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SHORT CIRCUITS OF REALITY:
REPRODUCIBILITY, SIMULATION AND TECHNICAL IMAGES IN
VILLIERS DE L'ISLE ADAM'S "L'EVE FUTURE," RAINER WERNER
FASSBINDER'S "WELT AM DRAHT," AND MICHAEL HANEKE'S "CACHÉ"

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation "Short Circuits of Reality: Reproducibility, Simulation and Technical Images in Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Eve Future* (1887), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht*, (1973) and Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005)" examines the reciprocal

relationship between the evolution of visual media technologies and sensory perception. Reading the 20th century as an era of simulation shows that there has been a historical connection between tendencies of simulation and the invention of audiovisual media technologies that enabled the increasingly “photo-realistic” reproduction of our material reality. This interplay and feedback loop between reality and literary imagination created the first female android in literature as a new media technological dawn was on the horizon in the outgoing 19th century. The rise of the mechanical machines and media technological apparatuses inaugurated the industrial age and the beginning of modernity.

Preceding the analyses of Villier’s de L’Isle Adam’s *L’Eve Future* (1887), Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Welt am Draht* (1973), and Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), I offer a theoretical and terminological foundation. It is based on three thinkers on the impact of media technologies on perception from the now considered “classic era of media theory.” Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on reproducibility and the replacement of original sources by ubiquitous copies are followed by Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra and simulation. Here, the distinction between original and copy gradually becomes obsolete in the state of simulation and hyperreality. Vilém Flusser’s theory of technical images and technical imagination stands in contrast to Baudrillard’s, as he counters the deceptive quality of the simulacra by approaching “technical images” (images created by apparatuses) as signifiers that project meaning outwards instead of inwards.

The following second chapter is concerned with the notion of unstable sources and the depiction of phonographic, photographic and cinematic media technologies as narrative devices in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel *l’Eve Future* from 1887. I argue that

the simulation of these media technologies in the narrative enables the destabilization of original sources and replaces them with simulacra that ultimately cannot be sustained.

The third chapter analyzes the “aesthetics of simulation” implemented in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *World on a Wire* (1973). In a combination of philosophical and existential reflections on the nature of reality, the film calls the perception of reality radically into question while employing a simulative aesthetic that includes the spectator in its cinematic framework.

The fourth and final chapter reads the “image as projectile” in Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005). It includes not just the spectator in its visual framework, but also what is purposely left outside of the film-frame. By combining Benjamin’s notion of shock and Flusser’s concept of projection in relation to technical images, I intend to show that Haneke’s moral impetus is related to the (mis)perception of technical—and in this case, digital—images, which have a simultaneous abstract and concrete violent quality. The question that Haneke transfers to the viewer is then, to what extent are we responsible for the violent images we are willingly exposed to on a daily basis?

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“We shall survive in the memory of others.”

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INTRODUCTION

“Pics, or it didn’t happen!” This often-heard phrase that recently became an online-meme, expresses the seemingly necessary need for the consistent (audio) visual documentation with photos and videos today.¹ What seems to be a banal prompt among acquaintances to support recent experiences with visual evidence also exposes the increasing dependency on visual proof to make those experiences believable. Following this logic, photos, videos and other forms of audiovisual recordings are genuine representations of reality. And of course, they are able to provide a documentary “effect” to show that (or how) something happened—archives and museums are testaments to this idea. Nevertheless, one just has to look at the complex status of audiovisual media as photo and video content in global courts of law in order to quickly realize that the line between documented reality and edited fiction is indeed a very thin one. Due to the increasing ubiquity of smartphone technology, digital image production as well as manipulation and distribution tools via the web, the boundaries between perceived and mediated reality become increasingly blurred. How mediated did our reality already become? And how complex is the relationship between us operators and the apparatuses that we use on a daily basis? Naturally these questions have been addressed in the scholarship of the past century. Even before the invention of Turing’s machine in 1936/1937, the relationship and potential dependency between apparatus and operator has been mostly analyzed under the umbrella of prosthetics.

Already Friedrich Nietzsche thought about this relationship after trying his new typewriter for the first time (a Danish Malling-Hansen writing ball): “Unser Werkzeug

¹ See Wendellen Li, “Pics Or it Didn’t Happen: Welcome to the Post-Reality World in 2017.” *Wired UK*

schreibt an unseren Gedanken mit (Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts),” which thereby puts forwards the claim that the media we use to write have a decisive influence on the structure of our thoughts, and therefore also influence their content.² Friedrich A. Kittler famously picked up on this notion later and derived that “[t]here is no [s]oftware” because it is precisely the “hardware” of media technologies, which determine our structures of thinking and therefore also “define what really is.”³ While Kittler’s radical point paved the way for the academic discipline of media studies in Germany—or media history to be more precise—the discipline has steadily evolved and departed from the strict and deterministic approach towards media-technologies, while still acknowledging the idea that the relationship between apparatus and operator is in fact reciprocal.

So why “Short Circuits of Reality?” the title involves a double meaning, which becomes even clearer in German.⁴ “Wirklichkeit, kurz geschlossen.” signifies a disturbance in an electronic circuit, as well as it implies a potential misunderstanding. “Etwas kurz schließen” (to short-circuit) does not just indicate to override an electric circuit of a car for instance; it also means that something has not been grasped in its entirety. Reality has a similar quality, as it is dynamic and constantly evolving and therefore impossible to understand in its entirety. Nevertheless, our reality today seems to be increasingly dominated by electronic circuits, their underlying programs, algorithms, and the images they produce. It is hard to deny that our reality becomes progressively mediated by digital images rather than texts.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Brief an Heinrich Köselitz in Venedig,” in *Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden*. Bd. 6 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag: 1882/1986), 121-123.

³ Friedrich Kittler, “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.” (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1999) 3.

⁴ It also refers to the concept of simulation and hyperreality (“court-circuit de la réalité”) as well as Flusser’s “pagan short-circuit” (“heidnischer Kurzschluss”), which will be introduced in the following.

Our writing and especially image making tools surely have evolved. And while we still write, we rarely do so with the help of a typewriter or even a pen. The rapid evolution of media technologies in the 20th century have revolutionized and changed our ways of communication, from physical mail to email to chat, text message, emoji and image sharing applications. Digital images and screens surround us all the time and the presentiment is that this might rather increase globally in the near future. For that reason, my dissertation project tries to trace some of the origins and effects of *media technologies* in the literary imagination of the outgoing 19th century in Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle Adam's science fiction novel *L'Eve Future* (1887), to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's science fiction TV miniseries *Welt am Draht* in 1973 and finally to the contemporary realism of Michael Haneke's *Caché*, shot entirely in HD-Video in 2005.

Preceding the analyses of these three primary sources is the theoretical and terminological foundation, which is based on three thinkers from the now considered "classic" era of media theory concerned with the impact of media technologies on representation, signification, and perception. Walter Benjamin's concepts of reproducibility, aura, fragmentation and shock (*choc*) are the point of departure for the discussion of the reorganization of perception related to media technologies, particularly cinema. Benjamin's thoughts on reproducibility and the replacement of original sources by ubiquitous copies lead into Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and simulation, in which the distinction between original and copy gradually becomes obsolete in the state of simulation and hyperreality. Vilém Flusser's theory of technical images and technical imagination stands in contrast to Baudrillard's, as he tries to counter the deceptive quality

of the simulacra by approaching “technical images” (images created by apparatuses) as signifiers that project meaning outwards instead of inwards.

Three primary sources and close analyses will help to visualize the concepts on the impact of media technologies on our imagination and perception over the course of the 20th century. Following the theoretical introduction in the first chapter, the second chapter is concerned with the notion of unstable sources and phonographic, photographic and cinematic media technologies as narrative devices in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel *L’Eve Future* from 1887. I argue that the simulation of these media technologies in the narrative—which is performed on a narrative as well as structural, semantic level—enables the destabilization of original sources and replaces them with simulacra that ultimately cannot be sustained. The third chapter analyzes the “aesthetics of simulation” implemented in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *World on a Wire* (1973). The film depicts multiple layers of computer simulations that resemble reality and make the distinction between them increasingly difficult. In a combination of philosophical and existential reflections on the nature of reality, the film calls the perception of reality in relation to computer-simulated environments radically into question while employing a simulative aesthetic that includes the spectator in its cinematic framework.

The fourth and final chapter reads the image as projectile in Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), which includes not just the spectator in its visual framework, but also what is purposely left outside of the film frame. By combining Benjamin’s notion of shock and Flusser’s concept of projection in relation to technical images, I intend to show that Haneke’s moral impetus is related to the (mis)perception of technical—and in this case, digital—images, which have a simultaneously abstract and concrete violent quality. The

question that Haneke transfers to the viewer is, then, to what extent are we responsible for the violent images we are exposed to on a daily basis in entertainment and the mass media?

Chapter I: Theoretical Framework: Reproducibility, Simulation, Projection

As photography and film steadily evolved in the course of the 19th century and finally were combined in the hybrid medium of the digital computer in the 20th century, these “new” media technologies fundamentally changed the way the world is perceived over time and therefore introduced new paradigms of perception to the masses. The increasingly immediate reproduction, manipulation and depiction of reality in moving images lead the way to the increasing importance of the interplay between apparatus and operator as well as towards the increasing “exhibition value” of mediated representations of the world.

In order to give a diverse overview of this rather expansive topic, I introduce and discuss three key figures of media theoretical thought spanning the course of the 20th century: Walter Benjamin and the notion of reproducibility and cinematic shock (*choc*, *choque*), Jean Baudrillard and the concept of simulacra and simulation, and finally Vilém Flusser’s thoughts on technical images and technical imagination. Walter Benjamin’s status as a pioneering thinker for the evolving media theory in the 20th century is largely agreed upon today, as a seemingly never ending stream of publications on his writings can attest.⁵ His influence is also visible in the work of other cultural theorists who took media seriously, such as Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard and Vilém Flusser. Benjamin’s remarks decisively shaped their assumptions on the evolution of media

⁵ See Andreas Ströhl, “Von der Aura zum Chock: Walter Benjamin—die Kunst, ihre Reproduzierbarkeit und die Technik, in *Medientheorien Kompakt* (Konstanz: UVK, 2014) 67; Miriam Hansen, Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology”, in *New German Critique*, No. 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (Duke, Winter, 1987), 179-224; Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 34, No 2 (Chicago: Winter 2008); Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” in *October*, Vol 62 (MIT, Autumn, 1992); Sven Kramer. *Walter Benjamin zur Einführung*. (Hamburg: Junius 2003); Antonio Somaini, “Walter Benjamin’s Media Theory: The *Medium* and the *Apparat*,” in *Grey Room* Vol 62 (MIT: Winter 2016).

(specifically the relationship between operator and apparatus) as well as on media artifacts and the spectator. Benjamin's focus on apperception as it specifically relates to visual media, such as photography and film, is essential for Baudrillard's as well as Flusser's later reflections on the evolving feedback loop between operator, apparatus and recipient/spectator. The notion of shock in avant-garde art and cinema, the distinction between original and copy as well as receptive modes of distraction (*Zerstreuung*) and immersion (*Versenkung*) that Benjamin introduces and expands upon throughout his oeuvre become the foundation for concepts of simulation and hyperreality in Jean Baudrillard.⁶ Influenced by Marxism as well as historical materialism, Baudrillard bases his remarks on simulacra and simulation on his critique of the Marxist concept of commodities. By combining this critique with semiotics, Baudrillard disrupts the Marxist distinction between use and exchange value and introduces the value of the sign as its own category. As its extreme consequence, signs become independent in the state of simulation, rendering any objective differences between them obsolete and introducing the concept of hyperreality. The film scholar and sociologist Sean Cubitt compares this state of total operability of signs (a value of equivalence that renders any objective distinctions between them obsolete) in Baudrillard's thought to DNA codes and their recombinant abilities.⁷ Flusser also argues for the dominance of an abstract mathematical code in the latter half of the 20th century, but in turn rejects the state of total simulation and indifference; he counters with his unique take on technical images and technical imagination that calls for the conscious and active reception and production of technical

⁶ See Walter Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977); Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963).

⁷ See Sean Cubitt, *Simulation and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2001), 23.

images in the digital age. The goal of the following section is to introduce and contextualize these three thinkers in order to apply and visualize their relevant concepts in the intermedial close-readings of the following chapters.

Walter Benjamin: Reproducibility, Aura, Shock

To write something original about the “single most-often cited text by Benjamin or any other German writer on film” is a daring task I will attempt.⁸ The importance of *The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility* (1935/36) for the historical and media technological construction of human perception in modernity cannot be overstated.⁹ While this is not the place to elaborately discuss the theoretical influences and the place of this influential text and its multiple versions within Benjamin’s entire oeuvre, the ambiguous and sometimes arbitrary character of its terminology needs to be elucidated in order to create the foundation for my thesis and establish a basis for the core of my analysis of Baudrillard’s and Flusser’s related media theories. In order to do so, the focus will therefore be on introducing some of the main concepts of Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay in relation to questions concerning the reorganization of human perception in light of media technological developments. If our perceptual apparatus has been decisively influenced and changed by the invention and development of media technologies such as photography and film already over a century ago, we can assume that exponentially expanding development of image production and processing technologies have similar consequences. For this reason, it is of critical importance to clarify Benjamin’s dynamic understanding of “medium” and “aura” as well as his notion of “shock” in the contexts of

⁸ See Miriam Hansen, Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology”, in *New German Critique*, No. 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (Duke: Winter, 1987), 179.

⁹ See *ibid.* 179-224.

their scholarly reception in the Anglo-American discourse from the second half of the 20th century until now.

Perception, Medium, Aura

For Benjamin, the complex reasons for the changes in sensual perception are related to historical contexts and technological progress. This means that the world has been perceived very differently over the course of time, depending on the given historical context and the civilizational knowledge available. This assumption therefore also implies the possible plurality and artificiality of experiencing the world through the senses (*aisthesis*), which has an aesthetic dimension and can change over the course of time.¹⁰ Susan Buck-Morss claims that Benjamin's intended social and political "revolution" through new media technologies is precisely related to this origin of the Greek word: the perception of the senses as in the etymological sense of *aisthetikos*. Therefore, media technological aesthetics are therefore closely interrelated to the "perception of the senses" in Benjamin's thought. Later during Benjamin's time, the meaning of aesthetics was applied predominantly to art and therefore to "cultural forms rather than sensible experience, to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than the real."¹¹ To complement this study of Benjamin's understanding of aesthetics, the reorganization of the senses and perception is also related to historical and technological processes, as Benjamin himself argues:

¹⁰ See Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," in *October*, Vol 62 (Autumn, 1992), 6. "*Aisthisis* [sic] is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. [...] It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer."

¹¹ Ibid. 6.

Innerhalb großer geschichtlicher Zeiträume verändert sich mit der gesamten Daseinsweise der menschlichen Kollektiva auch die Art und Weise ihrer Sinneswahrnehmung. Die Art und Weise, in der die menschliche Sinneswahrnehmung sich organisiert – das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt – ist nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt.¹²

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but also by history.¹³

Here, Benjamin situates the way sensual perception is organized in a “medium”—a dynamic state—that is dependent on natural and historical processes. The interdependencies of media and perception therefore require specific contextualization that takes these factors in their unique constellations into consideration. Antonio Somaini defines Benjamin’s use of *Medium* as “the spatially extended environment, the *milieu*, the atmosphere, the *Umwelt* in which perception occurs” and distinguishes it from the term *Apparat*, which he describes as the technical artifacts that contribute to the (re)organization of sensory experience.¹⁴ Consequently he concludes that Benjamin is neither concerned primarily with a study of “media” conceived as forms of representation having some kind of *media specificity* nor with “media” conceived as technical instruments or means of (mass) communication; instead, he (Benjamin) examines the artistic, epistemic and political implications of the changes in the “*medium* of perception” produced by a steadily evolving domain of material and technical *Apparate* that give

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963) 14.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2008), 23. (English)

¹⁴ Antonio Somaini, “Walter Benjamin’s Media Theory: The *Medium* and the *Apparat*,” in *Grey Room*, Vol. 62 (Winter 2016), 7.

place to ever new “configurations of nature.”¹⁵ This presupposes the focus of Benjamin’s media theory is on the technically mediated “aesthetics” of the transformations of sensory experience.¹⁶

Cinema is the paradigmatic technological medium for Benjamin for this evolving sense of “aesthetics,” as it most clearly relates to the reorganization of sensual experience, “the *medium* of perception” as he calls it. Benjamin’s conception of *medium* has a broader significance that is connected to *media diaphana* (air, smoke, vapor, clouds, glass, etc.) and therefore has an ethereal connotation, while *Apparatus* relates to the new media technological inventions at the time, particularly visual media such as photography and cinema.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Benjamin’s conflation of “medium” and “apparatus of perception” indicates the increasing interdependence between the new technological media and the perceptual apparatus (*Wahrnehmungsapparat*).¹⁸ Somaini helpfully describes Benjamin’s various uses of the term medium and identifies five different meanings in his writings from 1915-1920, which are the basis for his use of the term in later texts such as the “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (“Little History of Photography,” 1931), the chapters of “Berliner Kindheit um 1900” (“Berlin Childhood around 1900,” 1932-1934, revised 1938), the related essays “Über das mimetische Vermögen” and “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (“On the Mimetic Faculty” and “Doctrine of the Similar,” both 1933), several of the fragments in the *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*), as well as a passage from the preparatory materials for the theses “Über den Begriff der

¹⁵ Ibid. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid. 11. This interrelation between technological media and sensual perception anticipates later conceptions of media technologies with prosthetic qualities (specifically Marshall McLuhan’s “extensions of man” in *Understanding Media*. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

Geschichte” (“On the Concept of History,” 1940).¹⁹ Somaini elaborates on Benjamin’s various uses of the term in more detail:

(1) *Medium* as the diffused, unstable, metamorphic, cloudlike world of color. (2) *Medium* as the surface manifestation of transcendence, in a usage not far from the one we find in the context of the occult of the second half of the nineteenth-century, in which the term *medium* designated those who were capable of entering into contact with the realm of the dead and of spirits. (3) *Medium* as the ontological domain from which things are called into existence through the act of naming. (4) *Medium* as the “*Medium* of reflection,” the infinite “connection” elaborated by a thought that proceeds through different forms of “mediation” (Vermittlung) and considers works of art as “living centers of reflection.” (5) Finally, *Medium* as the diaphanous halo that needs to be penetrated in order to access a work of art, a halo whose density and transparency change in time, determining the reception of the work of art both by its contemporaries and in later periods.²⁰

It becomes clear that Benjamin’s use of medium evolved contextually and can be distinguished from his use of apparatus, which relates more closely to a prosthetic understanding of media technologies, especially in the context of “auxiliary apparatuses” with the ability to rearrange perception:

Benjamin’s “aesthetic” media theory is therefore based on the observation that the human “apparatus of perception” had been progressively more exposed to the action of a new generation of technical *Apparate* that had completely reorganized the “*Medium*” of perception. The use of the term *Apparat* to indicate both the sensory and the technical apparatuses involved in the different forms of technically mediated experience—a use that also can be found in Sigmund Freud, who, in “A Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad” (1925), discusses the relations between our “perceptual apparatus” (*Wahrnehmungsapparat*) and “all the forms of auxiliary apparatuses (*Hilfsapparate*) we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions,” such as “spectacles, photographic cameras, ear trumpets,” and the “mystic

¹⁹ Somaini 17.

