

The Archiving Film: A Pharmacology of the Media Flux

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Abstract

By analyzing films assembled from images from the media flux, this article aims to explore a poetics of what we shall call the archiving film. We argue that such a cinema may be a pharmacological politics of memory, since it archives the ephemeral, often repressed or overlooked images of an operational flux, freeing their potentiality as cultural artefacts. From Walter Benjamin's view that history belongs to the oppressed, to Foucault's study of panopticism and Agamben's poetics of inoperability, we propose to trace the artistic and epistemological value of the archiving film, focusing on an awareness of selectivity and transfiguration on part of the filmmakers. The chosen filmography marks a shift in relation to images from the flux: from a paradigmatic, descriptive state of contemplation (as in Michael Klier's *Der Riese* from 1983, comprised of footage from the first CCTV cameras installed in West Germany), to a later syntagmatic turn (in *Dragonfly Eyes* from 2017, Xu Bing uses extensive hours of surveillance footage from mainland China to create a metafictional narrative). With the advent of desktop cinema and machinima, the hybridization of an archiving cinema thus escapes an analytic scheme set on binary oppositions, including that between author and spectator.

Keywords: archiving film, panopticism, operational images, pharmakon, negative entropy, Benjamin, Foucault, Agamben, Stiegler

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Introduction: film archiving in the age of tele-panopticism

Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon,¹ whereby institutionalized individuals (prisoners, workers, pupils, etc.) feel themselves under surveillance even when no guard is watching them, promised a disciplinary efficiency, delegated entirely to self-disciplining subjects: "in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers." (Foucault, 1995, p. 201) Foucault uses panopticism as a metaphor for a society of biopolitical control,² in which a centralized power imposes the most effective surveillance practices, managing the biological status of the population (Foucault, 1995, 2008). Agamben (1995) compares this relationship to that inside a concentration camp, where man is reduced to "bare life" and kept in a permanent "state of exception" from the law. Agamben seems to be in agreement with Walter Benjamin (2007), who wrote in his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (p. 257), and that "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge." (p. 260). By "oppressed class" we understand a classless state of exception, beyond the proletariat-bourgeoisie distinction. For Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2011, 2015, 2009), in semicapitalism³ (or

¹ Jeremy Bentham is known as the founder of utilitarianism, developed in *Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation* (1789), in which Bentham makes the well-known utilitarian distinction between the desirability of pleasure, as opposed to pain as a legal punishment. In *The Panopticon* (1787), Bentham describes a revolutionary prison prototype where prisoners are locked up separately, in a round structure facing a tower in the middle, from which a guard can see every prisoner at all times, whereas the prisoners do not know when they are being watched, expecting to be under surveillance at any given time. The panopticon was popularised two centuries later by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1995, pp. 195-228)

² For Foucault, the form of government (as an exercise of sovereign power) which was shaped by liberalism since the 18th century has brought about a sublimation of the "unlimited state" (*raison d'État*) into a form of "frugal government", not on the basis of market jurisdiction, but on its veracity, on the truth of the market as the intersection of interests and according to a law of nature. The state has thus reduced its intervention internally, not constrained by opposition, that is, by an extrinsic force. Instead, this form of government has been regulated from within, gradually developing an internal form of management, towards a biopolitical control of the population, by regulating, for example, reproduction, behaviour and so on. For further reading, see Foucault, M. (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at College of France (1978-1979)*. (G. Burchell, Trans.). Pelgrave Macmillan

³ In his works such as *After The Future* (2011), *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. (2015) or *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. (2009), Franco "Bifo" Berardi defines "semicapitalism" as the shift from an economy in which value is related to material

cognitive capitalism), the entire middle class (including creative or cognitive workers) undergoes a generalized state of proletarianization, a loss of autonomy over work and life. And if for Foucault (1995), the liberty associated with liberalism was "produced" and treated as production, i.e. regularized and consumed, Byung Chul-Han (2015) describes neoliberalism not through a correctional negativity, as in disciplinary societies, but through an excess of positivity; not a deprivation of freedom, but the coercion to be free, or the coercion to produce (and thus consume) freedom.

Such a society takes the economic form of surveillance capitalism, as Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls it, although we might also call it self-surveillance capitalism. This state of affairs is directly proportional to the democratization of audiovisual production, distribution channels and the general media trans-nomadism feeding the algorithmic protentions⁴ of attention-grabbing identity commodification: from biopower (Foucault, 2008) to psychopower (Stiegler, 2010a, 2010b), from the control of the body to that of the mind.

Thus, the production and circulation of contents in the media sphere sets in motion a televisual semiotic flux that compresses space and time (Fisher, 2014) and which is instrumentalized in practices of panoptic psychopolitical control. This flux is ephemeral because it is propagated, not archived. Contents are accessible only through their circulation in the infosphere, which also alters them as algorithmic protentions, culminating in the synthetic generative images. The tele-panoptic flux is thus an intermediary stage, a semiotic chain of production that supports its own reproduction. From this ontological contingency, we address Stiegler's view of the media flux as *pharmakon* (Stiegler, 2013), both as a poison and a remedy,⁵ as a *diabolic* tool (from the Greek *diabolē*, meaning separation, atomisation) that captures and destroys attention, or as a *sim-bolic* remedy (*sumbolein* meaning union, binding), a retention that restores attention and the capacity to attach (Stiegler, 2013).

