

Technology and the moving image

Since its earliest manifestations, moving image art has been bound up with technology as a medium of image-production, projection, distribution and dissemination; in this sense all of its works engage with technology. However, technology in its broader capacity as the use of technical means within life, society and the environment, is also a subject of enquiry for many artists, using the moving image or not; it can also refer to broader historical milieus within which all cultural practice takes place. I want to discuss some of difficulties these interlocking meanings present before moving on to the topic this essay will focus on: how artist have used the moving image to address the liveness and immediacy that technology enables.

Adorno, in his earlier writings, suggested that the motion picture was rooted less in artistic wants and more in the fact that sound and image technology had reached the point of becoming feasible methods of image production; this was 'essentially unrelated, or related only very indirectly, to any possible aesthetic idea.'¹ As Miriam Hansen explains², for Adorno the cinema's techniques of mass reproduction and distribution are the very basis of its artistic processes, which is arguably true of all other moving image art. This deterministic approach, whereby art works are simply symptomatic of technological advances, was countered by André Bazin amongst others, who believed cinema was already developed in the cultural imagination before its technology was even conceived of. For him, "to place the scientific discoveries or the industrial techniques that have loomed so large in its development at the source of the cinema's invention"³ would be reversing the order of causality; technology merely facilitated what was already present conceptually. Balancing out these opposing views, technology could instead be seen as 'a social product, constituted by-and constituting-society'⁴, shaping art works as much as they shape it. This social aspect is particularly true of moving image technology, which is also used in the wider culture by institutions like TV and cinema.

The institutions that employ moving image technologies have been the subject of many artists' enquiries, such as David Hall, who suggested that 'film (as cinema) and video (as television) became of interest, because they were the media of now'⁵. Artists thus use mediums (film, video) to address the institutions associated with them (cinema, TV). Unlike more traditional media, moving image artworks often utilise technologies that simultaneously operate in commercial, domestic, surveillance and military spheres. These associations thus imbue- or taint- the technology, whether or not they are the focus of the work; as Mike Leggett points out, video was subject to countercultural suspicion due to its roots in military

¹ Quoted by Miriam B. Hansen 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966)', *New German Critique*, No. 24/25, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema, Autumn, 1981 - Winter, 1982, pp. 188
Original quote from Hanns Eisler (and Theodor W. Adorno), *Composing for the Films* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 63; German original (Adorno's version), repr. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15 (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 64.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted in Jonathan Walley, 'The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film', *October*, Vol. 103 (Winter, 2003), p. 23

⁴ Scott McQuire and Natalia Radywyl, 'From Object to Platform: Art, digital technology and time', *Time & Society*, vol. 19 No. 1 (2010), p. 9

⁵ Quoted in Duncan White, 'British Expanded Cinema and the 'Live Culture' 1969-79', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 11 no1 March 2010, p96

reconnaissance and its deployment in the Vietnam War⁶. Moreover, older media, like painting and sculpture, are indisputably art and have no other function in the way that a medium like video does, and thus have no 'mainstream' to define themselves against. However, this problematic, mostly oppositional relationship to a 'mainstream' has been a productive one, and rejection of its codes has arguably been a motivating force behind much avant-garde film⁷. Although these relationships may be less acutely delineated today, the economic and conceptual differentiation of artists' moving image from its other manifestations remains one of its defining characteristics.

Seeking the defining characteristic of the medium of film has also been a key avant-garde preoccupation, according to John Hanahrdt. He argues that the work of Structural/ Materialist filmmakers 'subverts cinematic convention by exploring its properties and materials'⁸ in a continuation of the modernist tradition of aiming to locate a medium's specific, essential properties. A similar desire to self-reflexively investigate video technology also motivated much early artistic experimentation, for example Nam June Paik's use of a magnet to distort a TV set's cathode ray in *Magnet TV* (1965). While this explored the physical nature of signal transmission, it also underscored the inextricability of the medium from its social, domestic use, suggesting its 'essence' could not be sought in mechanics alone. A quality that seemed innate to video's first practitioners was immediacy, the instantaneous playback of footage and the illusion of liveness that it engendered. Of course video, like all representational technologies, is a recorded medium, and is thus a mediation, but unlike film the speed at which the exchange occurs bolstered this illusion. However, any act of mediation brings about a shift in the way the experience or event being recorded is understood.