²⁰ Ibid. 17.

writing pad”—seems to indicate a certain predisposition, by the human sensory organs, to the encounter with technology.²¹

Benjamin’s purposely dynamic use of the term medium and its interrelation to technological apparatuses still holds up today, even if the technologies have decisively evolved. This can be seen in Sybille Krämer’s volume *Medien, Computer, Realität*, in which three understandings of the term medium form the basis for the further inquiry into what it can represent as a phenomenon in its unique constellation: (1) as transmission or *Übertragung*, (2) as mediation or *Vermittlung* or, (3) as communicability or *Mittelbarkeit*.²²

Benjamin’s various understandings of medium bring us closer to his equally diffuse use of “aura,” which he introduced explicitly in the “Little History of Photography.”²³ Here, it is the uniqueness and the gaze in the portraits of early daguerreotypes, in which Benjamin locates a “diaphanous and haloed atmosphere” that he further defines as “auratic”: “(T)here was an aura about them, a *Medium* that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that *Medium*.”²⁴ Somaini highlights Benjamin’s synonymous use of *medium* and *aura* in this passage as “they both indicate the specific density of the diaphanous halo, the atmosphere that surrounds the material world of the nineteenth century as it is represented through photography and that

²¹ Somaini 11.

²² Sybille Krämer, “Was haben die Medien, der Computer und die Realität miteinander zu tun? Zur Einleitung in diesen Band,” in *Medien, Computer, Realität* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998) 16.

²³ Walter Benjamin, “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie,” in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963) 57. Miriam Hansen adds that Benjamin’s first comment on the concept of aura can be found in an unpublished report on one of his hashish experiments, dated March, 1930. Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No 2 (Chicago: Winter 2008) 336.

²⁴ Benjamin, “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie,” (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963) 57. See Somaini 18. Somaini chose to capitalize the term *Medium* when relating to Benjamin’s diverse understanding of the term.

conditions the possibility of the modern spectator to have access to it.”²⁵ Two observations are crucial here, first, the specific relation to the technical capabilities of early photography—the uniqueness of daguerreotypes and their production process—and second, the involvement of the spectators and the conditioning qualities that the medium of photography has on their perceptual capacities. In concrete examples, Benjamin contrasts the Pictorialist photographers, who “saw their task to simulate the aura using all the arts of retouching, and especially the so-called gum print,” with the photographs of Eugène Atget, whose depictions of the empty streets and squares of Paris, “suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.”²⁶ The rupture that Benjamin sees in Atget’s photographs enables the political education of the gaze pursued by the surrealists and other photographers later.²⁷ Benjamin picks up on this educational aspect and relates it to film and cinema in the “Artwork” essay, as I will discuss shortly.

Let us first come back to the much-debated definition of Benjamin’s use of “aura.” Similarly to “medium,” and seen in relation to all of Benjamin’s writings, the concept of “aura” has multiple contextual meanings that depend on the unique constellations in which it is embedded, as well as to what extent it is strategically deployed (i.e. in contrast to the common connotation in occult discourse at the time).²⁸ Even though the range of meanings of aura in Benjamin’s writings is dynamic and evolves, there is a clear link to his examination of technological media. For Benjamin, the changes in the “medium of perception” taking place around the turn of 1900 are closely related to the demise of the aura: “Und wenn Veränderungen im Medium der

²⁵ Somaini 18.

²⁶ Somaini 18. I want to draw attention to the simulative tendency that is apparent in the artificial reproduction of aura through media technological means in the example of the Pictorialists.

²⁷ Somaini 19.

²⁸ Hansen 338.

Wahrnehmung, deren Zeitgenossen wir sind, sich als Verfall der Aura begreifen lassen, so kann man dessen gesellschaftliche Bedingungen aufzeigen“ (“And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay“).²⁹ The notion of “aura” has been widely interpreted as an aesthetic category and in contrast to the productive innovation that new media technologies and their reproducibility enable.³⁰ Particularly when, according to film historian Miriam Hansen, “the simulation of auratic effects does appear on the side of the technological media (as in the recycling of the classics, the Hollywood star cult, or fascist mass spectacle), it assumes an acutely negative valence, which turns the etiology (causality) of aura’s decline into a call for its demolition.”³¹ Hansen sees the purely aesthetic interpretation of Benjamin’s aura as a reductive reading that she partly blames on the narrow understanding of the third version of the “Artwork” essay.³² Here, Benjamin defines the concept of aura further “als einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag” (“the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”).³³ This unapproachability (*Unnahbarkeit*) of the unique artwork is a key aspect of its auratic quality and fleeting effect.³⁴ The aura of the unique and original artwork is based on the tradition of rituals from which its “cult value” derives.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963) 15; Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2008), 23. (English).

³⁰ Hansen 336. See her essay for an in-depth reading of the intertextual influences of Benjamin’s changing conception of aura. Also see Barry Schwabsky, “Aura as Medium,” in *Raritan*, Vol. 36, No 2 (Spring 2017).

³¹ Hansen 336-337.

³² Hansen 337. As Benjamin referred to the second version of the essay as his “Urtext,” Hansen uses that version as the basis for further discussion.

³³ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 15. (English) 23.

³⁴ Benjamin 16. In a footnote Benjamin expands on the definition and explains this unapproachability in more detail: Die Definition der Aura als „einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag“, stellt

The reproduced artwork, however, emancipates itself from this tradition based in the ritual and replaces the “cult value” with “exhibition value” through the inclusion of mechanical and media technological reproduction techniques. The aura is lost in this process and its demise relates to two tendencies that can be observed in the reaction of the masses in society:

Die Dinge sich räumlich und menschlich näherzubringen ist ein genau so leidenschaftliches Anliegen der gegenwärtigen Massen wie es ihre Tendenz einer Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit durch die Aufnahme von deren Reproduktion ist.³⁵

Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to “get closer” to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.³⁶

Back then as it is right now, the desire to appropriate space and time in the image and to fix a subject, object or happening (or “each thing’s uniqueness”) by reproducing, storing and distributing it (in the image), are apparent with the recent rise and success of mobile and instant image-sharing technologies and applications. Even though Benjamin could not foresee this context, it is difficult not to relate his ideas to our current historical epoch. He specifies further by relating this desire directly to capturing the object in the image, respectively the reproduced image: “Tagtäglich macht sich unabweisbarer das Bedürfnis geltend, des Gegenstands aus nächster Nähe im Bild, vielmehr im *Abbild*, in der Reproduktion habhaft zu werden” (“Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of

nichts anderes dar als die Formulierung des Kultwerts des Kunstwerks in Kategorien der raum-zeitlichen Wahrnehmung. Ferne ist das Gegenteil von Nähe. Das *wesentlich* Ferne ist das Unnahbare. In der Tat ist Unnahbarkeit eine Hauptqualität des Kultbildes. Es bleibt seiner Natur nach „Ferne so nah es sein mag“. Die Nähe, die man seiner Materie abzugewinnen vermag, tut der Ferne nicht Abbruch, die es nach seiner Erscheinung bewahrt.“

³⁵ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 15.

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2008), 23. (English)

an object at close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction”).³⁷ This indicates the desire and tendency of appropriating a simulated, virtual reproduction of reality into photographic memory technologies, whether this image is stored in a roll of analog film or a memory card, which are inserted into the camera. The option of capturing and recording something in the form of a photograph can become the incentive for action and shape habits. The possibility of capturing the moment and saving the memory for later inspection leads to changes in the way that the present moment is perceived in the first place. Depending on the situation, this can evoke a heightened or decreased amount of attention, but the presence of the photographic apparatus (or smartphone) and its option to capture has an influence on how it is perceived.

The previous quote by Benjamin additionally highlights the distinction between the original image (*Bild*) and its reproduction/copy (*Abbild*), which have inherently different characteristics. Whereas the image is characterized by its uniqueness and duration, and therefore results in a higher degree of immersion, the reproduction is characterized by its repeatability and elusiveness. Benjamin also relates this phenomenon to apperception in modernity:³⁸

Die Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle, die Zertrümmerung der Aura, ist die Signatur einer Wahrnehmung, deren „Sinn für das Gleichartige in der Welt“ so gewachsen ist, daß sie es mittels der Reproduktion auch dem Einmaligen abgewinnt.

The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose “sense for all that is the

³⁷ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 15; English, 23.

³⁸ See Ole W. Fischer, “‘The Treachery of Images’ - Architecture, Immersion, and the Digital Realm,” in *Immersion in the Digital Arts in Media*, Studies in Intermediality, Vol 2, (2015) for an in-depth look at the genealogy of immersion in relation to Benjamin.

same in the world” has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.³⁹

The novelty in this passage is the relation of perception to a tendency of sameness that is caused through the synchronization of reproduction processes. In other words, the ubiquity and similarity, which reproducibility enables, feed back into perception so that even unique objects are perceived as copies. On the other hand, the liberating aspect of reproducibility is seen in the emancipation from the ritual and, as the aspect of reproducibility inherently enters the mode of production, the reproduced artwork “wird in immer steigendem Maße die Reproduktion eines auf Reproduzierbarkeit angelegten Kunstwerks” (“to an ever increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility”).⁴⁰ For Benjamin, film is *the* paradigmatic example as it inherently includes its technological reproducibility by including its distribution into the framework of its production.⁴¹

I want to argue that the desire to appropriate the moment in the image that Benjamin describes marks a decisive step toward what we could call simulative tendencies that emerge with the invention of visual media technologies such as photography and film. These technologies enable the storage and distribution of sounds and (moving) images and closely resemble reality but remain mediated. Furthermore, technological progress and apparatuses that call for human-machine interaction enable

³⁹ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 16; Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, 23-24 (English).

⁴⁰ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 17. (English) 24.

⁴¹ Ibid. 17; see footnote 9: “Die technische Reproduzierbarkeit der Filmwerke ist unmittelbar in der Technik ihrer Produktion begründet. Diese ermöglicht nicht nur auf die unmittelbarste Art die massenweise Verbreitung der Filmwerke, sie erzwingt sie vielmehr geradezu. (...)” In the English version: “The technological reproducibility of films is based directly on the technology of their production. This not only makes possible the mass dissemination of films in the most direct way, but actually enforces it.” (44, footnote 9)

the mediated appropriation of reality through a reciprocal feedback loop. In the context of my work, Villiers de L'Isle Adam's novel *L'Eve Future* (*Tomorrow's Eve*, 1887) will serve as a paradigmatic example of the literary reflection and feedback loop that Benjamin describes 30 years later. Furthermore Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht* (*World on a Wire*, 1973) and also Michael Haneke's *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005) will illustrate the increasing tendency to blur the clear distinction between the original and reproduced (mediated) copy in the realm of the hyperreal.

Fragmentation, Shock and Film

Benjamin's reflection on film and changes in perception is deeply related to the fragmented sensual experience of modern life in the city (particularly Paris) in the 1920s. Sven Kramer writes about the aphorisms in Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* ("One-Way-Street," 1928) that "[d]ie fragmentarische Form der Reflexion schließt sich hier zusammen mit der Großstadterfahrung, indem Benjamin seine Überschriften motivisch diesem Bereich entnimmt, sodass das Großstadtleben in den Textrhythmus eingegangen zu sein scheint."⁴² This observation describes a feedback loop between the fragmented experience of the city and Benjamin's theoretical and literary reflection, which included fragmentation in its structure. The overwhelming sensual experience of life in the industrialized metropolis finds its entrance into literature and criticism and vice versa.

But theoretical and literary reflection itself was not enough to actively counter the rise of fascism in Europe at the time. Benjamin's call to counter the totalitarian "aestheticization of politics" with "the politicization of art" is closely related to similar

⁴² Sven Kramer, *Walter Benjamin zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius 2003), 69.

developments in avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Surrealism, Dada and Bertolt Brecht's epic theater.⁴³ Susan Buck-Morss emphasizes that Benjamin locates sensory alienation at the source of the "aestheticization of politics" and that fascism does not create this aestheticization per se, but rather "manages" (*betreibt*) it.⁴⁴ The communist response via the "politicization of art" can therefore not be limited to countering fascist with communist propaganda; moreover, Benjamin aims for the reorganization of the sensory apparatus in order to counter the "anaestheticizing" effect that media technologies can enable. On the anaestheticizing quality of media technologies, Buck-Morss writes "the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of *anaesthetics*. In this situation of 'crisis in perception,' it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving it back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring 'perceptibility.'⁴⁵

While art movements such as Surrealism aim to enrich art and the modern experience with the depths of the social and psychological unconscious, epic theater draws attention to the artificiality and constructedness of the staged scenes with the help of alienation techniques that break the immersion of the spectator.⁴⁶ This anti-illusionism was transferred to other art forms later, especially in visual media such as photography and film. In Benjamin's view especially those carry an emancipatory potential that could lead to broader political participation in society. Benjamin's cautious optimism was not

⁴³ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 44; Kramer 82.

⁴⁴ Buck-Morss 4.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 18: She further adds: "The technical apparatus, incapable of "returning our gaze," catches the deadness of the eyes that confront the machine—eyes that "have lost their ability to look." Of course, the eyes still see. Bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much—and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synesthetic organization as *anaesthetics*."

⁴⁶ By way of exposing the set design, with fragmented narratives or distanced and neutral acting styles for instance. See Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 147-155.

commonly shared among his contemporaries, especially other Marxist thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who feared the demise of bourgeois high culture through the “culture industry.”⁴⁷ Brecht, too, was cautious and understood these cultural ruptures mainly in relation to media-technological reproduction techniques.⁴⁸

Brecht’s epic theater was a decisive inspiration for Benjamin’s conception of shock. In opposition to text, which evokes image associations in the reader, the theater produces gestures that have the potential to freeze and isolate actions, comparable to the images on a filmstrip.⁴⁹ The potential abrupt rupture in the sequence of gestures may result in a shock experience for the audience, which in the intended case results in critical thinking (through its distancing and alienation techniques): “Das epische Theater gibt also nicht Zustände wieder, es entdeckt sie vielmehr. Die Entdeckung der Zustände vollzieht sich mittels der Unterbrechung von Abläufen.”⁵⁰ The moment of disruption and fragmentation challenges the audience and they potentially evolve from being passive consumers to active explorers and participants. The moment of interactivity that becomes increasingly relevant in our daily interactions with computers (but also artworks like immersive or interactive installations) have their foundation in the alienation techniques of epic theater. Benjamin expands on this thought in his essay *Der Autor als Produzent* (The Author as Producer, 1932), where he states that Brecht was the first to have demanded intellectuals and artists „den Produktionsapparat nicht zu beliefern, ohne ihn

⁴⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 1969) 128-153.

⁴⁸ Andreas Ströhl, “Von der Aura zum Chock: Walter Benjamin - die Kunst, ihre Reproduzierbarkeit und die Technik, in *Medientheorien Kompakt* (Konstanz: UVK, 2014) 67.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Philosophische und ästhetische Schriften,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II (Frankfurt: 1972-1989) 515.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 522.

zugleich, nach Maßgabe des Möglichen, im Sinne des Sozialismus zu verändern.“⁵¹

Benjamin and Brecht share the motivation to repurpose art for creative action and people more generally instead of solely “informing” intellectuals and artists. This new approach is inherently political and defined by a reconsideration of the relationship of form, content and technology (*Technik*).⁵²

The inherent political quality can be traced back to the irreversible changes that came with industrialization and the rise of fascism. In Benjamin’s and also Brecht’s perspective, these tendencies have to be countered with open and participatory cultural models that use new technologies with political—socialist—intent.⁵³ Sven Kramer describes Benjamin’s imagined use of new technologies under the premise of its interdependent potentials and practical applications:

Will eine politische Kunst praktisch wirksam werden, so muss sie inmitten der avanciertesten Techniken arbeiten. Aber sie darf sie nicht in der üblichen, kapitalistisch geprägten Weise einsetzen, die – gesteigert im Faschismus – unweigerlich in den Krieg führt. Vielmehr soll eine solche Kunst, indem sie sich den fortgeschrittensten Techniken bedient, deren utopisch-innovative Potenziale entdecken. Kunst, Technik und Politik durchdringen einander.⁵⁴

The interplay between media technologies and the (re)production of artworks with political ambition has to break with given conventions that perpetuate the status quo.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Benjamin II, 691

⁵² The term “Technik” (technology) has multiple connotations for Benjamin. On the one hand, it signifies the craft and artistic quality of an artwork and, on the other, it stands for innovations in the history of technology. See Kramer 80. Also see Barry Schwabsky, “Aura as Medium,” in *Raritan*, Vol. 36, No 2 (Spring 2017) for a detailed discussion of Brecht’s influence on Benjamin.