We will consider cinema as the gravitational centre of contemporary art, as the mediatic node of all the panoptic retentions it can assemble, given the nature of

production of goods to an economy centred on the immaterial production of signs - information, communication or "emotional labour".

⁴ In the Husserlian sense, "protection" as an anticipation based on retention.

⁵ See Derrida, J. (1981). *Dissemination*. (B. Johnson, Trans.) The Athlone Press; and Heidenreich, F. & Weber-Stein F. (2022), *The Politics of Digital Pharmacology: Exploring the Craft of Collective Care*, transcript Verlag

film as an aggregative temporal object, the physical equivalent of what Stiegler (1998) calls "arche-cinema": "A film, like a melody, is essentially a flux: it consists of its unity in and as flow. The temporal object, as flux, coincides with the stream of consciousness of which it is the object: the spectator's" (p. 12.). We will therefore analyze a form of cinema that retains the flux by archiving it, a necessary aestheticization in the face of semiotic contingency - a form of upcycling, rather than recycling, by virtue of which the added value of the reused content is not just aesthetic, but also epistemological.

By addressing the practices by which filmmakers retain the ephemeral images of the flux (both operational images⁶ such as surveillance footage, as well as epistolary images or screen capturing), we will try to prove how such films can represent a pharmacological act of historical becoming, through which the spectator also becomes a creator. We will name them "archiving films" rather than archival films, since they are not made from preexisting archives. In their montage, filmmakers implicitly archive contents from the flux, even as they alter their discursive nature. Otherwise, clips uploaded on online platforms are not archived, since the intention is not to store them, but to instrumentalize them, whereas a cinematic assemblage can de-instrumentalize them aesthetically, freeing their artistic and also historical potentiality.

Malqueridas: a pharmacological politics of memory as selectivity and transfiguration

Considering the ever growing scale of the media flux, both in terms of content and propagation, a pharmacological politics of memory firstly implies an "awareness of selectivity" (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, p. 63), a form of vigilance with regard to potentially valuable evanescent contents that otherwise get lost in the scale and speed of the flux, thus inhibiting the formation of a cultural memory.

Malqueridas (2023) is made from such valuable ephemeral documents: films and photographs taken secretly with the mobile phones of inmates inside a women's prison in Chile. Incarcerated mothers could raise their children up to the age of two, secretly filming them inside the cell, and after separation, the mothers who still had long sentences ahead stayed in touch with their children through their

⁶ In his multimedia installation, *Eye/Machine I* (2000), Harun Farocki calls "operational images" the images whose sole purpose is operational (such as surveillance footage), and which are not made to be looked at or contemplated.

phones. The film's author, Tana Gilbert, portrays motherhood through this clandestine phone archive that mostly portrays bonds of love and care. The images are valuable as they depict a social organism in which the recorded acts of love and care appear as subversive. While Gilbert does not deprive the viewers of a video shot after a police raid or of the painful separation between mothers and their children, the film does not didactically devolve into a punitive unmasking of abuse by reducing the co-authors to the status of victims.

Beyond a consciousness of selectivity, the mastery of an archiving film lies in the transfiguration of the retained materials. Gilbert has transposed these photos and videos onto 35mm color film, a physical medium with a longer lifespan than virtual storage. By archiving them on an analogue medium, these low-resolution images mixed with the graininess and dustiness of film render an aesthetics of a clandestine memory otherwise doomed to repression, but saved on a physical medium and enlarged on a cinema screen, a post-digital gesture⁷ that reflects an archiving spirit on part of the author. And although the mothers obviously did not film with the intention of making cinema, they did intend to form a personal archive, so the intention of the filmmaker aligns with their repressed need of assembling their memory.

Over the course of the film, the testimony of an ex-prisoner, Karina Sánchez, accompanies the images in voice-over, but her intimate story is collective, compiled from more than twenty other prisoners' testimonies, a fact which Gilbert only shares at the end of the film⁸ - catharsis as a synergy of simplification, as a force of attraction, from disorder to order, from entropy to negative entropy, or "negentropy".⁹ The clandestine ephemerality of the collective audiovisual memory archived in *Malqueridas* is thus negentropically reassembled as a subversive history of care, wherein the apparent undifferentiation of the women portrayed in the film constitutes, in effect, a form of individuation, through the preservation of their memory.

⁷ For further reading, see Cramer, F. (June, 2014, 3-1) *What is 'Post-Digital'?*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336885121_What_Is_'Post-Digital' - Cramer argues that the attitudes which coalesce around the "post-digital" label blur the distinction between old and new media.