Writing when the first flush of excitement over film was ebbing away, Walter Benjamin made numerous prescient observations about the effect of technology on the artwork. Comparing the painted image to that of film he notes that for the viewer 'No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed.'⁹ This shock effect of constant flux highlights the fundamental difference of film: the incorporating of temporal relations with spatial relations. While film seemed to animate images, injecting them with vitality in a way that Jean Epstein described as 'a transformation as amazing as the generation of life from inanimate things'¹⁰, it also introduced a new form of temporality, one based on reproduction.

In Benjamin's famous formulation, aura, the 'unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be' withers under the influence of reproduction, which allows the masses to grasp previously distant places, objects and events, bringing them

⁶ Mike Leggett, 'Private Performance and Making Art with Video', paper presented at Tate Modern Symposium on *Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception* 17-19 April 2009, podcast accessed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/podcast/feed.xml>

⁷ See for example Jonas Mekas' discussion of how avant-garde film defined itself against the mainstream, including the interesting evolution of nomenclature in 'Independence for independents' in Chris Holmlund, Justin Wyatt (eds.) *Contemporary American independent film: from the margins to the mainstream*, Routledge, 2005

⁸ John G. Hanahrdt, "The Medium Viewed: American Avant-Garde Film," in *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Marilyn Singer (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1976), p. 22. OCTOBER 103, Quoted by Jonathan Walley, 'The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film', *OCTOBER*, Vol. 103 (Winter, 2003), p. 15

⁹ Walter Benjamin, (1936), *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp217-253

¹⁰ Quoted by Laura Mulvey in her essay 'The Possessive Spectator'. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a second: stillness and the moving image*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p175

ever “closer” spatially and humanly¹¹. A new temporality is thus borne out reproduction, whereby the unique, unrepeatable time and place of a piano recital can potentially be repeated ad infinitum in multiple, as yet undetermined, times and places, meshing the viewer’s temporal plane with that of the reproduced event. Spatial relations are also rewritten, with distances collapsed between the event and the viewer, as the reproduction now travels to the masses in the comfort of their own homes. How has this ‘bringing closer’ affected the modes of address artworks employ? How does it position the viewing subjects, who, as John Ellis describes in the context of TV, are ‘separated in space yet united in time’¹²?

The knowledge of mediation transforms the presentation of the self, as seen in the early cinema that Tom Gunning has described as the ‘cinema of attractions’. He argues that it was fundamentally “a cinema that displaces its visibility, willing to rupture a self enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator”¹³, for example by making eye-contact, displaying exhibitionism and acknowledging the camera. These self-reflexive gestures foreground the fact of mediation, interrupting the fictional present of the narrative and alerting the viewer to both the artifice of filmic temporality and the reality of their own present. Despite being beyond the scope of this essay, Malcolm Le Grice’s articulation of the tension between real and representational (narrative) time/ space in his writing around expanded cinema¹⁴ should be mentioned in this context. Awareness of mediation thus engenders an ‘outward-facing’ style of address that is presaged by the knowledge of its consequent reception by countless possible viewers in innumerable futures.