⁵³ Along these lines, Vilém Flusser calls to learn the dominant code of the technical image (which includes photography, video and film) in order to counterbalance totalitarian and manipulative tendencies of “amphitheatrical” discourses in radio and television.

⁵⁴ Kramer 81.

⁵⁵ In addition, Flusser develops a comparable approach and relates it to the practice of photography. In order to create new images and new information, the photographer has to “play” against the program of the apparatus. See Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2000) 25.

Brecht's ideas on the participatory potential of the radio serve as a model to elicit social change on a larger scale in society.⁵⁶ Accordingly, media technological progress is embedded in complex relations that stretch between the poles of technological determinism and the utopian potential of critically adapting to that progress. The interplay between technological progress and the adoption of media technologies by society in specific man-machine constellations determine its social outcome, whether society is overwhelmed by this progress or if it can be utilized for the common good.⁵⁷

Although the status of film as an art form was still debated at the time, Benjamin decisively understood it as such. Fragmentation in conjunction with montage is one of the key characteristics of film that is also related to the notion of shock. The ability to dissect actors' bodies into visual fragments via framing and montage techniques is a crucial element that Benjamin compares to the scalpel of a surgeon.⁵⁸ In this regard, it is especially the principle of montage, which is critical for this perspective as it is directly linked to new models in perception (i.e. the fragmented experience of life in the metropolis). Benjamin is influenced by these new models to such an extent that he adopts montage techniques in his own writing, especially in the *Passagenwerk* (1927-1940), which remained a fragment due to his suicide.⁵⁹

So while it is important to keep the analogy between perception, reproduction techniques and their appropriation in art production in mind, Benjamin defines a

⁵⁶ Bertolt Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat" ("The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication"), in *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheaters Darmstadt*, No. 16 (1932). Benjamin was an avid radio content producer himself. He produced segments for the literature program at the Frankfurter Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk as well as programs for children and teenagers at the Berliner Rundfunk. See Kramer 82.

⁵⁷ Kramer 86.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 31-32; 36.

⁵⁹ Kramer 95.

preliminary goal that reminds us to maintain a balance between (media) technological progress and human agency: “Als vorläufiges Ziel wäre ein Zustand anzustreben, in dem die Menschen nicht zu Instrumenten im blinden Selbstlauf der Technik degradiert wären, sondern im Gleichgewicht mit ihr stünden.”⁶⁰ The notion of actively using technology as an “organ” in the service of humanity signifies an early indication of prosthetic tendencies in relation to media technologies that has been widely adopted in later media theory, specifically Marshall McLuhan’s.⁶¹

The moment of shock that Benjamin isolates is closely related to the perceptive processes of editing techniques and, even though there is an uncontrollable element involved for the spectator, the experience in the cinema can serve as an active exercise in (changing) perception to the new industrialized reality of the metropolis. Particularly film and its montage techniques enable a new way of seeing that is somewhat analogous to the fragmented experience of the industrialized city. The shock it entails makes immersive contemplation difficult because of the rapid changes of perspectives in the film images.⁶² Following this trajectory, film is able to depict new experiences and therefore creates “eine neue Region des Bewusstseins.”⁶³ Even though he situates film and the shock it produces as decisive factors in the destruction (*Zertrümmerung*) of aura, Benjamin is invested in transforming the loss of aura into something liberating and emancipatory. Following the framework of the “politicization of art,” the loss of aura generates a

⁶⁰ Benjamin VII, 375, in Kramer 97.

⁶¹ See Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage – An Inventory of Effects*. (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1967); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge: MIT, 1994).

⁶² Benjamin I, 503, in Kramer 98. This active exercise becomes particularly visible in Michael Haneke’s films particularly *Caché*, and also in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *World on a Wire*, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

⁶³ Benjamin II, 752.

perceptive field of experimentation that orients viewers' perception and social habits towards a social revolution against the rise of fascism. The moment of emancipation is closely related to the modern experience but comes along with a moment of loss (of the auratic experience) by way of shock experiences.⁶⁴ As previously pointed out, the experience of distraction and shock are related to a potential learning experience in the modern and industrialized urban environment. "Im Film kommt die chockförmige [sic] Wahrnehmung als formales Prinzip zur Geltung. Was am Fließband den Rhythmus der Produktion bestimmt, liegt beim Film der Rezeption zugrunde."⁶⁵ Shock experiences in film externalize the modern mode of perception and make it visible on the screen. Cinema can function as a survival practice for the distracting features of modern city life and therefore are a reflection and projection of society at the same time.

Film historian R.L. Rutsky highlights the aspect of conditioning in Benjamin's reflection of shock in film. The English version translates "chockförmige Wahrnehmung" to "perception conditioned by shock" and Rutsky situates Benjamin's discussion of the phenomenon between "stimuli" and a "kind of training," which is inspired not only by Freud, but also draws from "behaviorist ideas of stimuli and conditioned responses."⁶⁶ Additionally, Benjamin relates the shock experience to electric energy charges that result in physical jolts in the body of the viewer.⁶⁷ Rutsky reminds us of the proximity of this phenomenon to the concept of innervation, which Benjamin also discussed in earlier

⁶⁴ Benjamin: Baudelaire "hat den Preis bezeichnet, um welchen die Sensation der Moderne zu haben ist: die Zertrümmerung der Aura im Schockerlebnis" (I, 653). Sven Kramer also highlights the ephemeral quality of Benjamin's use of aura, which results in the difficulty of clearly defining it. Kramer 91-92. For Eva Geulen this is the reason why "aura" for Benjamin is more of a performative intervention than a clearly defined term ("weniger ein Begriff als performativer Eingriff" [Geulen 580-605]).

⁶⁵ Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 208.

⁶⁶ R.L. Rutsky, "Walter Benjamin and the Dispersion of Cinema," in *Symploke*, Vol. 15, No ½, Cinema without Borders (2007), 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 15.

versions of the *Kunstwerk* essay. Innervation represents an “internal counterpart to external shocks or stimuli” and “it is precisely this transmission or flow of stimuli from external to internal that subjects ‘the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.’ Shocks, then, do not simply jolt the consciousness that comes into contact with them; they enter and, in fact, alter the bodily pathways and processes by which they are perceived or received.”⁶⁸ If this assertion is taken seriously in its relation to technological reproducibility and editing in film, “the technical processes of film, including montage, themselves become part of this more haptic, bodily perceptual process.”⁶⁹

On the opposite end, Benjamin contrasts the shock experience and its increasing potential for distraction (*Zerstreuung*) with the enduring immersion or ‘contemplation’ (*Versenkung*) related to the perceptive experience of paintings, panoramas and other “traditional” still images.⁷⁰ Benjamin offers multiple applications of distraction in relation to the perception of artworks, architecture and motion pictures. Theoretician and

⁶⁸ Ibid. 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 16.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 33-34. Ole Fischer discusses immersion in its relation to Benjamin’s remarks and distinguishes between two different meanings of immersion: “Both denote a slip into another form of reality, the loss of the present here and now in favor of an alternative mental state. Both further underline the emotional participation of the observer by reducing the (critical) distance between him and her and the observed. The two notions, however, tackle diverse positions on the degree of absorption of the viewer: on the one side, immersion is pictured as a total enclosure by a medium, as an illusionistic image space, which presents a seamless totality capacity of capturing the viewer’s perception, and which addresses primarily digital virtual realities. While this strand of ‘immersion’ focuses on the medium and reduces the viewer’s role to passive receiver, it is the term’s other interpretation that emphasizes its internal effect. Following this hypothesis, each medium has the potential to bring about an emphatic experience: books (for example, the effect of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on the readership of his time), music (from Richard Wagner to contemporary raves), opera, theater, and cinema but also games, works of art and architecture, and even nature. Here, ‘immersion describes emotional absorption in a medium, a state of mind that psychology has labeled ‘flow’. Immersion in 3-D films, virtual or augmented reality, or computer games might be new variations of a recurring perceptual motif but do not come close to constituting a media revolution. While various media show differences, of course regarding the construction of absorption, all forms of immersion underline the active role of the enwrapped viewer who willingly dives into their world. In other words, immersion takes place in the mind” See Ole W. Fischer, “The Treachery of Images”: Architecture, Immersion, and the Digital Realm, in *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* (Brill Online, 2015) 1-2.

curator Ole Fischer remarks in this context that “dispersion or distraction offers a twofold reading of, first, the spatial distribution of a work of art (series, reproduction, circulation) and, second, society’s inattentive perception and enjoyment.”⁷¹

Today, the distinction between distraction and immersion is also valid for different approaches in filmmaking and television. While fast-paced blockbuster productions and commercial advertising work with a high frequency of fast cuts that relate to distraction through shock, other independent or art film productions often work with longer takes and steady shots that invite contemplation in the viewers by including them in their cinematic and voyeuristic framework. Rainer Werner Fassbinder and also Michael Haneke function as paradigmatic film authors in the latter context. Both filmmakers are invested in reflective and projective processes that engage the spectators’ relationships with their films, albeit in different ways. While Haneke particularly works with static long takes and elliptic montage sequences, Fassbinder’s camera is more dynamic and uses uncommon stylistic devices such as zooms to highlight specific narrative events visually. The following analytical chapters will provide more detail on both directors and specifically Fassbinder’s *Welt am Draht* (*World on a Wire*, 1973) and Haneke’s *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005).

Despite the emancipatory enthusiasm, the threat of capitalist appropriation of the utopian and revolutionary potential of new media technologies such as film looms in the background of Benjamin’s thought. He indicates this danger and tendency in the replacement of the actors’ aura by their artificial image and celebrity or “star” persona:

Der Film antwortet auf das Einschrumpfen der Aura mit einem künstlichen Aufbau der „personality“ ausserhalb des Ateliers. Der

⁷¹ Fischer, 9.

vom Filmkapital geförderte Starkultus konserviert jenen Zauber der Persönlichkeit, der schon längst nur noch im fauligen Zauber ihres Warencharakters besteht. Solange das Filmkapital den Ton angibt, lässt sich dem heutigen Film im allgemeinen kein anderes revolutionäres Verdienst zuschreiben, als eine revolutionäre Kritik der überkommenen Vorstellungen von Kunst zu befördern.⁷²

Film capital uses the revolutionary opportunities implied by this control for counterrevolutionary purposes. Not only does the cult of the movie star which it fosters preserve that magic of the personality which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character, but its counterpart, the cult of the audience, reinforces the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses.⁷³

In Benjamin's description of the commodification processes of the "film industry," the "film star" demonstrates the true intention of capitalist production, simulating the "authenticity" and aura of the stage actor. The audience was eager to appropriate this concept and transform into exhibition value. The artificial element in the creation of the "star persona" has a simulative tendency in that it establishes or replaces an image that is engineered to be perceived as authentic.⁷⁴

The following subchapter will provide a closer look at the genealogy of simulation—from Greco-Roman antiquity to late-twentieth-century post-structuralism—in relation to the evolution of media technologies, thereby showing to what extent the distinction between original and copy has been destabilized with the advent of mechanical reproducibility as well as how it (the distinction) eventually has been de-referentialized and artificially resurrected in the concept of simulation and hyperreality.

⁷² Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 28.

⁷³ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, 23-24 (English). The English translation of this version differs decisively from the German original here.

⁷⁴ On precursors for phantasmagoric and simulation spaces such as the arcades and malls in France, see Buck-Morss 21-22 .

Jean Baudrillard: Simulacra, Simulation, Hyperreality

The concept of simulation can be traced back as far as Plato's critique of images and the allegory of the cave.⁷⁵ Already here, the concept of simulation was related to an illusory copy that is not even grounded in an original image (*Urbild*). Moreover, it relates to copies of copies, illusions and hallucinations.⁷⁶ Ovid also describes the hallucinatory understanding of simulation in the myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with the "image of a body"; similarly, Horace uses the verb "simulare" to criticize poetry that considers illusory representation as something perfectly real.⁷⁷ It was not until Gilles Deleuze that the negative and delusive connotation of simulation changed by attempting to reverse the Platonic constellations and their deceptive connotation to something creative and productive ("renverser le platonisme").⁷⁸ This re-definition of simulation, as discussed below, and especially the all-encompassing breakthrough of computer technology established the notion of defining modernity itself as an era of simulation ("l'ère du simulation").⁷⁹ Even before the existence of microprocessors, computers were in essence "simulators."⁸⁰

However, there is an ongoing debate that circles around the relation of simulation to mimetic representation. To what extent is simulation imitation? Or, how does it go beyond it? Early definitions of simulation as Ovid's reference to the Pygmalion myth highlight the notion of analogy over perfect reproduction. Therefore, simulation was understood as reproducing something as closely as possible, which implies that traces of

⁷⁵ Dotzler 515; Cubitt 3.

⁷⁶ Dotzler 515.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 515

⁷⁸ Ibid. 526-27.

⁷⁹ Dotzler 515.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 515.

the (original) referent remain intact.⁸¹ Still, it is the computer that performs the transition from imitation to simulation. The shift into the digital sphere and computer graphics marks the transition from imitation to simulation.⁸²

The entanglement of the concept of simulation with evolving computer technologies is responsible for the suspicion that increasing interaction with virtual environments result in a loss of concrete experience and understanding.⁸³ In that sense and if taken seriously, simulation does perform the de-referentialization that the contemporary understanding of it implies.⁸⁴ Nevertheless this de-referentialization is closely tied to the artificial replacement of the destabilized signifier, which Jean Baudrillard explores in his radical notion of simulacra and simulation. Simulacra establish the arbitrary order of signs in relation to developments in media technologies. In this arbitrary order, Baudrillard declares the total operability of the code:

Its [the code's] sole interest is in continuing to operate: this is why it opposes change and eventually divorces itself and everyone caught up in it from history. The code functions, it appears, like the code of language, the underlying grammatical rules that, according to contemporary linguistics, generate every spoken sentence; or like the mathematical codes for compression and transmission that govern modern communication technologies; or, most tellingly perhaps, like the genetic code, forming and shaping the body of every living thing and "operating" the body like a remotely controlled robot.⁸⁵

We can highlight the pervasiveness of the "code" which "operates" on multiple levels, biological as well as technological. From this perspective, the understanding of society as permeated by different "codes" has ultimately devastating consequences when following

⁸¹ Ibid. 516.

⁸² Ibid. 517.

⁸³ Ibid. 516-18.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 518.

⁸⁵ Cubitt 44.

Baudrillard's line of argument. Sean Cubitt elaborates in more detail in this context, drawing on Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*:

The natural law of value, based on use-value, was also founded in the relationship between signifiers and their referents, the things to which they refer. Use and meaning gave previous societies a certain fullness, although Baudrillard does perceive even in the Renaissance, when capitalism first began, a kind of simulation, which he calls "counterfeit." The Industrial Revolution brought with it a second order of simulation when it introduced the commodity form. Under this regime of the market law of value, commodities were produced as equivalents for one another, equivalents which included the industrial worker's labour power. By the same token, signifiers were now freed from the necessity to refer to reality, their equivalent of use-value, and instead were produced endlessly as equivalents, one for another. The third order of simulation, our own, is dominated by the "structural law of value," which is also the code.⁸⁶

The decisive difference to previous conceptions is the understanding of simulation not as a deficient mode of reproduced depictions in the mimetic sense, but as a unique category that reflects on the power of autonomous processes of signs due to the increasing distribution of technological media.⁸⁷ It would fall short to understand simulation as mere imitation and representation since the invention and spread of digital media. Rather, simulation goes beyond mimetic representation by creating its own realities.⁸⁸ The discourse is divisive in this regard. Some counter the strict opposition between mimetic representation and simulation and for instance claim an increase in real experience through simulation practices; others question the status of de-referentialization or try to realign the conception of simulation under the premise of mimesis entirely.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cubitt 44.

⁸⁷ Dotzler 518.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 518-19.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 518-519.

It was Baudrillard's insistence on relating the concept of simulation to *media techno-logical* developments that made his name representative of present theoretical conceptions of simulation.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, categorizing him along disciplinary boundaries proves to be difficult. Departing from a critique of economic value in Marxism, which in his view misses the purposelessness of symbolic exchange (*L'Échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976), Baudrillard develops his concept of simulation.⁹¹ On the one hand, his apocalyptic and nihilist analysis of the present is grounded in the loss of reference, i.e. the de-referentialization of signs. And, on the other hand, instead of enabling communication, mass media actually prohibit it.⁹²

Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra establish the evolution from mimetic representation to the concept of simulation in historical progression:

Three orders of simulation, parallel to mutations in the law of value, have succeeded one another since the Renaissance:

- 1 The *counterfeit* is the dominant scheme of the "classical" epoch, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution.
- 2 *Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era.
- 3 *Simulation* is the dominant scheme of the present phase of history, governed by the code.⁹³

Simulacra of the first order play on the natural law of value; those of the second order play on the commodity law of value; and those of the third order play on the structural law of value.

The crisis of signification is closely related to the "mutations in the laws of value," which Baudrillard relates to three distinct historical periods. *Imitation* leaves the difference and

⁹⁰ Ibid. 519.

⁹¹ Andreas Ströhl, "Das Komplott der Simulakra: Jean Baudrillard," in *Medientheorien Kompakt* (Konstanz: UVK, 2014), 192.

⁹² Andreas Ströhl, "Das Komplott der Simulakra: Jean Baudrillard," 192.

