Metalious's manuscript was thoroughly censured, edited, and revised in order to become a best seller, which then was adapted into a blockbuster movie, which then led to Metalious writing a sequel, which in turn was made into a second movie, all of which eventually led to the series *Peyton Place* (the first soap opera smash hit on American television in 1964). However, each of these transmedial reformulations and revisions of the *Peyton Place* narrative enacts on the level of production, via screenwriting and casting decisions, mise-en-scène,

Figure 7.1 *Glitched Peyton Place*,
Photograph by the Author.

and advertising campaigns those very acts of hypocrisy, silencing, and abuse that the original story tells about. If the central question of Metalious's novel is that of bastardy and illegitimacy, it is also the central question for the different adaptations, which are not only illegitimately rewriting the author's original text but which themselves put her authority as writer into question (cf. Binotto 2016).

Repetition, translation, transformation, transmediation, reproduction, procreation, embodiment, disfigurement, dismemberment, destruction, and deconstruction—all those practices and the question of their (il)legitimacy are found perfectly incapsulated in this lagging image on my iPad. Taken from a film about a novel about bastardy, this image itself, as the product of an illegitimate accident, begs the question: What gave birth to that?

Working Poor

Pixelated and degraded, the scene from *Peyton Place* as was presented to me by my digital device is also an exemplary case of what the video artist and theorist Hito Steyerl calls a "poor image":

> The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. (Steyerl 2009)

However, the poor image as an "illicit bastard" not only raises the question of genealogy illegitimacy again, but also links this with questions of class struggle. As Steyerl writes, the poor image must also be seen as a "lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearance," which makes visible the production and exploitation within capitalist mass culture of which the poor image is both product and waste.

Keeping that in mind, it strikes me even more that exactly in this scene from *Peyton Place*, right after the lag occurred, the character of the housekeeper Nellie in answer to her employer's question why she didn't stay at home utters the following line: "Work keeps my mind off of things." All of a sudden, this simple sentence (which in the context of the film's plot is hinting at Nellie's distress over having found out about the abuse of her daughter) is now revealed to be highly overdetermined: Inadvertently, it becomes a contradictory but curiously apt metatheoretical comment on what just occurred on my iPad: If the film streaming had worked as usual, I wouldn't have minded the scene and this particular sentence. But also: The way it worked my device kept my mind off of things we normally focus on like plot or character. Instead, it brought to my attention the work itself: the functions and dysfunctions of the very technology we use.

"Work keeps my mind off of things"—so the lagged film told me—could ultimately be the slogan of a practical aesthetics of film, a practice that does not already know beforehand what "things" it wants to prove but which is open for unexpected encounters found in the process of "work" itself.

Para-Practice, Para-Site

Such a practical aesthetics—which I have just tried not only to describe but also to perform—puts the accident and the lag/lack of knowledge at its center. As a name for this particular form of an accidental practical aesthetics, I propose the Freudian term of *Fehlleistung*—parapraxis. But while parapraxis is normally (and also by Freud) thought of as an inner conflict between the subject's conscious intention and the unconscious, I would take the term in a both more pragmatic and literal but thus also in a more radical sense. Parapraxis is to be located "beyond" or "beside" it (as the prefix "para-" already suggests) instead of within the subject. Following Jacques Lacan's claim for an "ex-sistence" of the unconscious, with which he means that unconscious processes have less to do with supposedly inner motives but rather with external (media) practices such as language (cf. Lacan 2002: 6), so too "parapraxis" must be seen at work in those technological practices with which we engage. And picking up on Félix Guattari's concept of a machine-unconscious (cf. Guattari 1984: 111–19), I argue that not only slips of tongue but also the parapraxes of technical objects and devices, the slips, blips, beeps, and lags of microphones, typewriters, cameras, projectors, and computers make us encounter the unconscious (cf. Binotto 2018).

I understand the video essay as a preeminent field of parapraxis inasmuch as it does not try to contain or exhaust film by analyzing its contents but instead by opening it up to those distortions that supposedly have nothing to do with it and that seem to come from outside as interferences. Parapraxis is thus also a parasitic practice in the sense that Michel Serres used the term. As Serres elaborates in his discussion of the "parasite" what lies at the center of all media and technology is not the undeviated transfer of information but distortion: "No canal without noise" (Serres 1982: 79). Accordingly, the parasite is not simply an external intruder which lives off of the host but rather an agent of the host's evolution (184). Similarly, the video essay as a parasite of cinema lives off of film history but also revolutionizes it, by exposing cinema to new forms of interference. The video essay thus eventually can be seen also as a para-site, a different scene of film, a new site for making and watching films differently.