Whereas the playful solicitation of the viewer in early cinema embodies the uncontrived experiments of a medium in its infancy, before Hollywood narrative conventions triumphed¹⁵, Andy Warhol’s *Screen Tests* address the potentially uneasy relationship between performer and viewer within the fully codified system of film. Beautiful faces are methodically, almost mechanically, offered up in medium close up for inspection by a stationary camera for the full three minutes of the film reel, in what David James calls ‘a theatre of self-presentation’ where people are “always trying to accommodate themselves to the demands of the camera.”¹⁶ Referencing cinema as an industry by re-enacting a stage of the casting process, *Screen Tests* underlines both the industrial production of the spectacle and the commodification of humans into consumer goods via their transmutation into ‘stars’. Evoking the mass-production line underscores the interchangeability and ultimate disposability of any one of these stars, whose value is fleeting and dependant upon their ability to successfully ‘connect’, through the camera, to an audience. If performance is inevitable, James argues, it constitutes being as performance, a prescient assessment of contemporary subjectivity as well. However, the camera has the power to look away, suggesting a dynamic of control over the performed self.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² John Ellis, *Seeing things: television in the age of uncertainty*, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 2000

¹³ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde.” *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Robert Stam & Toby Miller. Blackwell, 2000. 229-235.

¹⁴ Malcolm Le Grice, ‘Real Time/Space’, in Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, BFI, London 2001

¹⁵ Miriam Hansen, argues the standardization of narrative film had already taken place in the US between 1906-07, repressing the ‘primitive’ attractions of exhibitionism and viewer acknowledgement. In Miriam Hansen, ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology”’, *New German Critique*, No. 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory. (Winter, 1987), p 180

¹⁶ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p 67.

Preventing the viewer from exercising this power to look away is one of TV's most urgent aims. One way of achieving this is through the intimacy of the 'televsual address', a direct-to-camera delivery which ranges in tone from authoritative and informative to conspiratorial and chatty, according to the show's requirements. It relies on uniting viewer and performer in an imaginary shared present regardless of the temporal and spatial distance separating them, in what John Ellis calls TV's 'co-presence'¹⁷. This combines with the perceived 'liveness' of TV to create the illusion of an unmediated reality.

Duncan White pinpoints the moon landing in 1969 as the moment when 'television solidified its position as the main mediator of public consciousness by emphasizing its unique value as a 'live' medium'¹⁸, a value that has been consistently explored by artists using video. David Hall's *This is a television receiver* (1976) rigorously deconstructs both the illusion of an unmediated TV present and the authority of the televisual address through repeated replay of a message read by news broadcaster Richard Baker. His words draw attention to the mediated nature of TV transmission by alerting the viewer to both the fact of representation (this is *not* a man), and to the boxy objecthood of the TV set itself. What Cate Elwes calls the 'death of the image by abstraction' through three generations of image and sound replay also foregrounds the recorded nature of TV, and by extension, of video. This recorded, mediated nature is normally repressed in the service of an illusory 'present' premised on the possibility of liveness (despite, as Ellis has pointed out, the relative improbability of its actual occurrence) and facilitated by what Raymond Williams called TVs 'flow'¹⁹. Flow creates a syntax for what would otherwise be a fragmented jumble of series, adverts, indents and shows, creating a temporal continuity that seduces the viewer into an attentiveness that ad revenues depend on.

Richard Serra and Carlotta Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* (1973) in a more didactic way attacks television's efficiency in delivering viewers to corporations, both through adverts and through the wider messages of consumption and normative behaviour its' shows promote. What Douglas David called TV's 'sense of 'authentic presence'²⁰ and its corollary, an illusion of an unmediated reality, could obviously be harnessed for ideological ends; after all, if what was seen and heard on TV was 'real' and authentic then it was probably 'true' as well.

Video technology's deployment in TV meant that as an artistic medium it was already codified as 'live' through association. For artists, the collapse of the temporal distance of the action, event or performance and its viewing that video allowed accentuated this quality of immediacy. In 'Live on Tape', William Kaizen quotes a range of artists for whom video and immediacy were inextricably linked, from Lynda Benglis to Nam June Paik, who marveled that "you see your picture instantaneously"²¹. A system for recording was thus being described as if it were unmediated, a 'true' and instantaneous representation of the reality it recorded.