⁹³ Jean Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 135.

relationship between sign and signified as well as original and copy intact and is dominant in the Classical period before the Industrial Revolution. In this earlier period, the reproduced image (*simulacrum*) is a clear counterfeit of the real and is therefore mimetic.⁹⁴

With the advent of electromechanical reproduction techniques during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, the simulacra of the second order begin to break down the distinctions between the original signifier (*image*) and their representation (*copy*).⁹⁵ Baudrillard picks up on Benjamin's ideas on reproducibility and states that the ubiquity of (electro)mechanical reproduction and its mass production of copies enable the misrepresentation of reality and threatens to replace it with its mass proliferation of copies.⁹⁶ In contrast to the limited universe of simulacra of the preindustrial era, where utopia opposed an ideal or alternative universe that left the original signifier intact, the simulacra of the second order add the multiplication of their own possibilities to the potentially infinite universe of production, which allow Baudrillard to refer to the genre of science-fiction.⁹⁷

Simulacra of the third order implode the difference between original and copy and establish the copy itself as an independent real. Taking to its extreme, the distinction between reality and its representation is lost due to the spiraling movement (the *precession*) of simulacra, which is opposed to mimetic representation.⁹⁸ This establishes

⁹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 120.

⁹⁵ As we can observe in Villiers de L'Isle Adam's *L'Eve Future*. See Chapter 2.

⁹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 121.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 122.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 121. Baudrillard uses the term *precession* in relation to the spiraling and encompassing movement of simulacra. In the German translation of *Koolhaas, oder der Aufstand der Zeichen* (Berlin: Merve, 1978), he defines the term as follows: "Präzession: ein Terminus aus der Physik, meint in der Mechanik allgemein die ausweichende Bewegung der Rotationsachse eines Kreisel bei Krafteinwirkung."

the era of the simulacra of simulation and hyperreality, which are founded on information and models in a cybernetic game of total operability. This cybernetic game is realized in the digital binary code today. Every element is subject to operations and manipulations and can be arbitrarily combined or manipulated to form or depict something. As mentioned before, the dominant code becomes the pervasive structure for society in this order.

Simulation redefines itself in opposition to the common conception of fiction by consistently questioning the validity of dichotomies such as true and false; real and imaginary; real and fictional. The paradoxical implosion of difference Baudrillard is insisting on means that these oppositions cannot be sustained in the realm of simulation because it deletes all references while artificially resurrecting them at the same time.⁹⁹ In that sense it is the deletion of the original reference and its artificial resurrection, which establishes the simulacrum of simulation as hyperreal. The radical—and often overlooked—move is that simulation distinguishes itself from mimetic representation by way of including it in its framework.¹⁰⁰ This does not mean that the recurrence of existing mimetic representations excludes the notion of modernity as “l’ère du simulation.” It is one of *the* decisive tricks of the concept of simulation to re-inject the distinction between real and fictional: “Sie [Simulation] operiert als Dereferentialisierung der Zeichen wie

In der Astronomie bezeichnet Präzession die Kreisel- oder Taumelbewegung der Erdbachse (innerhalb von 26000 Jahren), genauer: die durch diese Kreiselbewegung verursachte Rücklaufbewegung des Schnittpunktes zwischen Himmelsäquator und Ekliptik (Erdbahn).“

⁹⁹ “Partout [...], où la distinction des deux poles ne peut plus être maintenue, on entre dans la simulation” [Baudrillard 56], denn Simulation bedeutet zugleich die „liquidation de tous les référentiels“ *und* deren „résurrection artificielle.“ See Dotzler 524.

¹⁰⁰ Dotzler 524.

zugleich als “court-circuit de la réalité et à son redoublement par les signes,” und *so* errichtet sie – oder inszeniert – ihre ‘Hyperrealität’.”¹⁰¹

While Baudrillard did not sufficiently define the notion of code, except for relating the “simulatory state of total operability” to genetic code (DNA),¹⁰² Vilém Flusser agrees on the dominance of (cultural) codes and expands on this analysis, albeit in a different way. Whereas the dominant code in Flusser’s model of cultural history is either text or image based, the computer complicates the issue and introduces a similar state of operability and calculation of pixels that lead towards Flusser’s conception of technical images and techno-imagination.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 524.

¹⁰² Cubitt 44.

Vilém Flusser: Technical Images, Technical Imagination

In his short piece on “McLuhan and the Cultural Theory of Media,” media historian Mark Poster indicates the “outstanding exception” that Vilém Flusser represents in regards to the impact of media in the 20th century. He criticizes the lack of attention Vilém Flusser has received by a range of thinkers associated with so-called French Theory (eg. Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard) as well as other defining thinkers of post-modern period such as Jürgen Habermas and Judith Butler.¹⁰³ Poster argues that the Czech cultural theorist can be compared to Marshall McLuhan and to Jean Baudrillard: “With McLuhan, Flusser takes media seriously and, with Baudrillard, he discerns the impact of media on culture.”¹⁰⁴ While agreeing with Poster, I would stress that Flusser was critical towards Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, especially in relation to the self-proclaimed de-referentialization of signs. In dialogue with Peter Weibel, Flusser distances himself from the concept of simulation and introduces the central distinction between concretization and abstraction:

Man sollte eine Disziplin ausarbeiten, die darauf verzichtet, den Unterschied zwischen real und fiktiv als Kriterium anzuwenden und die stattdessen mit dem Unterschied zwischen konkret und abstrakt arbeitet. [...] Konkretizität hat im Unterschied zur Realität den Vorteil, daß sie steigerbar ist. Ich kann sagen, etwas ist konkreter, greifbarer, manifester als etwas anderes. Das ist ein relativer Begriff. Realität ist zwar auch ein relativer Begriff, aber man sieht ihm das nicht so an. Die Leute sprechen von der harten Realität oder von der brasilianischen Wirklichkeit oder von ähnlichem Blödsinn, als sei dies eine faßbare Situation, während es sich doch nur um einen Grenzwert handelt. Deswegen geht mir auch der Begriff der “Simulation” so gegen den Strich. Wenn etwas simuliert wird, also etwas anderem ähnlich ist, dann muss es etwas geben, das simuliert wird. Im Begriff der “Simulation” oder

¹⁰³ Mark Poster, “McLuhan and the Cultural Theory of Media,” in *Media Tropes eJournal*, Vol. II, no. 2 (2010), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 8.

des “Simulacrums” steckt ein tiefer metaphysischer Glaube an etwas Simulierbares. Diesen Glauben teile ich nicht.¹⁰⁵

Flusser seems to reject the notion of simulation because it implies a naïve conception of reality that cannot be sustained theoretically.¹⁰⁶ Even if not fully acknowledged, Flusser adopted and expanded on central concepts of reproducibility as well as simulation and developed them further, turning away from Baudrillard’s nihilism towards a more optimistic—even if wary—perspective towards a participatory media and image culture. The following subchapter will introduce several of Flusser’s main ideas in this context.

Media and Codes

Flusser’s approach to thinking about the impact of media technologies on consciousness and history is rooted in an understanding of the dominant codes in culture and society. Similarly to Walter Benjamin, Flusser’s understanding of “media” consciously remains vague and dynamic. Flusser scholars Guldin, Finger and Bernardo locate three diverse concepts of media in their introduction to Flusser’s oeuvre. First, media are structures of communication that determine their content, which is understood in its semantic effect.¹⁰⁷ Second, the concept of media is also used synonymously with “sign” and “code”; therefore, languages, text and images are also media according to Flusser.¹⁰⁸ And finally, media connect people and their environment, but by doing this they disconnect them at the same time.¹⁰⁹ Flusser repeatedly mentions the glass window as an analogy for medium in this third sense. It enables a certain perspective on the world, but

¹⁰⁵ Vilém Flusser, “Zwiegespräche,” in *Edition Flusser*, ed. Andreas Muller-Pohle (1996)

¹⁰⁶ Andreas Ströhl, “Das Komplott der Simulakra: Jean Baudrillard,” 193.

¹⁰⁷ Rainer Guldin, Anke Finger, Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser* (Paderborn: W. Fink, 2009), 85.

¹⁰⁸ Guldin, Finger, Bernardo 85.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 85

simultaneously offers a limited excerpt of it and thereby positions itself between perceived reality and us.¹¹⁰ The inherent dialectic of media and their codes to connect and offer a view on reality, while adding another potentially distorting layer to it, is the driving force behind the unstoppable media evolution from Flusser's perspective and has to be understood as a medial *a priori*.¹¹¹

Flusser focuses on the structures of communication inherent to the codes of media technologies. Let me give two opposing examples in this context: Telephone conversations are dialogical because senders and receivers are reciprocal. Television on the other hand is discursive (and in further differentiation amphitheatrical and ideological) due to the ability of one sender to broadcast to a mass audience without immediate feedback possibilities.¹¹² Flusser's focus on the inherent communication structures without acknowledging the "hardware" puts him at odds with Friedrich Kittler, who took a radical stance in focusing on the hardware of media technologies. Nevertheless, Flusser moves into closer proximity to Kittler than Baudrillard by acknowledging the media-technological *a priori*.¹¹³ But in Flusser's perspective, codes are defined as systems of symbols that serve to explain the world and their environment.¹¹⁴ Hence, the essential codes for Flusser's understanding of cultural history are images and texts, from which he develops his communication theory

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 85.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 85. In this sense Flusser does not focus on the specifics of the "hardware" of specific media technologies.

¹¹² Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2007), 16-63. See Thomas Steinmaurer, "Television," in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, ed. Siegfried Zielinski, Peter Weibel, Daniel Irrgang (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 399-400. "Amphitheatrical discourse" refers to the circuit or wiring (Schaltung) of mass media like TV that enables the univocal transmission from one sender to a mass audience.

¹¹³ See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford, 1999); *Optical Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Finger, Guldin, Bernardo 86.

(*Kommunikologie*) as well as further reflections on the impact of visual media such as photography, film and television. Flusser defines a code in more detail as “a sign system arranged in a regular pattern.”¹¹⁵ Andreas Mueller Pohle further elaborates on Flusser’s understanding of the code:

Flusser betrachtet die westliche Zivilisation angesichts ihrer gegenwärtigen Krise, die sich als eine Krise des alphabetischen Codes und des linearen Schreibens darstellt. Mit der Erfindung von Fotografie und Film, und nochmal beschleunigt seit dem Aufkommen digitaler Technobilder, wird der alphabetische Code von neuen, nachalphabetischen Codes verdrängt, die sich für die Herstellung, Speicherung, Weitergabe und Entzifferung von Informationen als effizienter herausstellen.

Flusser looks at Western civilization in the light [*sic*] of its current crisis, which presents itself as a crisis of the alphabetic code and of linear writing. With the invention of photography and film, and speeded [*sic*] up even more by the advent of digital technical images (*Technobilder*), the alphabetic code is being pushed out by new, post-alphabetic codes which are more efficient for the production, storage, distribution and decoding of information.¹¹⁶

Flusser developed his *Kommunikologie* (1996) in response to Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. He rejects the notion that “the medium is the [sole] message.”¹¹⁷ Still, McLuhan’s influence is clearly visible in Flusser’s approach to deciphering the codes that media apparatuses disseminate.¹¹⁸ Flusser takes the impact of media technologies on culture and society seriously and focuses on the *interaction* between subject and object, medium and recipient, apparatus and operator. Media have the potential to always be used differently—in dialogical or discursive ways—and therefore

¹¹⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2011), 83. Andreas Mueller-Pohle adds that “As a whole, a fabric of symbols called a ‘culture’ that has been made by human beings (hence the ‘genetic code’ is not part of it).”

¹¹⁶ Mueller-Pohle, “Code” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 110.

¹¹⁷ Guldin, Finger, Bernardo 86. Also, see Mark Poster, “McLuhan and the Cultural Theory of Media.”

¹¹⁸ Poster 8.

they are neither solely determined by their hardware nor do they exist outside of their socio-political contexts. It is the relationship and interaction between subject and object in the respective historical and social contexts that is decisive for Flusser. The dominance of amphitheatrical mass media (TV, radio and the press for instance) and its tendency towards synchronizing similarity could have devastating consequences and result in a hyperreal society without any clear point of reference. Amphitheatrical media intend to provoke certain kinds of habits from as many recipients as possible: “Alle amphitheatralisch ausgesandten Botschaften sind Imperative.”¹¹⁹

Flusser’s response to this rather apocalyptic vision is to reconsider the use of media radically and to implement dialogical communication structures that require familiarization with the code from the perspective of the producer and receiver alike.¹²⁰ In Flusser’s model of cultural history, it is therefore the transformation of the codes, and not the media (structures) themselves that result in the far reaching changes of society: “Der Umsturz der Codes, welcher durch die Nervensimulationen wie TV, Computer, und Video hervorgerufen wird, ist mindestens ebenso gewaltig wie der von der Dampfmaschine verursachte Umsturz.”¹²¹ Analogously to media, codes operate with the inherent dialectic of trying to make reality more accessible while positioning themselves in-between the subject and reality, similar to the metaphor of the glass window.

¹¹⁹ Flusser. *Kommunikologie* 284-285: “Das Fernsehen ist ein gutes Beispiel für amphitheatralische Medien, und für Massenmedien im Besonderen, weil es das Charakteristische am Zirkus heraushebt: das Massifizierende, die falsche Freiheit, die Verantwortungslosigkeit, die Unmöglichkeit zu dialogisieren, die Passivität der schwarzen Kiste gegenüber, die magische Gewalt dieser Kiste, die ontologische Verfremdung mit ihren ästhetischen, erkenntnistheoretischen und politischen Folgen und das programmierte Verhalten. Es ist auch ein gutes Beispiel für die Ambivalenz derer, die Kommunikologie betreiben: sie können das Fernsehen immer besser programmieren oder aber seinen Code entziffern. Sie können in ihm sein oder hinter ihm sein. Was ihnen allerdings schwer fällt, ist vor ihm zu sitzen.”

¹²⁰ Guldin, Finger, Bernardo 86.

¹²¹ Flusser. *Kommunikologie* 236.

In his diagnosis *Die Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code* (1991), Flusser states that technological evolution lead to the prevalence of more complex mathematical calculations and their numbers—algorithms—in attempts to describe the world. As these calculations and manipulations became increasingly difficult, the arithmetic code of “high math” became a sort of secret code that was inaccessible to the masses.¹²² The exodus of numbers from its alphanumeric code (the alphabet) led to it becoming increasingly hermetic. Therefore Flusser claims that the models of behavior for society are increasingly encoded into complex mathematical equations that run the machines and apparatuses we rely on.¹²³ Of course the invention of the computer and its ubiquitous use pushed this development further exponentially. Its ability not only to be able to calculate the most complex equations but to also manipulate them enabled the possibility of computing alternate realities without imaginary limits. Computer processing is able, for example, to make highly abstract numbers concrete in the visualization of digital technical images on LCD screens.¹²⁴ Nevertheless the power to produce and manipulate these images is limited to the programming elite that is able to decipher the abstract codes and to feed the computers with new numbers. Flusser summarizes the situation in 1996 as follows:

Es gibt eine relative kleine Gruppe von Eingeweihten, welche für das Manipulieren der Zahlencodes kompetent ist, und die große Masse der Uneingeweihten, der Laien. Die Elite besteht nicht mehr

¹²² Flusser. “Die Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code,” *Literatur im Informationszeitalter*, ed. Dirk Matejovski and Friedrich Kittler (Frankfurt, 1996), 11.

¹²³ Flusser 11. When Flusser talks about the exodus of numbers from the alphanumeric code, he means that numbers used to be included or were even similar to many different alphabets (eg. Greek), until they started to be used separately in order to describe natural and scientific phenomena: “Sehr oft hat das gleiche Zeichen sowohl ein Phonem als auch eine Menge bezeichnet, war also zugleich Buchstabe und Zahl; doch seit einiger Zeit sind die sogenannten arabischen Zahlen die Ideogramme für Mengen. Es sollte also immer schon, und besonders gegenwärtig, nicht vom Alphabet, sondern von einem alphanumerischen Code gesprochen werden” (Flusser, “Die Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code,” 9).

¹²⁴ Flusser, “Die Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code,” 13.

nur noch aus Wissenschaftlern und Technikern, sondern jetzt auch aus Verwaltern und Künstlern. Diese formulieren aus Algorithmen die gegenwärtig gültigen Erkenntnismodelle, die sie dank zum Teil simulierten Experimenten immer erneut zu widerlegen versuchen. Sie formulieren aus Algorithmen Verhaltensmodelle, sie treffen also Entscheidungen aufgrund von Theorien, welche es erlauben, Entscheidungen in Dezidemen zu kalkulieren und dann zurück zu computieren. Diese Entscheidungen werden dann an die Politiker weitergegeben, um die Tatsache zu verdecken, dass sie von Verwaltungstechnikern getroffen wurden (der Golfkrieg ist dafür ein Beispiel). Weiterhin formulieren sie aus Algorithmen Erlebnismodelle, also Kunstwerke in virtuellen Räumen, alternative numerisch generierte Phänomene.¹²⁵

Flusser's central premise addresses the discrepancy of power that the scientific and economic elite has gained through the creation of controlling algorithms and virtual spaces that are able to shape social habits and political practice. Nevertheless he sees this in the context of an historical evolution. As the world could not be grasped anymore by the texts and alphabetical code since the Industrial Revolution, it resulted in it being unimaginable, which is why technical images that derive from computation were invented. The incentive was to be able to imagine the world again and concretize from the mathematical abstraction in the code with which the apparatuses and computers operate:

Diese technischen Bilder, beginnend mit Fotos, über Filme, Fernsehen und Computerbilder hinaus bis hin zu Hologrammen, übernehmen fortschreitend die Rolle der Buchstaben als Träger der kulturellen Informationen. (So dass man schließlich auf alle buchstäbliche Erklärung der Welt zu verzichten beginnt, um sich dank der von der Elite hergestellten Vorstellungen der Welt zu begnügen.) Die immer kompetenter werdende Elite läuft parallel zu der immer unmündiger werdenden Masse.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid. 13.

¹²⁶ Flusser, "Die Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code," 14.