⁸ Driessen, Kees. (September 7, 2023). *Venice Critics' Week 2023: Malqueridas by Tana Gilbert*. <https://businessdoceurope.com/venice-critics-week-malqueridas-by-tana-gilbert-2023/>

⁹ For further reading, see Stiegler, B. (2018) *The Neganthropocene* (D. Ross, Trans.), pp. 38-41

Der Riese: the entropy of the paradigmatic flux

Through montage, an archiving film implicitly changes the original function of the constitutive contents, through what Jaimie Baron would call an "intentional disparity" (Baron, 2014), as in *Der Riese* (1983) or in *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017), made exclusively from surveillance CCTV footage which is disarmed into a cinematic assemblage. While archiving operational images, montage follows an interplay between paradigm and syntagm, between the non-differentiation of the database logic and a structuralism reclaiming difference:

As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world. (Manovich, 2001, p. 199)

Thus, the goal of an archiving narrator is to break the serial relation of non-differentiation between the elements that make up a database, even as the narrative becomes a descriptive montage that expresses precisely the database logic from which it is aesthetically reclaimed.

As a semantic structure endowed with meaning, the syntagm has a narrative dimension, whereas the paradigm represents semantic potentiality. Manovich (2001) argues that in the new digital environments, this Saussurean semiotic model (developed by Roland Barthes) is overturned: "Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialised. Paradigm is privileged, syntagm is downplayed. Paradigm is real, syntagm is virtual." (p. 203). In experimental films made from pre-existing footage, this reversal can be glimpsed as far back as the short films of Hans Richter [*Every Day* (1929)] or Arthur Lipsett [*Very Nice, Very Nice* (1961); *Fluxes* (1968)]. In these films, the mixture of media images and sounds are devoid of clear causal relations, favouring archival contingency over narrative necessity. Instead of a classical narrative, which is virtualized, these films rely on a "collage of attractions", signalling the destitution of historical indexicality under the quantitative (and

hyperstimulating) pressure of media traces, which represent a world that the filmmakers propose to look at through the paradigmatic spectacle of entropy.

Similarly, the apparition of CCTV cameras opened up a new database-logic paradigm. If Lipsett edited the archive of a flux, Michael Klier had access to a temporary surveillance archive in *Der Riese* (1983), considering the short storage time of this type of operational footage, which cannot be considered an archive as such.

Klier's film is considered the first documentary made exclusively from CCTV footage, corresponding to the infancy of televisual surveillance. Most of the footage is in low-resolution black and white, accompanied by musical excerpts by Mahler and Wagner, as well as in sync sound (where the cameras were equipped with microphones). These rudimentary cameras pan jerkily on the x-y axis, mainly depicting public spaces in West German cities, but also the private homes of wealthy families. The low resolution makes individuals seen from a distance as unrecognisable silhouettes. The camera, however, individualizes them by following suspect people. Individuation here is seen as potentially dangerous, since suspicion is the criterion for this differentiation. In a sequence filmed in a crowded underpass, two teenagers abuse a third by chasing him, hitting him and throwing his rucksack. The lack of intervention by other passersby contrasts with the camera's perspective as it reacts to the conflict, following the teenagers. After they leave the frame, the camera left "without an object" continues panning, fixing on a pigeon. The operational nature of the shot is thus de-instrumentalized even in its making. It is unclear whether the camera operator is testing his or her ability to follow an unpredictable subject such as a bird or whether he/she has a cinematic impulse to aestheticize a reality otherwise committed to survey.

Der Riese (which means "The Giant") is the product of a time when the general public did not have access to such images, and when becoming aware of their existence was seen as a didactic necessity. But with the current ubiquity of surveillance, the mere contemplation of images is no longer necessary or sufficient. Instead, a focus on the syntagmatic, narrative dimension seems to be directly proportional to the scale of the paradigm; that is, to the scale of the surveillance phenomenon.

Dragonfly Eyes: a syntagmatic approach to posthuman identity

In *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017), the multidisciplinary artist Xu Bing made use of the online availability of surveillance footage on a virtual cloud, simultaneously recording on twenty computers over 11,000 hours, eventually edited into an 81-minute metafiction film. Bing's aim, as stated in the film's introductory text, is to build a story out of all these silent recordings. He therefore invents causal relations between otherwise disparate images, using fake diegetic sound, dialogue and fictional monologues, the people in the footage being dubbed by actors.

A digital entity manages all these images, a form of artificial general intelligence (AGI) called *Dragonfly*. A synthetic voice, similar to the model used by astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, opens the film by narrating a text that appears verbatim as the letters are typed: "This is Dragonfly. Dragonfly has 28,000 eyes. Blinking 40,000 times per second." (*Dragonfly Eyes*, 2017). Meanwhile, a fast montage of surveillance footage, edited at a superhuman, unfixable pace, seems to render Dragonfly as a demiurgic indexing machine of the world. Objects are isolated graphically from the background and designated textually: plant, car, man, woman, etc. Some images display the date and time, others numbers or ideograms, indicating their operational nature.