¹⁷ John Ellis quoted by Cate Elwes, 'The Domestic Spaces of Video Installation', paper presented at Tate Modern Symposium on *Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception* 17-19 April 2009, podcast accessed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/podcast/feed.xml>

¹⁸ Duncan White, 'British Expanded Cinema and the 'Live Culture' 1969-79', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 11 no1 March 2010

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Television: technology and cultural form*, Routledge, London 2003

²⁰ Douglas Davis 'Time! Time! Time! The Context of Immediacy', quoted by William Kaizen, 'Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate', *Art and the Moving Image: a critical reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, Tate Publishing, 2008, p263

²¹ William Kaizen, 'Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate', p 259

Many artists questioned this seemingly unproblematic association of video with liveness, aiming instead to 'pry open video's immediacy, to make the viewer feel its mediation'²². One strategy for achieving this was revisiting the self-reflexive gestures expressed in early cinema, drawing the viewer's attention to the artifice of a shared present. *Kensington Gore* (1980), by Cate Elwes, combines self-reflexivity with humour to deconstruct the illusion of a coherent TV narrative and singular present, as it recounts a story in which a period drama is unexpectedly replicated by real events on set. Using multiple heterogeneous forms of delivery which allude to and subvert the authority of the televisual address, including direct to camera asides, voiceover, reenactments of key moments, and another artist reading, the video also undermines the singular narrator's coherence. Furthermore, superimposing different temporalities- the 'now' of the video, the story, the reflecting on the story- onto the viewer's temporal plane problematises the notion of an unmediated present. In John Smith's *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), a street scene in East London is accompanied by a voiceover that appears to be directing the passersby in a hubristic fantasy of agency. This humorous reinterpretation of their actions as responses to the artist's instructions fabricates an illusory shared present for the video and audio, while self-reflexively acknowledging the viewer as 'in on the joke' and fully aware of the discrepancy between the film and the voiceover's re-framing of the actions within it.

Vito Acconci's video works combine self-reflexive performance with seduction of the viewer with an approach now familiar in contemporary video work by artists like Kalup Linzy and Ryan Trecartin. His direct-to camera address in *Theme Song* (1973), in which he regales the viewer in extreme close up with snippets of lines from pop songs, harnesses the power of co-presence cemented in TV and exaggerates its intimate tone, becoming leering and borderline manipulative. A parallel could be drawn here to the complaints Michael Fried made against the 'stage presence' and theatricality of minimal art, which extort a 'special complicity' from the beholder, who is confronted by being 'placed not just in his space but in his way'. Acconci exploits this supposedly degenerate demeanour, actively soliciting the viewers' attention and displaying the artwork's acute 'neediness' of the viewer for its completion. In another of his videos, *Centers*, the artist attempts to keep his finger pointed in the centre of the screen for the duration of the tape. Kaizen regards the pointing gesture as the 'most interpellative'²³ of all, connoting the process by which the viewer is singled out and commanded into attention in an echo of the authoritarian inflections of the televisual address.

Neediness and bossiness notwithstanding, early video art like Acconci's was soon diagnosed by Rosalind Krauss with a different psychological tendency in her now classic essay, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*. She focuses on the 'mirror-like surface' of video technology, and 'the simultaneous reception and projection of an image'²⁴ which enabled artists to transmit and record footage in real time. For her, Acconci's gesture in *Centers* both literalises the critical notion of 'pointing' and employs the video monitor as a mirror, creating an unbroken symmetry between the artist's eyes and that of his projected double, a 'spatial enclosure' that promotes 'a condition of self-reflection'. It is this image of self-regard that she feels is so emblematic as to be 'the condition of the entire genre'. The instantaneous nature of image production and reception thus seemed to create a particular- narcissistic- style of performance that inflected the interaction between artwork and viewer.