The problem of all codes (and mediated/coded communication for that matter) is that—rather than making the world more accessible and comprehensible—they instead slide in between the world and the masses and block direct access to it, rather than enabling it.¹²⁷ Here, Flusser's argumentation relates to Baudrillard's idea that mass media actually prohibit communication by enabling a selected elite to program what is actually mediated and perceived by the consuming masses.

Whereas other image theories tend to focus on photography as a medium of representation and sustain the relationship between the image (*Abbildung*) and the depiction of the subject (*Abgebildetem*), Flusser's theory on photography and its images establishes a radically different approach. The central question for him is how a) the pre-historic image, i.e. the cave paintings in Lascaux b) writing and text and c) the technical image have influenced our ways of thinking, our experience and our culture reciprocally. In this sense, Flusser is not particularly interested in the sign/signification of a singular image. As previously mentioned he is more interested in the underlying code and program in which these images operate and how the communication structures of society are wired as a result, for instance how the very small elite is able to have an inordinate amount of power in programming the masses via those structures.

The Apparatus-Operator Complex

The phenomenological method enables Flusser to recognize the “apparatus-operator complex” as one of the decisive driving forces behind all social and technological change.¹²⁸ He is invested in asking how the constantly evolving and reciprocal

¹²⁷ Andreas Ströhl, “Vom Dialog, von Kanälen und Codes: Vilém Flussers bodenlose Phänomenologie der Kommunikation,” *Medientheorie Kompakt*, 161.

¹²⁸ Ströhl, “Introduction,” in Flusser, *Writings* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2002), xii.

relationship leads to changes in our interaction with the world as technologies transform texts, such as historical ones, into technical images, such as video or television programs and as a consequence influence our perception of texts. Hence, perception is updated according to new modes of creation, distribution and communication, as Benjamin had already observed in the context of film. He refers to the relationship between apparatus and operator as a “complex,” because there is no significant difference between them and they influence each other reciprocally.¹²⁹ With this understanding, the apparatus functions only in terms of the function of the operator, just as the operator functions only in terms of the program of the apparatus. In *Towards a Philosophy for Photography* (1984), Flusser expands on the apparatus-operator complex and defines it along the example of the photographer and the camera:

Betrachtet man den Fotoapparat (und den Apparat allgemein) in diesem Sinn, dann erkennt man, daß er Symbole herstellt: symbolische Flächen, so wie sie ihm in einer bestimmten Weise vorgeschrieben wurden. Der Fotoapparat ist programmiert, Fotografien zu erzeugen, und jede Fotografie ist eine Verwirklichung einer der im Programm des Apparates enthaltenen Möglichkeiten. Die Zahl dieser Möglichkeiten ist groß, aber sie ist dennoch endlich: Es ist die Zahl all jener Fotografien, die von einem Apparat aufgenommen werden können. Zwar kann man, in der These, eine Fotografie auf gleiche oder sehr ähnliche Weise immer wieder aufnehmen, aber das ist für das Fotografieren uninteressant. Solche Bilder sind “redundant”: Sie tragen keine neue Information und sind überflüssig. Im folgenden wird von redundanten Fotografien abgesehen werden, womit der Begriff “Fotografieren” auf das Herstellen von informativen Bildern eingeschränkt sein wird. Allerdings fällt dadurch der größte Teil aller Knipserei aus dem Rahmen dieser Untersuchung.¹³⁰

By declaring similar images redundant, Flusser decisively ignores the documentary value

¹²⁹ Ibid. xii.

¹³⁰ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 24-25.

similar photographs to make his point that in order to be able to create truly new information (or new images for that matter), the photographer has to play against the conventions and restrictions of the apparatus' program. This is exaggerated as it means that all other images are redundant repetitions of what has been produced already. Nevertheless, the missing knowledge of the "Snap-shooter" (*Knipser*) about the functionality of the apparatus results in the "indivisible oneness" between operators and apparatuses:

Der Komplex Apparat-Operator spielt innerhalb unserer Kommunikationsstruktur ungefähr jene Rolle, welche die Litterati (Schreiber, Priester, Mönche) zur Zeit der Manuskripte spielten. Das völlig Neue an unserer Situation ist, dass diese Relais nicht Menschen sind (...), sondern ein unentwirrbares Gemengsel von Menschen und Apparaten. Das ist es, was man meint, wenn man behauptet, unsere Kommunikationslage sei "unmenschlich" geworden.¹³¹

The indivisible oneness between apparatus and operator moves Flusser's understanding of human-machine interaction in close proximity to McLuhan's "extensions of man." Media technologies, accordingly, are understood as extensions of the body's organs and therefore become "irreplaceable prostheses" that could result in feelings of amputation when not available anymore.¹³²

Traditional Imagination and Technical Imagination

Flusser distinguishes two forms of imagination that are related to the perception and production of images in their historical contexts: that of "traditional imagination" and that of "new imagination" or "technical imagination." While "traditional imagination" describes the ability to take a step back from experienced reality and to form an image of

¹³¹ Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, 152.

¹³² Ströhl, "Introduction," in Flusser, *Writings*, xii.

this impression (as an abstraction), “technical imagination” describes the ability to compute a technical image from a range of possibilities (and is therefore a concretization).¹³³ Computing describes the indivisible production process of the apparatus-operator that results in the concretization of an image by way of condensing the pixel/dots to form an image that seems like an authentic reproduction of a scene. It is important to note that although both forms of imagination result in an image, they are opposing modes of visualization in Flusser’s understanding. The first takes as its starting point sensory perception, and therefore is related to the German *Vorstellungskraft*; the second is rational understanding, which therefore is related to the German *Einbildungskraft*.¹³⁴ While traditional imagination produces traditional images, new imagination produces technical images or alternative realities. These two concepts can only be understood as complementary opposites.¹³⁵

While technical images are used to help us orient ourselves in the world as models of action, they also have a distancing—simulative—element that alienates us from the reality perceived. Flusser sees this dialectic in all mediation, “meaning that every medium possesses both communicative and distancing qualities. And so the spiral of alienation

¹³³ See Philip Toegel, “To Compute,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 118: “Computing is the activity of an imagination that is no longer part of the lineup of progressive abstractions that distorts our view of the world, critiquing and representing the world. Instead, it generates concentrations within the fields of possibility of the universe of dots, gathering dots together and projecting new images and concepts that already carry their critique within them, which no longer represent the world but instead the program or code from which they originate. For Vilem Flusser, the concept of ‘virtual’ stands between true and false; reality and fiction. It replaces ontological dichotomies and describes reality as a function of probabilities. In the mathematical code of zero-dimension dots, something is more real, the more improbable it is (negentropy), the tighter the dots are gathered together—that is, computed—into phenomena. Computing is human in that it signifies a movement opposed to entropy. At the same time, it eliminates the human being as being brought forth by linear and historical thinking, as an ‘ego capsule’, as a subject of the objective world. For it is not just the world that can be ‘calculated to pieces’, but also what Flusser calls the characteristic of the individual: perception can be calculated to pieces in stimuli.”

¹³⁴ See Marcel René Marburger, “Traditional Imagination,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 229 and Yuk Hui, “Technical Imagination,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 389.

¹³⁵ Marburger, “Traditional Imagination,” 229-230; Hui, “Technical Imagination,” 389-390.

continues to turn—at least until new imagination frees us perhaps, from this curse we have placed upon ourselves.”¹³⁶ The new or technical imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is the key to breaking out of this *circulus vitiosus* in allowing the passive recipient to become an active operator and to create new information through the dialogical use of media technologies.

Flusser makes a strict distinction between traditional and technical images that derives from these different forms of imagination. While traditional images such as cave paintings derive from the imagination out of necessity, presumably in order to make the world imaginable and viewable, technical images are created by machines and apparatuses and therefore follow a different logic of computation and calculation, creating models rather than reflecting the world and enabling methods of intervention.¹³⁷ For example, satellite images give coordinates to pilots conducting airstrikes or surveillance images that are used to identify dangerous situations in advance. The technical image is key for Flusser’s media-centric approach:

Nicht mehr Menschen, sondern technische Bilder stehen jetzt im Zentrum, und dementsprechend sind es die Beziehungen zwischen dem technischen Bild und dem Menschen, nach denen die Gesellschaft zu klassifizieren ist, zum Beispiel in Gruppen vom Typ »Kinobesucher«, »Fernsehzuschauer« oder »Computerspieler«. Die Bedürfnisse, Wünsche, Gefühle und Kenntnisse des Menschen sind vom technischen Bild her zu erklären.¹³⁸

The re-classification of the relationship between the spectator and the technical image that Flusser introduces here relates back to the new way of consciousness that has been introduced by technical images. The linear way of thinking that was based on text and

¹³⁶ Marburger, “Traditional Imagination,” 229-230;

¹³⁷ Roland Meyer, “Technical Images,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 388.

¹³⁸ Flusser, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder* (Goettingen: European Photography, 1990) 45.

reading is replaced by a new way of thinking and imagination that is based on images.

According to Flusser, the traditional image functioned as the dominant code of the pre-historic period; writing is the dominant code of the historic period, and the numeric code and its visualization as technical images mark the beginning of the post-historical period.

With this understanding, text primarily functions as a template for new technical images.

The decisive attribute of technical images is the reversal of the relationship between

“reality” and their semiotic system (their code):

Alle früheren Codes – inklusive der traditionellen Bilder und linearen Texte – sind Träger von Botschaften hinsichtlich einer Welt, die es zu verstehen gilt. [...] Die Technobilder hingegen sind Folgen einer Manipulation der Welt [...]. Die Welt ist für die Technobilder nicht Ziel, sondern Rohmaterial. Sie vermitteln nicht zwischen Mensch und Welt – wie es alle vorangegangenen Codes taten [...]. Der Mond ist von amerikanischen Astronauten »erobert« worden, damit man dies und die Ansprache Nixons auf der Leinwand sehen kann, und Terroristen entführen Flugzeuge, um dabei gefilmt zu werden. [...] Die Geschichte läuft gegenwärtig im Hinblick auf Technobilder.¹³⁹

While traditional images try to explain the world, technical images enable the agency to manipulate it and process it as raw material with the intention of being exposed or perceived in a certain framework of interpretation. Therefore, traditional and technical images do not just derive from different kinds of imagination, but they also have a different effect that feeds back into social and political contexts as well as economic and technological production modes. Today, this is apparent in the synchronization of social tendencies and ever-changing trends that are perpetuated by technical images, which are produced and mass distributed via social media feeds. Other technical images are models for the (re)production of similar and—following Flusser, redundant—technical images.

¹³⁹ Flusser, “Filmerzeugung und Filmverbrauch,” In Flusser, *Lob der Oberflächlichkeit. Für eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1993), 163.

As Benjamin already stated, the gesture of appropriating something in the reproduced image becomes the primary motivation for future action.

Flusser warns of a particular misunderstanding between traditional images and technical images such as photographs, film or video images, which he calls the “pagan short circuit.”¹⁴⁰ As these images are created through different forms of imagination, the way they are perceived has to adapt accordingly. But because of their apparent similarity in the depiction of subjects and objects, the danger to confuse and perceive technical images as traditional images is high. This ontological “short circuit” presents technical images as if they were representations of the experience of the world. While this manner of interpretation is possible, it is missing a crucial point according to Flusser. As technical images are created from texts, concepts and programs, the task must be to decode these programs (or codes) in order to reach the underlying operating texts, such as scientific, ideologic, religious, historic or political ones.¹⁴¹ The confusion of both forms of images may lead to manipulations of audiences by advertising and propaganda. Traditional forms of perception therefore have a preserving effect on existing power structures. The consequences of this misconception are crucial as it allows the conditioning of society by a programming elite that controls the *Universe of Technical Images*. For Flusser, there is an imminent danger in the programming of technical images as models of behavior:

So wie sie uns gegenwärtig umgeben, bedeuten die technischen Bilder Modelle (Vorschriften) für das Erleben, Erkennen, Werten und Verhalten der Gesellschaft. Sie bedeuten imperative Programme. Die Einbildner und ihre Apparate geben gegenwärtig

¹⁴⁰ See Ströhl, “Vom Dialog, von Kanälen und Codes: Vilém Flussers bodenlose Phänomenologie der Kommunikation,” 164.

¹⁴¹ See Ströhl, “Vom Dialog, von Kanälen und Codes: Vilém Flussers bodenlose Phänomenologie der Kommunikation,” 164.

ihren Bildern eine nicht nur programmierte, sondern auch programmierende Bedeutung.¹⁴²

Because technical images signify imperative programs, it is vital to be conscious about the fact and see through the misconception. It is no coincidence that this critical stance is reminiscent of the tradition of Frankfurt School critics in relation to the “culture industry.” The danger of manipulated recipients that Flusser describes here has been generalized to a conscious deception of the masses by the mass media particularly by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer before.¹⁴³ But this tendency was already present in the writings of Bertolt Brecht as well as Walter Benjamin, with the decisive difference that both leave room for some sort of emancipation related to the use of media technologies while being wary of their potential dangers.¹⁴⁴

Flusser introduces the theological term of paganism (*Heidentum*) and relates it to the misconception of technical images as traditional images. It adds the possibility that faith plays a decisive role for this (mis)conception. To what extent has society already been programmed into believing in the “reality” that is depicted by these images? Once more, the manipulative, illusory and simulative aspect of technical images stands out.

Flusser is concerned with the lack of critique in relation to the technical image.¹⁴⁵ and introduces the concepts of dialogue and communication with the potential democratization of programming as well as creating a large programming mass. Flusser’s image criticism aims to counter the potential threat and iconoclasm resulting from the misunderstanding of technical images as traditional ones. Because of their similarity in

¹⁴² Flusser, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder*, 45.

¹⁴³ Adorno/Horkheimer, 128-153.

¹⁴⁴ Ströhl 165.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 165.

appearance, this confusion is one of the prevalent dangers that society has to tackle in order to counterbalance the manipulative force that enables the synchronization of the masses via totalitarian communication structures.¹⁴⁶ As Roland Meyer points out:

However, the target is no longer a magical understanding of the image that believes likenesses to be reality and does not recognize that they are but symbolic mediation. Flusser's target is the manipulated consciousness that regards the technical images produced by photography, film, and electronic and digital media as "traditional" images. The confusion that Flusser identifies here is the confusing of abstraction and concretion. Traditional images, beginning with cave paintings, are for him abstractions that reduce phenomena of space and time to "two dimensions," products of the "imagination," the ability to imagine the world as a surface, and to recognize representations of the world in symbols arranged on a surface. For Flusser, technical images, by contrast, are concretizations of calculations, the result of logical, conceptual operations manifested in artifacts, and they no longer have anything in common with traditional images, even when they look similar enough to be mistaken for them.¹⁴⁷

The misinterpretation of technical images as traditional images goes back to the initial problem and dialectic that is inherent to all media that has been mentioned before.

Originally created to make sense of the world and to help with orientation within it, they increasingly position themselves in between the recipient and the world and therefore blur and disturb the direct access to it. Therefore, technical images are not understood as representations, or as simulation, but rather as projections that are able to influence the behavior of their recipients. The programmers and creators of the images consequently become the controlling elite of technocrats, media operators and influencers of opinion that are able to control a digitally illiterate society. Technical images can operate as models and concepts that project into the future instead of representing the past:

¹⁴⁶ Roland Meyer, "Image Criticism," in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 226-227.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 226-227.

Sie sind Modelle, welche einer zerfallenen Welt und einem zerfallenen Bewußtsein Form verleihen, sie »informieren« sollen. Dabei ist bei ihnen der Bedeutungsvektor umgekehrt worden: Sie empfangen ihre Bedeutung nicht von außen, sondern sie projizieren sie nach außen. Sie geben dem Absurden Sinn.¹⁴⁸

Technical images create sense by inverting the vector of signification and projecting information. Due to the “Auswanderung der Zahlen aus dem alphanumerischen Code,” numbers can be computed to pixels, which function as models and concepts that are visualized as technical images. To be able to decode technical images does not mean to interpret whatever they show, but to decipher their inherent program— the texts and potential ideologies or economic incentives that are at the ground of the image.

¹⁴⁸ Flusser, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder*, 141.

Chapter II: Unstable Sources: Aura and Simulacra in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve Future*

Published in 1886 for the first time in its entirety, Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's symbolist novel *L'Eve Future* (Engl. *Tomorrow's Eve*), anticipates the beginning of modernity at the end of the 19th century. Villiers, who did not know much about science, was just as confused as he was inspired by the revolutionary technological age into which he was born. In fact, he was intrigued by the real and imaginary possibilities that these new inventions would enable, as it can be seen in the avant-garde nature of *L'Eve Future*.¹⁴⁹ Compared to the contemporary French novels of the 19th century that follow rather linear narratives and social trajectories, Villiers's novel anticipates elements of the 20th century in its narrative structure as well as its science-fiction plot revolving around the creation of the first female android named "Hadaly," the title giving *Tomorrow's Eve*.

I would like to argue that our understanding of this narrative benefits by reading it side by side with the media theoretical texts introduced before. My analysis reflects the belief that Villiers's novel is profoundly interested in notions regarding the instability of references and sources; in technological reproducibility and its consequences for the distinction of original and copy; as well as in challenging the reader's understanding of reality in light of media technologies that enable illusion and manipulation.

Starting from the analysis of how analog media reproduction technologies found their way into the narrative of Villiers' novel, *L'Eve Future*, this chapter examines to what extent romantic notions of nature have been transferred to mediated reproduction

¹⁴⁹ Martin Robert Adams, "Translator's Introduction," in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve* (Champaign: Illinois, 2001) XIV-XIV.

techniques and their hallucinatory power in modernity. Furthermore, the consequences of mechanical reproducibility are discussed in their relation to sustaining and blurring the distinction between the original and the reproduction/copy.