The main narrative thread follows the love story between Qing Ting and Ke Fan. The first part of the film is narrated from her perspective, and after a textually marked three-year ellipsis, the second part is told through his voice-over narration. Qing Ting is introduced by a monologue added over an infrared night shot of a Buddhist temple. A woman appears in the frame, the viewer being tempted to attribute it to the the voice-over, this time in Mandarin:

When I was 17, I got sick a lot. I was sent to a temple to practice Buddhism. I still remember my first night there. The loud buzzing in the courtyard. The dragonflies made that noise. It was louder than the sound of the wind. But I couldn't see them. They were flying too fast (...). (*Dragonfly Eyes*, 2017)

Qing Ting decides to leave the temple and face urban life. She takes a job at an industrial cow farm, where she meets Ke Fan: "Afterwards, Ke Fan told me that we had crossed paths on the stairs. He had detained me, but I didn't notice him.". Meanwhile, a surveillance shot depicts a man and woman passing each other on the

stairs, doubling the discourse as evidence: a utilitarian image narratively linked to an illustrative flashback. The discussion of their first meeting is continued through the shot of a man and a woman talking at a table in a restaurant:

(...) 'Didn't I notice you?' / 'Maybe.' / 'You're always a little distracted.' / 'Maybe. I've heard it from others.' / 'You have a unique name.' / 'My mom called me Qing Ting. I never used that name at the temple. But now I'm using it again.' / 'Temple?' / 'Yes, I was planning to become a nun. I studied for many years at the temple. But eventually I decided not to be ordained, so I left and came here.' (...) (*Dragonfly Eyes*, 2017)

The causal links between otherwise disparate images are thematically subsumed under a Buddhist perspective, whereby the film brings together the identities of all the people in the recordings as incarnations of the same Being. Qing Ting, which means dragonfly, is also the AGI Dragonfly. The two protagonists do not have a single identity, but are the names assigned to numerous men and women in the surveillance footage. The narrative freedom seems directly proportional to the dubbing possibilities, either inside or outside the frame, a freedom enhanced by the glitchy offset of sound from the sometimes lagged motion, signalling an interstitial, sporadic flow of information in the televisual transmission of data.

The footage also features security officers monitoring the surveillance cameras: a narrative opportunity to frame a police investigation into the disappearance of Xing Xing, an online celebrity who is actually Qing Ting after a cosmetic surgery and a complete identity change. Bing resorts to a shot-reverse shot montage between the officers and other CCTV images, which they carefully scrutinize, zooming in, rewinding, pausing, speculating on what the shot depicts, digressing into other conversations and so on. Qing Ting's disappearance ends in suicide (figure A, below), and the bereaved Ke Fan takes up her appearance through surgery, trying to follow her destiny, to work in the places where she used to work and so on.

Bing tries to subvert the perspective of informational deindividuation by showing it as the revelation of a universal spiritual truth. *Dragonfly Eyes* embraces the phenomenon of surveillance by propagating it through the archiving effect, making shocking images public, alongside a didactic metanarrative on the syntagmatic possibilities of operational images. Through this essayistic approach,

Bing resorts to a type of disparate narrativity in itself: (1) the main plot centred around Qing Ting and Ke Fan, (2) the AGI perspective of Dragonfly (3) images capturing exceptional situations, from calamities to deaths, and (4) the police investigation. The structural challenge is to thematically tie the narrative threads together through a Buddhist perspective on surveillance. And although the film is centred around a love story, the emotional detachment inherent to Buddhism (and to the essayist as a deconstructive author) places the viewer in the perspective of Dragonfly, archiving and indexing a world in which people¹⁰ appear undifferentiated, as well as their atomised stories, which are not treated as reality, but rather as potentiality.



Figure A: Xu, B. (2017). *Dragonfly Eyes* [Film]. Xu Bing Studio. A woman is about to fall into the water, her identity attributed to Xing Xing, the new identity of Qing Ting after surgery. The image appears as the POV of the investigators looking for clues in the surveillance footage. The operational graphics appear in a simulacrum, as either original or added in post production.

¹⁰ Director Xu Bing has stated in a Q&A following a screening of the film that he managed to locate the majority of individuals in the images to obtain their consent: *ICA (2018, October 3) Frames of Representation: DragonFly Eyes Q&A* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/h7PmQW5dBXM?si=3TMf718PVDry1AwQ>

Il n'y aura plus de nuit: the negentropy of data leaks

In the audiovisual installation *Eye/Machine 1* (2000), Harun Farocki has stated that operational images, by virtue of their utilitarianism, are not meant to be seen. Nowadays, operational images are available online (as in the case of some public CCTV cameras), while others have a closed circuit, their accessibility only occurring after being declassified or through data leaks.

The documentary *Il n'y aura plus de nuit [There Will Be No More Night]* (2020) is compiled from footage shot on military helicopters and posted on the internet after data leaks. Since military protocol requires mandatory recording of all flight time, the paradigmatic scale of the archive is visible in the leaks, which are nevertheless just as ephemeral as any other media content. Many of the sources cited in the film's credits are no longer available.