²² William Kaizen, 'Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate', p 265

²³ William Kaizen, 'Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate', p 267

²⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, *Art and the Moving Image : a critical reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, Tate Publishing, 2008, p 208

Communication, and the possibility of reaching across the 'spectatorial divide' (Elwes)²⁵ is key in works such as Acocnci's, echoing the 'direct and for me' nature of TV, which posits the 'viewer as the subject in a permanent arena of "communciationality"²⁶. Enabling this arena is the speed of information's dissemination, a speed that is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary culture, variously described as 'communicative capitalism' (Jodi Dean) and 'network capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello). According to Kazys Varnelis²⁷, in network culture 'immaterial production of information and its distribution through the network is the dominant organizational principle for the global economy'; its subject is not so much an individual, but dependant on various overlapping networks. Isabelle Graw argues that within this networked framework, exchange and communication are not only important but are the 'point' of contemporary subjectivity. She quotes Paolo Virno, for whom communication is 'the queen of productive forces', both a commodity, and a generator of value in a world where idle talk, conversation and dialogue around (especially cultural artifacts) create value.²⁸ The importance of enabling of communication, regardless of any specific content, engenders the default mode of address associated with Youtube, video blogs, and some would argue, networked subjectivity as a whole: a continuous chatter, tinged with a narcissistic and solipsistic need to be heard over the din. Ryan Trecartin's videos hinge on this subjectivity of performance in a hyper-mediatised, accelerated world of interchangeable personalities, temporalities and appearances. The denizens of his videos, locked in compulsive communication, seem to perfectly fulfill artist Seth Price's definition of contemporary collective experience as being 'based on simultaneous private experiences distributed across the field of media culture'²⁹. Simultaneous display and dissemination connects singularities into a network of constant communication in what appears to be a continuous and a-historical present, incorporating both a vast network in the now and an archive of the past.

Drawing on the web as organizational principle, Hito Stereyl's films loot its ever-expanding database of imagery, footage and methods of communication. Speed of transmission is key, especially with regards the poor image³⁰, a fast-moving, low-res web native with inherently oppositional qualities in an hierarchy of pixel counts. The poor image is 'about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities', a reproduction distributed in millions of places simultaneously, due partly to its immaterial nature.

Her video *In Free Fall* (2010), addressing the plane crash as a metaphor for the economic crisis, weaves together multiple iterations of the poor image and its moving cousins with their high res superiors. Youtube downloads, Skype chats and mobile phone clips thus co-exist with crisp top-resolution HD footage in an exposition and questioning of the hierarchy of resolution. This media multiplicity is echoed in the heterogeneity of performance styles employed, from direct to camera address, joky asides, outtakes, and manipulated documentary footage, which self-reflexively accentuate the film as a mediated document. The breathless superimposition of performance and media forms contributes to what an audience member at recent

²⁵ Cate Elwes, 'The Domestic Spaces of Video Installation'.

²⁶ Stephen Heath & Gillian Skirrow: 'Television, A World in Action', *Screen*, vol. 18, no.2. Summer 1977, p 55

²⁷ Kazys Varnelis, 'The Rise of Network Culture', *Dispersion exhibition catalogue*, ICA, London 2009

²⁸ Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press; Berlin, 2010, p64

²⁹ Seth Price, 'Dispersion', www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf, 2008

³⁰ Hito Stereyl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux*, Journal no. 10, November 2009. <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/94>. She goes on to argue that poor image echo the dematerialization of the art object and 'capital's semiotic turn' (Guattari) towards 'compressed, easily transportable and re-combinable, flexible data packages'.

screening identified as a weaving of temporalities, amalgamated into the present of the video. Stereyl then spoke of the multiple clashing temporal planes constituting contemporary reality, embodied in the 'fractured and flexible temporality' of the poor image. Her video updates David James' being as performance, positing a subject who is aware of their fully internalised mediation, yet embraces the heterogeneous nature of a collapsed present engendered by seemingly instantaneous interconnection, and communication.

Instantaneous feedback has accelerated to the extent that separating the moment of transmission from the moment of reception has become impossible, echoing the response that video technology first garnered from artists. Similarly the televisual address has mutated into a – supposedly- more egalitarian form of two-way communication, framed within network capitalism's imperative to communicate and enabled by the speed of mediation. In exploring how artists have used the moving image to explore immediacy, and its effects on the relationship between artwork and viewer, I hope to have drawn attention to the paradox of mediation being experienced as unmediated, a situation which seems to resonate with every increase in transmission speed that technology facilitates.