Villiers' reflection on the hallucinatory and manipulative power of artificial reproduction techniques has a misogynist undertone at its core that is apparent in the objectification and fragmentation of the female body throughout the novel. The flawed image of women is used by its male protagonists to justify the reproduction and replacement of a 'real' woman with an 'ideal' android to the liking of their projected fantasies. Nevertheless, this exclusively male desire of 'man-machine' (pro)creation is an apparatus-operator complex that is linked to death from the beginning and ultimately cannot be sustained in the narrative.

Beyond the problematic gender implications, the explicit link between fragmentation, objectification and audiovisual media technologies, such as cameras, phonographs, and telephones are of particular interest in this study. The novel anticipates notions of simulacra in their media technological signification as the android functions as a vessel for postmodern elements of overwriting and recombination. To what extent can the android be defined as a simulacrum? According to Baudrillard's three "orders of simulacra," science fiction corresponds to the second order that is related to the modern period of industrialization and is invested in the production of equivalence. *L'Eve Future* corresponds to this order, as there is an active effort to blur the distinction between original and copy, but the android is created in order to manifest at least an equivalent replacement of the original woman. The (original) signifier and the distinction between original and copy are therefore kept intact. Additionally, the novel corresponds to the

simulacra of science fiction as it extrapolates from existing media technologies of the time and imagines their abilities to be far more advanced, which eventually becomes reality over the course of the next decades. The novel reveals the feedback loop between science fiction, media technological reproduction techniques, and reality that is established at the end of the 19th century.

While the narrative origins of Villiers' novel reach back to the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, the themes raised in *L'Eve Future* still have an impact on mainstream culture today.¹⁵⁰ Even though most of Villiers' scientific ramblings are “mere mumbo jumbo, he knew or imagined things about the future of science and of scientific applications that have since come true.”¹⁵¹ It is the kind of extrapolation of the present in science fiction that Philip K. Dick later became famous for.

Villiers' was fascinated by the inventions of Thomas Alva Edison and chose him recurrently as one of the protagonists in his writings. The fragments “Miss Hadaly Habal” (1877) and “L'Andréide Paradoxale d'Edison” (1878) feature the American inventor as well as the early versions of the novel that had been published in serial form before its entire publication in 1886 (1880 in *Le Gaulois*, 1880-1 in *L'Etoile française*).¹⁵² Furthermore, Edison's inventions such as the incandescent light bulb (1879) and the phonograph (1877) became symbols for the rapid advancements of modernity.

¹⁵⁰ See recent major remakes *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) or *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). *Ghost in the Shell* was the US remake of the critically acclaimed Japanese Anime from 1995. *Blade Runner 2049* the sequel to the 1982 adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) both considered classics and genre defining. That both productions were released in 2017 approximately 30 years after their “original” versions can be seen as an indication for the resurfaced relevance for science-fiction themes concerning artificial intelligence and consciousness, augmented bodies and robots, utopian and dystopian future scenarios.

¹⁵¹ Adams XV.

¹⁵² Ana Oancea, “Edison's Modern Legend in Villiers' *L'Eve Future*,” in *Nordlit* 28, 2011 (URL: <https://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/article/view/2053/1913>) 174.

In *Tomorrow's Eve*, Villiers is particularly interested in expanding on the 'popular' legend that surrounded Edison, who was alive at the time. The "principal hero of this book" fuses real and fictional elements and therefore represents "the Wizard of Menlo Park" rather than the contemporary engineer Mr. Edison.¹⁵³ This becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses and Villiers' Edison clearly favors mythical and metaphysical elements over scientific facts. Edison "pushes his materialism towards its own negation—toward a profoundly religious and mystical idealism, in light of which the mere armature of electro-mechanical Hadaly can serve far more subtly than her flesh-and-blood original as a core for the crystallization of Lord Ewald's fervent Byronic soul."¹⁵⁴

Consequently, there is a particular focus on the media technologies that enable reproduction and communication to be far beyond their capabilities in *L'Eve Future*. Telephones have far greater range than the few hundred yards at the time. The phonograph, which was at its early stages of development and managed to barely record "Mary had a Little Lamb", is able to bring the sounds of an opera house into Edison's laboratory. Electric lighting, flash photography and film are also ahead of their time.¹⁵⁵ Besides the partial prediction of future technological developments, Robert Martin Adams highlights the originality of the symbiotic and ambiguous human-machine interaction in the novel. Particularly Villiers' "sense that as machines are becoming more human, humans are becoming, physically and spiritually, more mechanical."¹⁵⁶

Tomorrow's Eve is said to be the first novel that coined the term "android" in its modern

¹⁵³ Villiers de L'Isle Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve* (Champaign: Illinois, 2001) 3.

¹⁵⁴ Adams XV.

¹⁵⁵ Adams XVI.

¹⁵⁶ Adams XVI. See H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1885).

meaning (Fr. “androides”), although there are several literary precursors that verifiably influenced Villiers.¹⁵⁷ Among them, in particular, are Jules Verne, who included technological inventions and inventors in French literature at the time; E.T.A. Hoffmann’s mechanical doll Olympia in his famous tale “Der Sandmann” (1816); Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818); the Jewish folklore story of *The Golem* and the aforementioned myth of *Pygmalion*.

When broken down to its basic elements, *L’Eve Future*’s plot is relatively simple, but its extensive dialogues (mostly between Edison and Lord Ewald) and the detailed descriptions of fictionalized technology and reproduction techniques make it seem convoluted and confusing at times. A young British noble man, Lord Celian Ewald, shares his dissatisfaction with his fiancée Miss Alicia-Clary in a letter with his old friend Edison. Alicia-Clary is stunningly beautiful although seriously lacking in character. When both of the men describe her in her absence to be unbelievably shallow, the criticism towards Villiers’ misogynist account of what he hated about bourgeois culture of the time is justified.¹⁵⁸ In the novel, her empty character makes Lord Ewald’s life so miserable that he contemplates suicide. Edison, who works tirelessly on new inventions in his underground laboratory in New Jersey, is very happy to meet his old friend, but sad to see him in such a dreadful position. In order to help the suicidal Lord, he unveils a secret project he has been working on for a while. He presents as the solution to Ewald’s problems, a uniquely created female android named “Hadaly” made as a superior copy of

¹⁵⁷ See Brian Stableford, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 22.

¹⁵⁸ Jennifer Forrest. “The Lord of Hadaly’s Rings: Regulating the Female Body in Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s ‘l’Eve Future’”, in *South Central Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 1996) 18.

Alicia-Clary and filled with a more appealing “soul.”¹⁵⁹ Edison achieves this by recording her voice with phonographs and “photo-transferring” her appearance via photographic and cinematic devices onto the electromechanical android prototype.

When Lord Ewald asks Edison for the reason why he created the android in the first place, Edison recounts a previous incident involving a close friend that ended with his suicide. Mr. Anderson, a diligent man and loving husband was seduced by the young Miss Evelyn Habal, which ultimately ended in the destruction of his marriage and life. Unable to come to terms with his infidelity, he takes his own life and Edison sets out to track down Miss Evelyn in order to find out if her seductive beauty was anything like Mr. Anderson’s descriptions. Edison finds her in Philadelphia and realizes that her beauty was manufactured with the help of cosmetics (make-up, wigs and nail polish). For Edison, the deception of Mr. Anderson by Miss Evelyn Habal’s “fake” and artificially enhanced appearance motivates him to embrace the artificial copy and to replace the supposedly deceitful nature of women altogether.¹⁶⁰ To prove his point, Edison shows Lord Ewald two different film reels of Miss Evelyn Habal. While the first depicts her as the beautiful woman that Anderson fell in love with, the second film reveals her ‘true’ appearance, which turns out to be hideous without cosmetic enhancements.¹⁶¹

In a following scene, Edison explains the androids’ inner workings and functionality to Lord Ewald in lengthy detail. In fictionalized and exaggerated descriptions of the abilities of existing media technologies, the fantasy of recreating the

¹⁵⁹ Villiers himself refers to “Hadaly” as meaning “Ideal” in Farsi, supporting the notion to aspire to an ideal creation. See Villiers 76. Other secondary sources suggest that this meaning in Iranian is unsubstantiated and that ‘Hadaly’ and its supposed meaning are an invention of Villiers’. See Ritch Calvin, “The French Dick: Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, Philip K. Dick, and the Android,” in *Extrapolation*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2007), 345.

¹⁶⁰ Villiers 104-125.

¹⁶¹ Villiers 118.

“ideal” artificial woman comes to life in the dialogue between the two men. In order to transfer Alicia’s appearance onto Hadaly’s electromechanical body, Edison convinces Alicia to pose for her as *Tomorrow’s Eve*, presumably in preparation for a new kind of sculpture and in preparation for a theater role.¹⁶² In truth, Edison is able to record her appearance and voice with hidden cameras and phonographs over the next few weeks and is able to transfer Alicia’s appearance and voice onto Hadaly.¹⁶³

When Lord Ewald encounters the completed android for the first time, he takes her for the real Alicia and calls the whole endeavor of replacing her with the android into question, thereby suggesting it was all a big mistake in the first place. To his surprise, the android responds: “Dear friend, don’t you recognize me? It’s me Hadaly.”¹⁶⁴

Consequently convinced by the superiority of Edison’s creation over the ‘real’ Alicia-Clary, Ewald decides to return back to England with his electromechanical bride.

Unfortunately, a fire breaks out in the cargo compartment of the ship, and it sinks with the Android as well as the “original” Alicia-Clary, who drowns in one of the lifeboats. In the end, Lord Ewald arrives in England all by himself. Edison reads the news about the shipwreck in the newspaper as a final telegram reaches him from Liverpool, indicating that Lord Ewald might have fulfilled his initial suicidal wish: “My friend, only the loss of Hadaly leaves me inconsolable—I grieve only for that shade. Farewell. –Lord Ewald.”¹⁶⁵

The rejection of social norms and progress in favor of idealism also resurfaces in Villiers’ other works, for instance in his slightly later drama, *Axël*, from 1890. Similarly

¹⁶² Villiers 177.

¹⁶³ The process of digitizing human appearance became known as motion-capturing today and is particularly used in animation films and computer game design in order to capture human movement, gestures and facial expressions.

¹⁶⁴ Villiers 192.

¹⁶⁵ Villiers 219.

to Edison's efforts to teach Lord Celian Ewald to trade the real for the illusion and the original for the copy, Master Janus teaches the hero, "You are nothing but what you think: think the eternal." And again: "You possess the true being of all things in your will: you are the god that you can become."¹⁶⁶ It is then no coincidence that the central book chapter III of *Tomorrow's Eve* is called "An Underground Eden" and establishes Edison's laboratory as the location for the creation myth of modernity with all its media technological novelties—recording devices, phonographs, gramophones, telephones, photographic apparatuses, artificially resurrected nightingales including their birdsongs, and so forth.¹⁶⁷ It is the imagined ideal and godlike powers that his characters strive to realize through technological means. The novel therefore complicates its narrative through the extrapolated inclusion of detailed descriptions of Edison's media technological inventions. Partially based in reality but exaggerated in the fiction, Villiers manages to fuse possibilities of Edison's real achievements with the fictive elements of his narrative.

The mind-body dichotomy that reaches back to Descartes has a major influence on science fiction narratives involving the electromechanical reproduction of humanity.¹⁶⁸ Descartes distinguishes between the soul and the body and sees the human body as "nothing but a statue of machine made of earth," however, he does not exclude that it is still God, who is responsible for its creation.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, the mechanical model of the human body resulted in its distinction from animals, for which Descartes denied the existence of the same apparatus. The idea of humans being machines that are

¹⁶⁶ Adams XV.

¹⁶⁷ Villiers 89.

¹⁶⁸ Calvin 354.

¹⁶⁹ Calvin 354-355.

connected to minds with the ability for reason had a decisive impact on 18th century philosophy and resulted in some bold attempts to declare machinist analogies to humanity.¹⁷⁰ Taken to its extreme these developments gave rise to the thought that society itself is a machine, ultimately forcing the individual “self” to act like one as well.¹⁷¹

The concept of a mechanical and machinist society has been famously picked up on and visualized in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), for which Villiers’ *L’Eve Future* can be read as an inspiration and pre-text. The consequences of industrialization and the man-machine analogies in Fritz Lang’s film have broader implications for the division of society along ruling and working classes. Also the electromechanical reproduction of the “Machine-Maria” evoke a specific parallel to the desired (pro)creation of yet another *Eve of the future* that symbolizes the creation myth of modernity with media-technological reproduction techniques. Furthermore, Lang’s film is invested in visualizing the dependency and eventual emancipation of the enslaved working class in the lower underground world of the machines from the ruling upper class that regulates them from their tower far above the metropolitan cityscape. The dialectic between classes picks up on the Hegelian concept of master and servant, which turns out to be a common trope for science fiction narratives that reflect on the emancipation of subjugated species, whether they are subjugated humans operating machines, or androids created to fulfill human desires. In *L’Eve Future* the emancipatory aspect of the servant/android is not yet possible as nature (a storm and fire) ends up destroying the robot in a shipwreck on the way to England. Nevertheless, the novel sets a precedent for an ‘ideal’ electromechanical

¹⁷⁰ Calvin 355.

¹⁷¹ Adams XIX-XX. Adams refers to Doctor Jacques La Mettrie’s *L’Homme Machine* (1750) as an example for Descartes influence in relation to mechanical bias.

reproduction of a human being that has been enabled by media technologies and electricity.

Villiers' has a profound fascination with the Hegelian dialectic, as lengthy debates on existential themes in multiple of his writings show.¹⁷² In *Eve*, this becomes apparent in the lengthy dialogues between Edison and Lord Ewald.¹⁷³ Adams, the translator of the text, Adams calls this feature of Villiers' text "polemical imagination," which plays out in the dialogical arguments that become existential motivations for his characters.¹⁷⁴ Ewald tries to overcome his suicidal tendencies with the help of a new scientific god and symbol of modernism, Thomas Edison. The synthesis of an "eternal symbol"—between the two representatives of science and humanity—enable the reflection on the possibilities of unhindered research and technological progress with all the ethical and moral ambiguities they imply.

In this context, the literary scholar and translator Daniel Gerould points to the philosophical problem dominating the novel. From his perspective, the dominating question is how "we perceive the world and how we represent it, given the newly discovered technical means of recording, reproduction, and duplication."¹⁷⁵ The two male protagonists of the novel find themselves in an ongoing argument about "epistemological questions about the limits of our ability to know reality" and the inclusion of the historical Edison results in a curious mix of fact and fiction that feeds the reader's imagination.¹⁷⁶ Gerould acknowledges Villiers' ambiguous representation of Edison as

¹⁷² Adams XV.

¹⁷³ Daniel Gerould, "Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Nov., 1984), 318-19.

¹⁷⁴ Adams XV.

¹⁷⁵ Gerould 318-19.

¹⁷⁶ Gerould 319.

the scientist who works towards realizing the “ideal” in a mixture of scientific-technological and mythical-religious ways. Consequently Edison makes a continuous effort to prove and persuade Lord Ewald of the superiority of the artificial, the dominance of the copy over the original, the triumph of technology over nature. Romantic ideals are replaced with modernist ones. In this sense, Gerould agrees with the overarching notion of instability and overwriting of sources that is presented here: “These seemingly irrelevant and jocose reflections (on the possibility of technologically recording sounds and images of earlier times) actually establish Edison’s (and Villiers’) primary concern in the novel: the retention, recording, and reproduction of a ‘reality’ that will always remain uncertain and problematic.”¹⁷⁷

Media Technologies as Narrative Devices: Mysterious Sounds and Imaginary Photographs

Bon nombre de grandes paroles seraient incrustées, aujourd’hui, *ne variateur*,—[sic]—textuelles, enfin, sur les feuilles de mon cylindre, puisque *son prodigieux perfectionnement permet de recueillir, dès à présent, les ondes sonores à distance!*...(emphasis in original)

Plenty of great words would be recorded now, *ne variateur*—[sic]—word for word, that is, on the surface of my cylinders, since the prodigious development of the machine now allows us to receive, at the present moment, sound waves reaching us from a vast distance.¹⁷⁸

In this monologue from *L’Eve Future*, Edison imagines the missed opportunities to record words and generate knowledge, given the phonograph had been invented earlier. The possibility to receive reproduced sound waves from a vast distance at the present moment implies a notion of tele-presence that relates to Benjamin’s definition of an

¹⁷⁷ Gerould 321.

¹⁷⁸ Villiers 9.

ephemeral aura: “Was ist eigentlich Aura? Ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit: eine einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.”¹⁷⁹ While the unique aspect of the auratic dissolves in the notion of reproducibility, it seems that Benjamin’s auratic ‘Unnahbarkeit’ relates to mediated recording, storage and communication as they are able to make the absent present; they connect and disconnect at the same time. Like the window that enables people to see through walls and visualize the outside world, the frame and glass of it also adds another layer of material that defines a border and frame of reference for the viewer.

As the sound recording and its playback also imply a unique appearance of “distance” in the present moment, I would like to suggest that the functionality and the techniques of reproduction that these technologies enable—particularly the phonograph, photography and film—also influenced Villiers’ prose structurally, as the text describes and simulates attributes of said media technologies. The extended length of the alternating dialogue makes the distinction between their actual voices difficult at times in the narrative. Stylistically, this adds to the simulative effect that is inherent in the text. It recreates the confusion of multiple voices on the textual level as it simulates the dizzying effects of the many technologically reproduced voices and noises of Edison’s underground lab. Edison steadily tries to overcome the loss of original sound by recording and repurposing it. While Lord Ewald takes a stroll in his garden, two birds greet him with the sounds of human laughter. Edison built the birds and added the “human laughter instead of the old-fashioned, meaningless song of the normal bird”

¹⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. 57.

because it seemed to be “more in harmony with the Spirit of Progress.”¹⁸⁰ Without the knowledge of previous other visitors, Edison recorded their voices with phonographs and implanted them in the birds. His ongoing effort to sell the artificial in favor of the real is tied to technological improvement but also to surveillance and the ability to control:

“Real birds are so bad at repeating the words one teaches them!”¹⁸¹

In another example, Edison gives Lord Ewald a demonstration of the capabilities of his phonographs and gramophones without clearly exposing the devices where the sounds and voices originate from:

Lord Ewald, a ce chant inattendu, se sentit envahir par une sorte de surprise terrible.