These once inaccessible images, archived through their negentropic cinematic retention, document an imbalance of power not so much between hunter and victim, but between human and inhuman. Weber's documentary is a particular case of reflexive thriller, in which the images create a suspense that actress Nathalie Richard's voice-over commentary subsequently neutralizes from a detached perspective, reflecting on the mnemotechnical status of the images, on the psychological condition of the pilots and on their difficulty in distinguishing between, for instance, a harmless peasant carrying a rake and an enemy soldier armed with a Kalashnikov:

Lorsque les pilotes ont tiré sur un homme, ils doivent ensuite donner le film à leur hiérarchie. Des militaires regarderont la scène un peu plus tard, au calme. Ils se demanderont si le tir était justifié. Ils vérifieront, en scrutant les images, que l'homme qui a été tué avait bien des intentions hostiles. Ils discuteront, ils interpréteront. (...) Pierre V. dit que ces images ne sont pas faites pour être regardées. Selon lui, ces documents sont strictement opérationnels, et sa dimension ne peut que m'échapper. Je crois qu'elles resurgiront, un jour. Ils viendront nous hanter, comme les images de l'enfance. (*Il n'y aura plus de nuit*, 2020)¹¹

¹¹ Author's translation: "When a pilot shoots a man, he has to show the film to his superiors. The military will quietly watch the scene later. They will wonder if the attack was justified. They will check, analyzing the footage, whether the man who was killed really had hostile intentions. They will discuss,

Although this psychoanalytic approach to necropolitics also has a poetic dimension, especially towards the end of the film, alluding to the biblical resonance of its title (“There will be no more Night”, from Revelation 22:5), the voice over fragment above has a didactic reflexivity, resonating with Farocki’s theory on operational images.



Figure B: Weber, É. (2020). *Il n'y aura plus de nuit* [Film]. Perspective Films. As in *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017), the operational graphics are weaponized, but while in the case of the former, the weaponization is attributed to data extortion from the surveilled people, the latter features a direct, operational indication of death: the target, which instills suspense throughout the film.

When the shooter is authorized to liquidate the target, the camera shakes from the recoil of the shot, in an asynchrony between image and sound, disjoined by the significant distance between the target and the helicopter. This dislocated time establishes a perceptive disjunction of death. And when Weber cuts to another shot, the viewer remains in a constant anticipation of future assaults. Otherwise, the victims continuously tracked in the middle of the targeted frame (figure B, above) are killed in only a few instances throughout the film.

This noetic-affective oscillation that Weber instils through the interplay between suspense and reflection responds to the imbalance of control between the

they will interpret. (...) Pierre V. says these images are not made to be seen. According to him, these documents are strictly operational, and this dimension can only escape me. I think they will surface one day. They will haunt us like childhood images."

human and the inhuman. The syntagm-paradigm dichotomy is deconstructed, since the montage is a syntagmatic data leak of a paradigmatic database.

Screen retentions: perception as memory

An archiving film can capture the flux either directly, as in *Malqueridas*, where filmmaker Tana Gilbert had direct access to the detained women's personal recordings, or indirectly, through intermediary platforms such as Youtube, Archive.org, Wikileaks or other online sources. The possibility of screen recording democratizes the entire virtual space, marking an effervescent age of the essay, regardless whether the authors are called filmmakers or content creators. If a screen can record what it displays, then any content of the infosphere can be appropriated and archived. Thus, Bing could archive surveillance footage in *Dragonfly Eyes*, Radu Jude could selectively record from a livecam CCTV installed next to Andy Warhol's grave for his desktop documentary *Sleep #2* (2024), Farocki could record the operational architectures of military imagery in his multimedia series, such as *Eye/Machine I-III* (2000–2003), *Parallels I-IV* (2012–2014) or *Serious Games I-IV* (2009–2010), and Weber could archive necropolitical data leaks. A digital screen simultaneously displays and records a microtemporal flux which we perceive as instantaneous: "In contrast to cinema's screen, which primarily functioned as a record of perception, here the computer screen functions as a record of memory." (Manovich, 2016, p. 40). "The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and co-existence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen" (Manovich, 2016, p. 40). By being able to retain a televisual flux, the "screen-camera" does not simply retain, but projects further onto other screens, the practice of streaming¹² being the most obvious example. And from the multitude of streams (temporarily) available online, those of oppression naturally have a pharmacological primacy in cinema.

Without consisting entirely of screen captures, the short film *Swatted* (2018) opens with recordings of young people doing game streaming, exposing their location and rendering themselves vulnerable to a digital terrorism called "swatting": anonymous users in the USA call the police either claiming to be hostages of a supposed assailant or the assailants themselves, threatening to kill a

¹² Used in both gaming and social media, the term "stream" denotes the televisual, whereas "flux" is a broader concept for the everflowing collection of temporal objects. Additionally, the term "feed" emphasizes the consumption of such temporal objects seen as economically-operational contents.

hostage. And, while the victims film themselves gaming, SWAT troops appear storming in the background, much to the astonishment of the stream viewers. Startled by the ambush, some of the victims panic and end up getting shot by the troops.

The phone conversations between the dispatch and the terrorist caller reverberate in a 3D architecture, criss-crossed by numerous lines, the expression of a digital topography at the intersection of cinema, animation and game design.