Against Certain Tendencies

There seems to be a certain tendency in the contemporary video essay (to borrow the famous phrasing of François Truffaut's polemic against French cinema)—a tendency toward the polished and the smooth, toward the elegant, and the easily scrollable (cf. Lee

2017). And this tendency is not restricted to one of the two major modes of the video essay as they have been distinguished by Christian Keathley (2011) as the "explanatory mode" and the "poetic mode." Not only the explanatory video essays with their focus on traditional interpretative practices are prone to being reductive (cf. López and Martin 2017) but also the essays in the "poetic mode." Particularly, when "poetic" means that these videos are primarily invested in a celebration of the beauty of cinematic images (perhaps most extremely exemplified in the format of the supercut), they often feel like they rather gloss over than really engage with film.
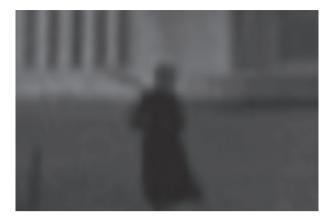
In addition to Keathleys's distinction between the poetic and the explanatory, I would thus propose a third mode, the mode of parapraxis. It is important to note that the parapraxis mode, for that matter, is located neither in-between nor in clear distance to both the poetic and the explanatory modes but rather crosses the two in accidental and uncontrollable ways.

Pam Cook's video essay *Timeless* on Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* may serve as an example for that. Looking forward to using the beautiful imagery of the film for her argument, Cook soon felt frustrated by the poor quality of the digital clips she had to use. However, as she relates in the accompanying text to her essay (and as the essay itself proves), she eventually saw in those very degradations of the digital images a potential: "My sense of loss provoked me to reflect on the affective resonance of image deterioration and its potential as a conduit for memory and nostalgia. . . . the aesthetic of imperfection draws attention to videography's micro-scale, cut-and-paste mode of production and situates it outside, sometimes in opposition to, mainstream digital output and the aspiration to hyperrealism" (Cook 2014).

In the lack *of* and *in* those images Cook accidentally but much more profoundly encountered the "lag" of time and memory, which is central not only to Wong Kar-wai's film but also to the engagement with this film and to the videographer's practice per se.

Something similar could be said about the highly compressed, stuttering, and jerking clips from Allan Dwan's *Heidi* in Catherine Grant's video essay *Mechanised Flights* as they undercut our enjoyment of the children's classic and its star Shirley Temple but instead force us into acknowledging the disturbing ambiguities that were always already present within the film but which also arose from the film's digital afterlife, as well as from our own troubled and changing relationship to said film.

To me, one of the most striking examples of such a parapractical video essay which *thinks with* the accidental coincidences of digital technology is still B. Kite's and Alexander Points-Zollo's three-part *Vertigo Variations*. Abstaining (at least for the most part) from the film's imagery, so fetishized by cinephiles, this video essay shows instead a *Vertigo* as one has never experienced it before: blurred, fractured, pixelated, and disappearing in clouds of digital noise with an unstable soundtrack (Figure 7.2). But in these abrasive, jarringly poor sounds and images, produced by a parapractical use of digital tools, an incredible richness of new encounters can be found. A supposedly all-too-familiar film alongside an assumed all-too-functional technology becomes a new site, a para-site of thinking with film. One could yet bemoan that such an experimental approach still feels obliged to revisit such an over-fetishized film and is thus still holding to classical

Figure 7.2 *Vertigo Variations, pt. 3*, Directed by B. Kite and Alexander Points-Zollo © Moving Image, 2011. All rights reserved.

auteurism, instead of looking at a far-less appreciated and noncanonized film like *Peyton Place*. Furthermore and perhaps more fundamentally, one can criticize that most digital distortions in the *Vertigo Variations* are of course no longer merely accidental but must be controlled in order to result into an actual video essay. Defects are eventually turned into effects and thus domesticated. Accidental artifact quickly becomes commodity (cf. Menkman 2011: 46–58).

This predicament, however, is the predicament of a parapractial aesthetics per se: Parapraxis cannot become a method to be taught and followed, but is far more a question of attitude. It means to be open to the occurrence, to be willing to work *with* instead of needing to prevent the accident. Parapraxis will thus also never become a tendency within the genre of the video essay, due to tendencies by definition being about foreseeable developments. In parapraxis, we all must remain, by necessity, amateurs, mere practitioners instead of professionals—with our minds kept off of things by the work itself, in constant lag of knowledge.

Notes

1. Regarding terminology, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin have suggested that "audiovisual essay" is to be preferred over "video essay" because, firstly, the former acknowledges the decisive role of sound and, secondly, because video is an anachronistic format (2014). I would nonetheless hold on to term "video," because of the digital format's close relation to electronic video signal, particularly to its aspects of instability, processuality, and reflexivity as discussed by Yvonne Spielmann (2008). Furthermore, I like that it suggests a connection between contemporary video essay practice and the radical investigations in the visual by video artists such as Shigeko Kubota, Dara Birnbaum, or Steina and Woody Vasulka.

2. In contrast to that, Barbara Klinger in her research on the "aftermarket" of cinema convincingly argued that the different (transmedial) reissues of a film (including pan-and-

scan TV versions or VHS-tapes) must be read not as mutilations but as legitimate texts which foreground an "inherent changeability of the film body" per se (2013: 27).

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