Alors, sur les versants en fleurs, une scène sabbatique, d’une absurdité à donner le vertige et qui présentait une sorte de caractère infernal, commença. D’affreuses voix de visiteurs quelconques s’échappaient, à la fois, du gosier de ces oiseaux: c’étaient des cris d’admiration, des questions banales ou saugrenues, —un bruit de gros applaudissements, même, d’assourdissants mouchoirs, d’offres d’argent.

Listening to this unanticipated song, Lord Ewald felt himself overwhelmed by a kind of fearful amazement.

Then, on the flower-crowded slopes there began a kind of witch’s Sabbath, absurd enough to make one dizzy, and yet with a kind of ugly, infernal overtone. Frightful squawking noises, as of random visitors, poured from the throats of the birds; they were cries of admiration, questions either banal or preposterous, canned laughter and applause, occasional deafening snorts as of noses being blown, offers of money.¹⁸²

The text evokes the random recorded sounds of Edison’s visitors and Lord Ewald’s senses are overwhelmed by the mediated confusion and noise that fills the air. Recalling the Faustian Walpurgisnacht, the witch’s Sabbath introduces mythical elements of

¹⁸⁰ Villiers 93.

¹⁸¹ Villiers 93.

¹⁸² Villiers 94.

confusion to the mediated recording. As the scene evolves, the cacophony stops, and romantic images of nature and its hallucinatory qualities become apparent:

Sur un signe de Hadaly, cette reproduction de la Gloire à l'instant même s'arrêta. Lord Ewald reporta ses yeux sur l'Androïde, en silence. Tout à coup, la voix pure d'un rossignol s'éleva dans l'ombre. Tous les oiseaux se turent, comme ceux d'un forêt, aux accents du prince de la nuit. Ceci sembla enchantement. L'oiseau éperdu chantait donc sous terre? Le grand voile noir de Hadaly lui rappelait sans doute la nuit, et il prenait la lampe pour le clair de lune. Le ruissellement de la délices mélodie se termina par unie pluie de notes mélancoliques. Cette voix, venue de la nature et qui rappelait les bois, le ciel et l'immensité, paraissait étrange en ce lieu.

At a gesture from Hadaly, this parody of Glory was instantly cut off. Lord Ewald turned his eyes once again to the Android, in silence. Suddenly the pure voice of a nightingale rang through the shadows. All the other birds fell silent, as they do in a forest when the voice is heard of the prince of the night. This seemed an enchantment. Was the foolish bird actually singing underground? No doubt the dark black veil of Hadaly suggested to him the night, and he mistook the lamp for moonlight. The flow of delicious melody terminated in a ripple of melancholy notes. This voice, coming straight from Nature and recalling the forests, the skies, and the immensity of space, seemed strange indeed in this place.¹⁸³

Whereas the chaotic and noisy recordings of visitors' voices are confusing, the perfectly reproduced song of the nightingale is likened to nature and has an enchanting effect on Lord Ewald. Clearly, the song of the nightingale enables a level of immersion and hallucination that Villiers relates to romantic themes such as shadows, veils, and the night.¹⁸⁴ By having Lord Ewald mistake the lamp for the moonlight, the narrator directly establishes the link between the moon as a romantic symbol and its replacement by

¹⁸³ Ibid. 94.

¹⁸⁴ The level of immersion (which can be related to Benjaminian 'Versenkung') is decisive for the hallucinatory power and effect of media technological artifacts and later virtual world. The degree of immersion is intrinsically linked to the invisibility of the functionality of the technological apparatus. The less the apparatus is visible, the higher the possible degree of immersion.

electricity. Moreover, it highlights the hallucinatory power of electronic media technology. The romantic image of nature is transferred to the mediated reproduction techniques of modernity.

Lord Ewald is so impressed by this listening experience that he relates it to the work of God, but Hadaly reminds him to admire this effect without trying to understand how the sounds are produced. Its understanding would result in the loss of their mythical and godlike quality.¹⁸⁵ The spiritual and hallucinatory quality of mediated recordings and their playback appears to reach its full potential when the recipient is unaware of the functionality of their devices. Nonetheless, Edison explains the media-technological set up that enabled the illusion and is consistent in promoting the mediated reproduction over nature:

—Ce rossignol?—dit, en riant, Edison: Ah! ah! c'est que je suis un amant de la nature, moi. J'aimais beaucoup le ramage de cet oiseau; et son décès, il y a deux mois, m'a cause, je vous l'affirme, une tristesse [...] j'ai enregistré son dernier chant. Le phonographe qui le reproduit ici est, en réalité, a vingt-cinq lieues, lui-même. Il est place dans une chambre de ma maison de New York, dans Broadway. J'y ai annexe un téléphone dont le fil passe en haut, sur mon laboratoire. Une ramification en vient jusqu'en ces caveaux, la, jusqu'en ces guirlandes, et aboutit a cette fleur-ci.

—Ah the nightingale, said Edison with a chuckle. Well, the fact is, I'm a lover of nature, so I am. I really was fond of the song of that bird, and his death a couple of months ago caused me, I assure you, genuine sadness. [...] I recorded his final song. The phonograph which plays it here is actually twenty-five leagues away. It stands in a room of my New York house, on Broadway. I've connected it to a telephone, the wire of which reaches into my laboratory up above; an extension brings it into the cave, down to this group of blossoms, and culminates in this particular flower.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Villiers 95.

¹⁸⁶ Villiers 95.

Images of nature frame the technological core of this passage. The recording of the dead nightingale plays on a phonograph in New York and is connected through a network of wires to a flower that functions as a speaker in New Jersey. The implemented technology is able to overcome space and time and simulates the tele-presence of a nightingale, whose song has been preserved in a recording. Edison calls it “an imitation-orchid” of high quality, with which he was able to capture the dead nightingale’s spirit, which is now preserved forever.¹⁸⁷

In a similar context about the imaginary possibilities of recording technologies and reminiscent of Villiers’ Edison, also Flusser reminds us of the lost possibilities of recording original sounds, given these tools had been invented earlier. In *Die Schrift* (1987; *Does Writing have a Future?*, 2011), he asks playfully: “Nur, woher wissen wir eigentlich, dass diese großen Schriftsteller (inklusive dem Autor der Heiligen Schrift) nicht lieber auf Tonband gesprochen oder gefilmt hätten?”¹⁸⁸ Flusser’s rhetorical question in his book about the replacement of writing by digital technologies implies and acknowledges the changing conditions that the inventions of sound and film recording signified. Still, as these original sounds are lost forever, also Edison reminds us that there is no point in worrying about their loss too much:

S’il est regrettable, en effet, que le son authentique et originel des paroles célèbres n’ait pas été retenu par le phonographe, je trouve, en y réfléchissant, qu’étendre ce regret jusqu’aux bruits énigmatiques ou mystérieux auxquels je songeais tout à l’heure serait un acte d’absurdité.

—If the phonograph never had a chance to record the authentic, original sound of those famous words, well that’s too bad; but to worry about

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 95.

¹⁸⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Die Schrift - Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), 7. Nevertheless, writing also means historical consciousness for Flusser.

missing those enigmatic or mysterious sounds that I was thinking about just now, that would be ridiculous.¹⁸⁹

The notion of “mysterious sounds” introduces the transitory nature of (audio) sources in the novel and becomes one way in which it addresses notions of instability and overwriting. On a closer look, the unstable quality of Edison’s audio sources is also connected to the female characters in *L’Eve Future*. It is apparent that the female characters, whether human, dead, or electromechanically reproduced, share a level of fragmentation that is linked to the underlying misogyny that *L’Eve Future* has often been accused of.¹⁹⁰ Kieran Murphy highlights Edison’s effort to replace original sources with technological copies, but also clearly links these artificial creations to a desire related to death. This is not just apparent in the android’s destruction at the end of the novel, but already throughout as the locations and her appearances attest. From her “underground tomb” to being “veiled” and traveling in a “coffin,” the references relating the android to the realm of death are constantly present in the text.¹⁹¹

Allison De Fren reveals the underlying misogyny of the novel by exposing the trifold fragmentation of the female body in the anatomical demonstration of the android (Hadaly), the verbal anatomization of a living woman (Alicia-Clary) and the cinematic deconstruction of a dead woman (Miss Evelyn Habal/Sowana).¹⁹² I want to pick up on this fragmentation in reference to Benjamin’s ideas about the cinema as a potential experience of fragmentation and experimentation. If the “Pygmalionesque desire that leads to the creation of the android in the novel is [...] best fulfilled by the ‘illusions of

¹⁸⁹ Villiers 14.

¹⁹⁰ See James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema* (New York: Columbia, 2000), 18-19.

¹⁹¹ See Kieran M. Murphy, “Electromagnetic Thought in Balzac, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Joseph Breuer,” in *Substance*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Issue 125 (2011), 137.

¹⁹² See Allison De Fren, “The Anatomical Gaze in Tomorrow’s Eve,” in *Science-Fiction Studies*, Vol. 36, No.2 (July 2009), 239.

movement' made possible by the advent of cinema," then it is only logical that Villiers tried to include the fragmentation of cinematic framing and montage techniques into the text.¹⁹³ However, this is particularly apparent in its relation to the novel's female characters. There is the unstable "original" source Alicia-Clary, whose appearance and voice are fragmented and reproduced in Edison's laboratory with multiple cameras and phonographs while she thinks she is posing for a sculpture and rehearsing for a theater role. Edison's mysterious assistant Mrs. Anderson/Sowana appears as a disembodied voice and is therefore an ephemeral source that has no fixed reference. Miss Evelyn Habal is described to be the stereotypical pretty and seductive blonde, who is revealed to be hideous without make-up. Edison reveals Miss Habal's artifice by showing Lord Ewald two different mediated versions of her. The first film reel shows her as the performer on stage; beautiful, seductive, although artificial as a result of being cosmetically enhanced. The second film reel shows her 'true' appearance without make-up and fake eye lashes.¹⁹⁴ Finally, the android Hadaly represents man's electromechanical re-creation of the ideal woman that is able to overwrite the flaws and manipulative nature of the real women in the novel.

Alicia-Clary is introduced in her absence from the very beginning of Ewald's arrival in New Jersey, which confirms the instability of her signifier as an original source. Her character is established as an image and her presence is mediated through a photograph and likened to the Venus de Milo, a highly reproduced sculpture from antiquity.¹⁹⁵ Alicia's profession as an actress supports her transitory identity and the

¹⁹³ Ibid. 230.

¹⁹⁴ Villiers 103-6.

¹⁹⁵ Villiers 56.

introduction of her character in her absence enable her to be the blank canvas for the projections of both men's fantasies and desires. Clearly, Edison's reference to the unknown sculptor of the Venus is not a coincidence. As in the case of the ancient statue, which was attributed to Praxiteles and Alexandros of Antioch, the allusion solidifies the instability of Alicia-Clary as an original, of whom copies can be made, and the problem of the male creator that 'produces' her. Her signifier is not clearly identifiable and relies on contextual relations that are determined by Edison and Ewald's associations when describing her photograph. In these descriptions, Alicia evokes "marble" and "the famous Venus of the unknown sculptor."¹⁹⁶ Therefore her already mediated presence is confused with another reference—Venus, the symbol of the antique ideal for love and beauty that has been reproduced in different artworks multiple times.

Hadaly, on the other hand, is introduced in a scene of technological resurrection. While she ascends from the depths of the earth with "a heavy, grinding noise," Edison anxiously awaits her arrival.¹⁹⁷ The first encounter between Edison, Ewald, and the android in the chapter "Security Measures" deliberately confuses the notion of original source (Alicia-Clary) and presumed copy (Hadaly). While Alicia-Clary has been introduced and described via Ewald's photograph, Hadaly ascends from the "abyss" of Edison's lab, as if a "coffin was being snatched from the darkness by genies, torn from the earth and raised to the surface."¹⁹⁸ As an electromechanical product of mediated technological and cultural techniques of reproduction based on multiple unstable

¹⁹⁶ Ibid 56.

¹⁹⁷ Villiers 57.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 56-57.

references, Hadaly anticipates postmodern elements of recombination and overwriting. It raises the question: To what extent can she be defined as a simulacrum?

Edison's Simulacra

—Ainsi, reprit Edison, l'oeuvre est accomplie et je puis conclure qu'elle n'est pas un vain simulacre. Une âme s'est donc surajoutée, disons-nous, à la voix, au geste, aux intonations, au sourire, à la pâleur même de la vivante qui fut votre amour.

—And so, Edison concluded, the work is finished, and I can conclude that it has not resulted in an empty or lifeless imitation. A soul has been added to it, or so we may say, giving its own qualities to the voice, the gestures, the intonations, the smile, the very pallor of the living woman who was your love.¹⁹⁹

In light of the dynamic qualities of the various sources, the distinction between original and copy is increasingly blurred. As the copy Hadaly has been infused with the soul of Mrs. Anderson/Sowana, Edison claims to have created more than a superficial imitation, a lifeless “simulacre” in the French original. Nevertheless the reproduction of Alicia in Hadaly anticipates the notion of simulacra that Jean Baudrillard develops in his writings *The Symbolic Exchange and Death* (*L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, 1976) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (*Simulacres et Simulation*, 1981).

In the chapter *Simulacra and Science Fiction* of the latter publication, Baudrillard expands on the three orders of simulacra he established in the former, and constitutes the necessary distance between the imaginary and the real as the decisive distinguishing factor. This so-called “distance-gap” enables the space for “ideal and critical projection”

¹⁹⁹ Villiers 216.

(and implicitly reflection) in the reader, but tends to abolish itself in the third category in the simulacra of simulation.²⁰⁰

Three orders of simulacra:

- (1) Simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image;
- (2) Simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production—a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra);
- (3) Simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.²⁰¹

The first category has the maximum capacity for imaginary projection as an entirely different universe can be imagined in this transcendent sphere. This sphere is clearly separated from the real and keeps the distinction between the real and imaginary intact.

The second category is relevant in this particular context as it corresponds to the imaginary of science fiction. Here, the projection capacity is already decisively reduced, as it is a mere exaggeration of what already exists. Whereas the imaginary utopia of the first order suggests an alternate universe, science fiction extrapolates on existing industrial novelties of modernity and therefore “*adds* the multiplication of its own possibilities to the potentially infinite universe of production.”²⁰² This is the case in *L'Eve Future* as Villiers based his fiction on existing technologies at the time, but exaggerated and combined their abilities in imaginative and creative ways.

²⁰⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 120-21.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 121.

²⁰² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 122.

The third category diminishes the “distance-gap” for imaginary projection completely and operates on the level of transitory models. At this point we enter the realm of simulation and *hyperreality* (in a cybernetic sense). It is an operational state where the code is indifferent about the distinction between real or fictive and original or copy as they are indistinctively interlinked. Consequently, this cybernetic, aleatory and uncertain “metatechnique” represents the realm of total uncertainty, total indifference.²⁰³

Baudrillard suggests the second order as the corresponding imaginary order to the genre of science fiction, and it is the materialization of the ‘ideal woman’ in the technologically reproduced android, as well as the role of desire that allow the reference to *L’Eve Future*. Driven by a desire to (re)establish an imaginary patriarchal image through male projection, Edison deploys all the technology at his disposal and acquires godlike abilities by transferring Sowana’s soul into the ideal android, Hadaly. Additionally, *L’Eve Future* can be associated with the second order of simulacra due to its use of fictive reproduction techniques that have a reference to reality but exaggerate their abilities in its science fiction narrative.

Edison consistently reminds us of his endeavor to overcome nature with technological means of reproduction. When he shows Hadaly to Ewald for the first time, he proudly establishes her as the superior copy that has the potential to erase and replace the original: “—Oh it’s better than real! Edison said simply. Flesh fades and grows old. [...] This *copy*, let’s say of Nature—if I may use this empirical word—will bury the original without itself ceasing to appear alive and young.”²⁰⁴ Edison establishes his creation as the perfect artificial *doppelgänger*, which aims to surpass the original. This

²⁰³ Ibid. 121-27.

²⁰⁴ Villiers 60.

speaks for his character's egomaniacal tendencies, and it supports the active endeavor of Edison (and Villiers) to establish the copy as superior to the original.²⁰⁵ Therefore the distinction between the original reference and the copy remains intact in the second order of simulacra that strives for equivalence. Edison seems to succeed with his endeavor as the novel progresses. Even before Lord Ewald mistakenly takes Hadaly to be the 'real' Alicia-Clary, and starts calling the whole enterprise of creating the android into question, he clearly states his willingness to replace Alicia with something illusory:

Ma passion d'abord ardente pour les lignes, la voix, le parfum et le charme EXTERIEUR de cette femme, est devenue d'un platonisme absolu. Son être moral m'a glacé les sens à jamais: ils en sont devenus purement *contemplatifs*. Voir en elle une maîtresse me *revolterait* aujourd'hui! Je n'y suis donc attaché que par une sorte d'admiration douloureuse. Contempler morte Miss Alicia serait mon désir, si la mort n'entraînait pas le triste effacement des traits humains! En un mot la présence de sa forme, fût-elle illusoire, suffirait à mon indifférence éblouie, puisque rien ne peut rendre cette femme digne de l'amour.

My passion, which began as a craze for the figure, the voice, the perfume, and the EXTERIOR charm of this woman, has become absolutely platonic. To think of her as mistress would *revolt* me nowadays. I am attached to her by nothing more than a kind of painful admiration. What I really would like, would be to see Miss Alicia dead, if death didn't result in the effacing of all human features. In a word, the presence of her form, even as an illusion, would satisfy my stunned indifference, since nothing can render this woman worthy of love.²⁰⁶

While the passage maintains the misogynistic objectification that reduces Alicia-Clary to her external features, it also renders the illusion—and later the android—preferable to Alicia and establishes it as an equivalent that aims to replace the original referent. Moreover, it establishes her as an objectified image, a projection that is based on Lord

²⁰⁵ In Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht* the 'original' Stiller is also described to have gone mad by his egomaniacal tendencies and 'godlike' powers over the simulation.