Machinima: performative ephemerality

An aggregate of the terms “machine” and “cinema”, machinima is a genre of films made through the graphics engines of video games (“Machinima”, 2024). In the ever evolving game design industry, machinima has historical value, archiving the graphics and gameplays of digital architectures which eventually become obsolete (“Machinima”, 2024). As far as the archiving film is concerned, we will focus on machinima made from in-game screen recordings, in which the authors capture the gameplay flux and edit it following a cinematic narrative structure.¹³

Open-world RPG games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) or *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) are best suited for such films, both owing to their narrative possibilities as well as their photorealism. In these games, the character can interact with the world in an open way, without following a predetermined path. The player can freely orient the camera or exclude the character from the shot. Furthermore, the original footage can be edited and dubbed.

The film *Grand Theft Hamlet* (2024), one of the few machinima feature films with a significant distribution,¹⁴ proposes a synthesis between gaming and theatre. Two British actors, Sam Crane and Mark Oosterveen, are out of work during the 2020 pandemic and spend time playing *Grand Theft Auto V* online (with multiple players logged in simultaneously), talking to each other through microphones. In the game, the two find an open-air amphitheatre, which gives them the idea for a theatrical experiment: to be the pioneers of a Shakespearean stage play set in the virtual space of a game. Together with Pinny Grylls (co-writer and co-director of the film, along with Crane), they look for co-participants, organizing a casting call for

¹³ Beyond its narrative potential, machinima proposes a historicist dimension on video games. In *Parallels I-IV* (2012-2014), Farocki retraces a brief history of digital graphic representation (taking the tree as a case study) in a montage of trees as seen in videogames, evolving from two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality and from abstraction to photorealism.

¹⁴ *Grand Theft Hamlet* (2025) is currently available on the streaming platform Mubi.

potential Shakespeare enthusiasts among players. They then try to link certain locations in the game to various scenes from the play, preparing a yacht or a plane to transport the audience between the scene locations. They organize in-game rehearsals, using their microphones and the limited capabilities of the gameplay, such as walking, stopping, turning or making a few possible gestures. But the game's violent gameplay prevents any possible fluency of this virtual stage production. Characters are constantly being killed, either by other players or by the in-game police. So the process becomes its own performance,¹⁵ a mixture of theatrical presence and digital absence: while the theatrical medium implies the physical, bodily presence of the performer in front of an audience, gaming represents the physical absence of the performer in the virtual game world, where he/she is replaced by a digital avatar.

In an analysis of the hauntological¹⁶ condition of Hamlet's father, Derrida (2006) addressed the primordial anachrony of injunction, of law, by what he called the "visor effect" (p. 6). The spectre of the armoured king looks through the visor, but he cannot be looked back, so that Hamlet is forced to blindly trust the voice of the one who speaks, the one who thus renders the injunction (Derrida, 2006, p. 7). And this injunction follows Hamlet by virtue of a "spectral asymmetry" (Derrida, 2006, p. 6). The ghost of the father sees but cannot be seen (Derrida, 2006, p. 6). And even if it does not appear throughout Shakespeare's play, the ghost is always present *in absentia*, becoming a panoptic instance for Hamlet, who is forced to follow the injunction (Derrida, 2006, p. 7). In Bentham's panopticon, the guardian in the watchtower is, likewise, a spectral absence as well as a projected presence.

In gaming, only human performativity accounts for presence. Otherwise, digital architectures are hauntological. They can become inaccessible, but they cannot degrade. For Deleuze (2000), "if there is no debasement of information, it is because information itself is debasement." (p. 269). This digital immortality inhibits the emergence of novelty even if digital artefacts are eventually doomed to obsolescence and oblivion (Fisher, 2014). Innovation becomes actualization, and novelty is no longer qualitative but quantitative. A negentropic archiving attitude aesthetically reveals this state of affairs, addressing what has been digitally

¹⁵ The filmmakers have only included fragments of the actual performance in the film, promising instead to release the full three-hour version in the future.

¹⁶ In French, the Derridean concept "hantologie" is a wordplay between "hanter" (to haunt, with a silent "h") and "ontologie" (ontology). Thus, "hantologie" reads almost the same as "ontologie", the silent "h" signifying an absence, a ghostly dimension.

repressed. This form of repression does not separate and isolate a (historical) wound from its body. In its virtualization, the wound becomes ubiquitous, undifferentiated from the body.

Hardly Working: an ecology of inoperativity

The short film *Hardly Working* (2022, dir. Total Refusal) is a documentary made from footage shot in the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), where the voice of a middle-aged man ethnographically describes the lives of the non-playable characters in the game:

This is the carpenter. The carpenter is one of over a thousand NPCs in the videogame *Red Dead Redemption 2*. NPCs is short for non-playable characters. They are extras who live their lives in the background of the stage picture. They bring a bit of bustle into a lifeless world and thus simulate normality. (*Hardly Working*, 2022)

These characters are only functionally developed, their ontological integrity assigned to their episodic role in the player's experience. Thus, their actions are repetitive, built around occupations that place them in a stereotypical, role-assigned western universe. By describing the routine of these "non-playable characters" of the working class (the carpenter, the laundress, the street sweeper, the stableman), the authors of the short film express an anti-operational critique of capitalism, of a simulated world in which the Other is devoid of agency, only having a functional ontology:

(...) The street sweeper has a decent work-life balance. She takes her job very seriously. She guides her broom with intent and her gaze is directed on the ground at all times. She sweeps meticulously, almost gingerly even. There is one particular spot she pays special attention to. For over two and a half hours she does nothing but sweep this one small area. And yet all the effort doesn't lead to any visible changes. No matter how diligently she sweeps, the sidewalk remains dusty and full of dried mud. (...) Throughout his 11-hour workday, he [the carpenter] sinks around 120 nails into the wood. Day after day, week after week. The product of his work does not concern him. Like in a capitalist economy, where the goal isn't to satisfy

demands, but to accumulate, there is no option for the grind to stop. There will never be enough nails in the wood. (*Hardly Working*, 2022)

The narrative-discursive threads of the characters are edited in parallel, but not from a player's perspective, but from an omniscient camera - some shots are screen-captured from above, while at times the camera tests the limits of the game world, going underground or rising to a maximum height, partially exposing the non-representable fringes of the map, like in figure C (below).



Figure C: Total Refusal: Flock, S., Klengel, R., Müllner, L., & Stumpf, M. (2022). *Hardly Working* [Film]. Total Refusal. The camera is tracking the stableman, going beneath the ground level, which is seen as a glitchy, partial representation of the game world.

In a 2014 lecture entitled *Resistance in Art*, Agamben (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2015) quotes Kazimir Malevich (1921) evoking his eulogy of laziness, which he develops into what he calls a "poetics of inoperativity" (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2015). Malevich does not advocate for laziness per se, but for freeing the individual from the function of his labour (Malevich, 1921). For Agamben, as for Malevich, anthropogenesis consists in man's tendency towards inoperativity, towards the development of a capacity to leave the sphere of activity, that is, the system to which man surrenders his production and the regulation of his freedom. Here, the views of Malevich and Agamben agree with that of Byung Chul Han (2015), for whom the stake is to regain the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) at the expense of *vita activa*, or the excess of positivity caused by the compulsion to be free:

When the stableman knocks off work, he visits the bar. Most evenings, he just sits there, wordlessly watching. On some occasions, he orders a beer of which he takes three or four sips. Later, he gets up dead drunk, from just those couple of mouthfuls. On his way back, the stableman loses his bearings. This is how he remains for the entirety of the night, until the sun has chased away the moon. In this time he does not work, consume or even sleep to regenerate his workforce. His idleness is a gesture more radical than you might think. On its own, his behaviour might be viewed as an unremarkable bug; funny, even. But in capitalism, a worker's time belongs to the person who bought it. To the employer. Idle labourers aren't just lazy. They are stealing time. Idleness is theft. In this very moment, the stableman is robbing the owning class of their control over his time. (*Hardly Working*, 2022)

This voice-over commentary appears over a two-minute long shot in which the stableman stands still in front of the hayracks, doing nothing as the day breaks. The authors end the film on the tone of an *ars poetica*: "As organised and synchronised action, collective idleness could grind reality to a halt. And perhaps, extort a future from the terror of permanent presence. Can we start glitching?" (*Hardly Working*, 2022). The narrator's voice has a robotic resonance. Although narrated by Jacob Banigan, the voice could pass as a text-to-speech model that conveys a form of solidarity with the inhuman proletariat of the non-playable bots. Through this essayistic approach, *Hardly Working* subverts the game's original gameplay (and function), focusing instead on the periphery of the game world: fringe characters (NPCs), fringe spaces, repetition or even inaction. The glitches in the operational simulation of reality thus become aestheticized, as objects of cultural analysis.

As in *Grand Theft Auto V*, the gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is based on the simulation of murder, a guarantee of the game's capitalization (the investment here being greater than that of a cinematic blockbuster),¹⁷ so that the player is proletarianized by an experience oriented not towards his individuation

¹⁷ According to Wikipedia, *Red Dead Redemption 2* cost between \$370 million and \$540 million, making it one of the most expensive video games ever produced: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_of_Red_Dead_Redemption_2#:~:text=Analyst%20estimations%20place%20the%20game's,expensive%20video%20games%20ever%20developed.

but towards the commodification of his time. Yet this power relation is not not unturnable, as *Hardly Working* poignantly demonstrates by capturing static moments, by diverting from the usual violent gameplay, in the form of a discursive contemplation of the process of production (and power relations) from the perspective of the proletarianized and objectified victims, simulating an identification with the virtual representation of a marginalised Other. “Non playable” characters reduced to bare life and, specifically, to bare function, become inhuman instances that the player can normally annihilate or harass without resentment. Moreover, in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, every witness to a crime is a potential threat, urging the player to kill them as well.

Grand Theft Hamlet and *Hardly Working* subvert the gameplay in distinct ways: while the former sees violence as the comic interruption of virtually staging a Shakespearean play, the latter questions a paradigm that hierarchically manages subjectivity and agency.

Apart from an intentional disparity towards the original gameplay, the political strength of machinima also lies in its potentially cost-free production, whereby the authors only invest their time. The accessibility of the means of production in machinima overrides the status of the audience as mere consumers, since anyone can make such a film without financial constraint, but only as a co-author, since (in the case of *Grand Theft Hamlet* or *Hardly Working*) the game designers employed by Rockstar Games are the actual architects of that (recycled) potential.¹⁸

Conclusions: towards a participatory cinema; towards becoming-minority

... the essay film is a fragile field because it must accept and welcome the ultimate instability of meaning and embrace openness as its unreserved ethos. The problematization of authorship is demanded by the essayist’s aim of extending authorship to the audience. (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 16)

Along with the entropic propagation of postcinematic media, the makers of the archiving film tend to move from a paradigmatic to a syntagmatic dimension,

¹⁸ On the end credits of *Hardly Working*, the authors also address the game designers at Rockstar Games: “A big thank you to all programmers and artists of Rockstar Games for giving birth to *these beautiful NPCs*.” (*Hardly Working*, 2022).

from contemplation to action. The first stage reveals a vision that seeks to pharmacologically annul the operational character of contents and offer them for contemplation as cultural artefacts. Eventually, such a vision embraces the flux in a narrative form, like the relation between the body and a new organ, initially treated as an intruder (as in *Der Riese* or in Farocki's work on operational images), only to then assimilate it syntagmatically, as in *Dragonfly Eyes*.

In a series of filmed interviews (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1996), Deleuze defined the left not as a matter of governance but of perception. Firstly, Deleuze compares a right-wing view to that of a postal address (house-street-town-country and so on), that is, from the self outward, whereas a left-wing vision is like an inverse address, from the whole to the self, from the outside to the inside (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1996). At the same time, Deleuze links being on the left to what he calls "becoming minority". Since the majority only exists as the projection of a sovereign power, minority remains the only accessible category of becoming - a man cannot become a man, but he can become a woman, an animal and so on (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1996), deconstructing the ontologically hierarchical *us-them* paradigm.

In cinema, isn't the essayist's aim to "try" (*essayer*) and "weigh" (*exigere-exagium*) embracing the perspective of the Other as a form of becoming-minority? The essay naturally transcends a binary, hierarchical system. It does not disavow the narrative, but sublimates it by deconstructing binaries: syntagm-paradigm, action-description, document-fiction, author-spectator. In fact, the latter implies, as Rascaroli has remarked (2007), that the authority extended towards the audience seeks not just representing the Other, but direct contact with the Other (through the otherness of the audience). Becoming minority does not take place from an exterior position, but from the interiority of the state of biopolitical exception, which is also the interiority of production and that of consumption, flattened in the infosphere into the same classless producer-consumers.

Benjamin was right to assert that history belongs to the oppressed, since a body undifferentiated from its wound does not accept it. In its ubiquity, the wound is invisible, unassimilated, an open wound that still pains, since the semiotic capital of history keeps addressing it and the public keeps responding to it, since the most enduring images are also the most oppressive, since the retentions and aesthetic assemblages of the flux reveal an ethos of not ignoring it, since class consciousness is the consciousness of general proletarianization.

In this post-class ubiquity of the digital wound, a negentropic pharmacology is related to what Agamben calls, using Feuerbach's term, *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, an aggregate of *Entwicklungs* (development) and *fähigkeit* (capacity), which would translate as the capacity to be developed, elaborated, actualized (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2015). Agamben applies the term to the relation between potentiality and actualization with regard to a given work, pointing to an exformative character: something that has remained unsaid, something that needs to be addressed (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2015). We could say, then, that an awareness of selectivity regards a content's capacity to be developed, elaborated, re-evaluated. Although a universal criteriology of selectivity seems an impossible task, since the archive is always indeterminable, orientated towards the future (Derrida, 1998), it is precisely the orientation towards the future that gives the measure of determination. Or, to put it in André Breton's words: "The work of art is valuable only in so far as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future" (as cited in Benjamin, 2007, p. 249). In the case of the archiving film, the *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* is of affective nature, what has remained unsaid about what has remained unfelt.

A film that negentropically retains and contains the affective flux thus unlocks historicity. It cannot be considered an archival film precisely because the retention, selection and editing constitute the archiving process itself: not as storing and indexing, since the flux itself cannot be stored, only selectively retained. No institutions assigned to digitally store a cultural heritage have the capacity to respond to the microtemporal speed and virtual nature of the flux. Filmmakers can only archive through montage because the flux is temporally accessible, and the most vigilant authors have an eye for what is worth developing and reevaluating into a pharmacological composition of historical affect.

Benjamin argues that any technical progress is also political (Benjamin, 2005), that any possibility of innovation, any transfiguration of fashion, that is, of standardized modes of production that constitute a trend, is directly proportional to a vision of inclusivity, whereby the consumer (audience) becomes the producer (creator). And, in the search for a techno-political composition that addresses postcinematic production of neglected feeling, cinema inherently contemplates its own language in the form of an ecology of inoperativity, pharmacologically balancing contemplation and activity.

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