²⁰⁶ Villiers 46.

Ewald's fantasy, which becomes the fragmented and unstable referent and source for her technological reproduction in Hadaly.

Ewald's wishes to replace the real woman with the "illusion" are finally fulfilled in the remarkable encounter with Hadaly after Alicia's external features have been transferred. Blinded by the perfection of the reproduced android, he believes he is seeing the 'real' Alicia and starts to question his previously expressed desire for her artificial reproduction completely until Hadaly reveals her true identity at the end of the page:

Ah! murmura-t-il, etais-je donc insensé ? Je revais le sacrilège... du'un jouet—dont l'aspect seul m'eût fait sourire, j'en suis sûr ! [...] O-bien-aimée ! Je te reconnais ! Tu existes, toi ! Tu es de chair et d'os, comme moi ! Je sens ton cœur battre ! Tes yeux ont pleuré ! Tes lèvres se sont émues sous l'étreinte des miennes ! Tu es une femme que l'amour peut rendre idéale comme ta beauté !—O chère Alicia ! Je t'aime ! Je...

Ah no, he said to himself, was I out of my mind? I was dreaming of a sacrilege, a plaything, a puppet, the mere sight of which would make me laugh, I'm certain! [...] Oh my darling! I know you, you exist, truly, as a creature of flesh and blood, like me! I feel your heartbeat! You wept for me! Your lips stirred under the pressure of mine! You are a woman whom love can render as ideal as your beauty! Oh, dearest Alicia, I adore you! I...²⁰⁷

In another effort of blurring the association of Alicia-Clary and the description of Hadaly, it seems as if Ewald unconsciously animates Hadaly by remembering the real features of Alicia. For a brief moment, Alicia-Clary and Hadaly become indistinguishable for Ewald, as well as the reader, but the 'reveal' at the end of the page—"My dear friend, don't you recognize me, it's me Hadaly"—ultimately establishes her as the superior copy. Hadaly's significance as a simulacrum of science fiction is apparent as the reproduced copy overwrites and replaces the original unstable referent (Alicia-Clary).²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Villiers 192.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 192.

In a more specific explanation of the difference between the simulacra of the first and second order, Baudrillard distinguishes between the automaton and the robot that can be related to this context:

A world separates these two artificial beings. One is the theatrical mechanical and clockwork counterfeit of man where the technique is to submit everything to *analogy* and to the simulacrum-effect. The other is dominated by a technical principle where the machine has the upper hand, and where, with the machine, *equivalence* is established. The automaton plays the man of the court, the socialite, it takes part in the social and theatrical drama of pre-Revolutionary France. As for the robot, as its name implies, it works; end of the theatre, beginning of human mechanics. The automaton is the *analogon* of man and remains responsive to him (even playing draughts with him!). The machine is the *equivalent* of man, appropriating him to itself as an equal in the unity of a functional process. This sums up the difference between first- and second-order simulacra.²⁰⁹

While E.T.A. Hoffmann's automat Olympia falls into the first order of simulacra as a mechanical imitation of humans, Villiers' Hadaly is a technological creation, a robot in Baudrillard's terms, that aims to be equivalent to humans and therefore to replace them. While the first order of simulacra is related to the pre-modern period of imitation, the second order is connected to the industrialized age of production and initiates the possibility of replacing man by robots that have been produced as equivalents. Baudrillard suggests that the production of robots is the first step of inverting the prosthetic relationship between man and machine, on behalf of the machine.

Expanding on this thought, new analog media technologies of the 19th century enable the overriding of meaning with reproduced copies and simulacra. The invention of the phonograph, photography, and film enabled the reproduction of sound and images

²⁰⁹ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 2017, revised edition), 74.

and their materialization in records and prints. This revolutionized the ability to generate, store and distribute knowledge and history, while it simultaneously lead to the increased blurring of original sources and their reproduced copies, and therefore initiated the tendency to render the distinction between original and copy obsolete in the simulacra of simulation. Media technological reproduction techniques opened up new possibilities of overwriting, manipulating and misunderstanding the perception of something as real as what is actually reproduced. They are “putting the listener in the position of a night wanderer on the highway, who thinks he’s petting a dog when he’s really enraging a wolf.”²¹⁰

While the mythical elements in Villiers’s tale motivate Edison to think of his android creation as something superior to a mere copy, the confusion and instability of original sources as discussed above introduce and anticipate the simulacra of simulation. However, as the reference between the original and copy is kept intact, *L’Eve Future* can be related to the simulacra of the second order, the simulacra of science fiction.

This change is evident in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s two-part TV series *Welt am Draht* (*World on a Wire*, 1973). While it is a science fiction film and Fassbinder’s only foray into the genre, it makes a conscious effort to create its own *hyperreality* and to erase the distinction between reality and simulation completely. The following chapter is examines to what extent this endeavor has been successful and analyzes the narrative and formal aesthetic techniques that have been deployed.

²¹⁰ Villiers 33.

Chapter III – Transitory Worlds: The Aesthetics of Simulation in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht*

Welt am Draht (*World on a Wire*), originally aired as a two-part mini-series on German television in 1973. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's only science-fiction film adapted the material from US-American author Daniel F. Galouye's novel *Simulacron-3* (1964), which is one of the earliest treatments of what would become known as virtual reality and set a precedent for several genre films to follow.²¹¹ In 2010, *World on a Wire* was digitally restored in collaboration with the Rainer Werner Fassbinder foundation, the Centre Pompidou in Paris and MoMA in New York, and it premiered on the big screen at the Berlin Film Festival, which resulted in renewed critical reception, especially in light of the rapid evolution of technology in the last few decades.²¹²

World on a Wire was shot during a particularly busy time for Fassbinder. He participated in four other productions in the same year (1973): *Effi Briest*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (*Ali: Angst essen Seele auf*), *Martha*, and *Nora Helmer*. The 37-year period, in which *World on a Wire* was basically hidden in the archives, is one of the reasons why the secondary literature on the film is surprisingly sparse. The same cannot be said about Fassbinder's oeuvre in general; on the contrary, his idiosyncratic, but powerful approach to filmmaking is revisited consistently to this day. The title of the biography by Hans Günther Pflaum and Rainer Werner Fassbinder himself, *Das bisschen Realität das ich*

²¹¹ See *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983), *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Westworld* (HBO-Series, 2016-ongoing)

²¹² See "Rainer Werner Fassbinder on World on a Wire," in *World on a Wire - Press Kit*, ed. Sarah Finklea (Janus Films, 2010): <http://www.janusfilms.com.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/worldonawire/woawpressnotes.pdf>

A remastered DVD release followed in Europe (Kinowelt Home Entertainment) and the US (The Criterion Collection).

brauche. Wie Filme entstehen, sets the tone for Fassbinder's relationship between the reality of Germany and the reality of filmmaking.

His prolific cinematic output can be partially understood in relation to his working methods. "In dem Moment, in dem ich in einen Raum reinkomme und die Szene sehe, die ich mir vorgestellt habe, entstehen für mich auch die Einstellungen, und in einem neuen Raum gibt es eben neue Sachen für mich, spannendere als in Räumen, die ich schon vorher kannte."²¹³ This intuitive approach and creative freedom can be linked to his status as an *auteur* from the early stages. But it was also his team of tight-knit friends and collaborators that enabled the productive collaboration. Cinematographer Michael Ballhaus remembers a particular scene for *World in a Wire*, which was shot on-location in a bar in Paris. Fassbinder was not happy with the location, but changing it would have resulted in the loss of an entire production day; the scene was worked out in desperation and resulted in heightened creativity: "Über die Verzweiflung hinaus ist dann plötzlich eine solche Intensität erwachsen oder erstanden, dass gerade diese Szenen dann ganz toll geworden sind," Ballhaus recalls.²¹⁴ Even though the choice of on-location settings was related to budget restrictions, it also enabled this kind of productive creative pressure. And with a crew of trusted collaborators, Fassbinder was able to raise his productivity in this highly demanding environment.

In terms of public reception, Thomas Elsaesser notes that Fassbinder "was one of the few directors of the New German Cinema whose films were seen by Germans, and

²¹³ See Richard C. Figge, "The Modus Operandi of Rainer Werner Fassbinder," in *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German*, Vol. 12, No.2 (Autumn, 1979), 23.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 23.

who was able to enter into some form of dialogue with the public sphere.’’²¹⁵ This was partly due to the extensive interest and coverage of his private escapades—it is no secret that he lived an excessive life filled with alcohol and cocaine—but Fassbinder also consciously wove these autobiographical references into his films, therefore “inviting allegorical cross-referencing of biographical and autobiographical elements [...] against the foil of German history.”²¹⁶ This conscious effort in Fassbinder’s life and films, which operate through the lens of West German society and history, offers a kaleidoscopic vision of the “pre-history and the aftermath of modern Germany’s greatest catastrophe.”²¹⁷ In that way Fassbinder started to consciously blur the boundaries of his social and historical themes with autobiographical experience. This is perhaps the most obvious in *Beware of a Holy Whore* (*Warnung vor einer heiligen Nutte*, 1971), where a disillusioned film crew (including Fassbinder himself as production manager “Sascha”) waits first for the arrival of the director, and then for the missing film reels in order to finally begin the production in a hotel in Spain. Boredom and alcohol increase the potential for social conflict among the crew while the whole production gradually turns into a complete disaster. Fassbinder’s meta-film about filmmaking exposes the power dynamics in the hierarchies on a film set and is reportedly based on his own filming experience in Spain during the production of *Whity* (1971).²¹⁸

Clearly, Fassbinder was a driven man with self-destructive tendencies, but he developed an almost existential need for cinematic reflection: “Aber es gilt zum Beispiel, dass ich alles was ich erlebe, auch irgendwie verarbeiten muss, um das Gefühl zu haben,

²¹⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder’s Germany - History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam, 1996), 10.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 10.

²¹⁷ Ibid. 10.

²¹⁸ See Elsaesser 274.

es erlebt zu haben.”²¹⁹ Cinematic reflection seems necessary for Fassbinder to contextualize and appropriate experiences and emotions. The result is a curious mixture of historical, biographical and cultural elements that involves the spectator on multiple levels by inviting historical reflection, but also self-reflection.

As for influences specific to *World on a Wire*, previous French sci-fi films such as *Playtime* (1967) and *Alphaville* (1965) inspired its labyrinthine spaces as well as its unstable setting and the identity crises of some of its characters.²²⁰ As these films largely operated without any special effects and on relatively low budgets, new levels of experimentation were reached by using elements of contemporary design and creative camera techniques that resulted in alienating effects.

However, Fassbinder’s cinematic influences were not just limited to France and Europe. After his discovery of German émigré Douglas Sirk in 1971, he was inspired to adapt Sirk’s Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s into a German context.²²¹ Sirk’s aesthetic influence is particularly present in Fassbinder’s use of mirrors and reflections. For Sirk, mirrors function as *imitations of life* and are integrated into the diegetic spaces that reflect on the emotions of the characters.²²² After he had specifically referred to

²¹⁹ Figge 24.

²²⁰ Other noteworthy films in the European art-house sci-fi tradition are *La Jetée* (1963), *Je t’aime, je t’aime* (1968). But also US-American sci-fi productions of the time as *THX 1138* (1971), *Soylent Green* (1973), or *Westworld* (1973) stand as possible influences to the ambiguous attitude towards technology that is inherent to *World on a Wire*.

²²¹ See Elsaesser 275. A selection of Fassbinder’s films that were inspired by the melodramas of Douglas Sirk: *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1972), *Jailbait* (1972), *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day* (1972), *Pioneers in Ingolstadt* (1971), *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), *Martha* (1973), *Fear of Fear* (1975), *Ali – Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), *Effi Briest* (1974), *Fox and his Friends* (1975), *Mother Küster’s Trip to Heaven* (1975), *I Only Want You to Love Me* (1975-1976), *Satan’s Brew* (1976), *Chinese Roulette* (1976).

²²² See Brian Faucette, “Word on a Wire Review,” in *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2014), 122.

Sirkian style and his use of mirrors in an essay he wrote in 1971, Fassbinder explicitly picked up on this notion in his films as well.²²³

Fassbinder's prolific output resulted in a similarly vast amount of scholarship that not only focused on his films, but also his personal life and its intersections with his work. Elsaesser discusses the "pitfalls of the biographical or auteurist approach" in his seminal study, *Fassbinder's Germany – History, Identity, Subject* (1996). While both approaches have their respective validity, as does a purely formal reading, Elsaesser's study aims to open up a multitude of "(mis)readings" that take the reciprocal relation "between the films and their mode of production, between the historical moment that they were made and the conditions under which they were made, between their chronological sequence and their chronological reference" into consideration.²²⁴

Following its own trajectory, Elsaesser's book opens up a network of references that relates psychoanalytical concepts such as identification, transference or narcissism to Fassbinder's strategies of involvement by applying or modifying the very same concepts in his films.²²⁵ As all of these diverse topics are impossible to cover in the framework of this analysis, I would simply like to highlight one of the key aspects that Elsaesser's argument circles around: the involvement of the spectators with various different strategies that connect them with the characters as well as the narrator in Fassbinder's films. Particularly strategies "of frame and view, of the different looks and their obstructions, of voyeuristic participation and exhibitionist display" are of interest to

²²³ Rainer Werner Fassbinder. "Imitation of Life - Six Films by Douglas Sirk," in *New Left Review*, Vol. 2, No. 91 (London, May, 1975), 89.

²²⁴ Elsaesser 9-10.

²²⁵ Ibid. 11.

me.²²⁶ The ubiquitous surveillance in *World on a Wire* uses aesthetic strategies that involve the viewer in both activities.²²⁷ Characters are consistently framed or reflected through mirrors and glass surfaces, and we become voyeurs of the protagonist Stiller's exhibitionist display in the simulation. While this happens unconsciously in the beginning, the audience is made aware and increasingly incorporated in this viewing process as the film advances.

Film and Fassbinder scholar Gerd Gemünden adds that the connection between reality and representation is undermined already in early Fassbinder gangster films, because they foreground how images and film constitute a certain reality rather than understanding them as a mere reflection of a given reality.²²⁸ I want to suggest that *World on a Wire* represents the extreme consequence of this tension. It establishes not one, but three different diegetic realities that exist simultaneously, are transitory and therefore question the authenticity of all of them, including our (the audience's) own. The distinction between reality and its simulations turns on itself and is mirrored to infinity in a seemingly indifferent mise en abyme. It is a state of indifference and dereferentialization that the third order of simulacra seems to exhibit, the order of simulation and hyperreality. Furthermore, *World on a Wire* implements an aesthetic of simulation on the narrative, as well as its visual and auditive levels and emancipates the simulated copy by creating its own hyperreality.

World on a Wire turns the Sirkian mirrors towards screens. Cathode ray monitors, videophones as well as other surveillance and computer screens are consistently present

²²⁶ Elsaesser 11.

²²⁷ See Florian Leitner, "The perfect Panopticon: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht*," in *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (Autumn 2009)

²²⁸ See Gerd Gmünden, "The Cultural Politics of Fassbinder's German Hollywood," in *New German Critique*, No. 63, Special Issue on Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Autumn, 1994) 64.

throughout the film. Both the mirrors and the screens raise questions about the fragmented, artificial, and illusory nature of (virtual) identity and the materiality of perceived reality in relation to the image. In conjunction with the constant camera movement and framing techniques it is sometimes hard to distinguish what is a reflection in a mirror or a camera image on a screen. This brings us to the central philosophical question the film raises: the epistemological question surrounding the subjective nature of reality and the placement and involvement of the spectator in relation to the filmic space, both beyond and within the frame.

This chapter seeks to explore the cinematic aesthetic strategies implemented in Fassbinder's *World on a Wire*, which actively involves the spectator in the viewing process and challenges their understanding of reality.

In order to grasp the complex interplay among virtuality and reality in the film's narrative, I begin by summarizing the plot. After Prof. Vollmer (Adrian Hoven), the lead scientist at the IKZ [Institute for Cybernetics and Research of the Future], dies under mysterious circumstances, the main protagonist Fred Stiller (Klaus Löwitsch) takes his place as the new computer specialist at the institute.²²⁹ The IKZ developed a state-funded computer called Simulacron-I that simulates an artificial virtual world with ten thousand so-called "identity units." These units are virtual people with their own consciousness, although they are unconscious about the fact that they live inside a simulated world. The intended purpose of the simulation is to extract empirical data for political and economical predictions of the future.

²²⁹ *Stiller* is also the title of and name of the main protagonist in Max Frisch's novel from 1954 (Eng. *I'm not Stiller*). In it, Anatol Stiller, a sculptor, tries to defame his past by taking a new name and identity. As Fred Stiller's quest for his own (artificial) identity is a central theme in *World on a Wire*, it can be assumed that Fassbinder consciously made this allusion. See Joachim Kaiser, "Stiller," in *Die Zeit* (1979) URL: <http://www.zeit.de/1979/15/stiller>

When Günther Lause (Ivan Desny), the security chief of the institute, mysteriously disappears at a party at CEO Herbert Siskin's (Karl-Heinz Vosgerau) house, Fred Stiller begins to investigate his whereabouts and the hard-boiled narrative is set in motion, which is linked to themes from *film noir*.²³⁰ Stiller's lone wolf approach to solving Vollmer's death and Lause's disappearance and the constant threat of being played by inaccessible higher power dynamics establish Stiller as the classical noir fall guy. Additionally, visual references such as prominently featured window blinds, consistent cigarette smoking and the wardrobe of the characters pay homage to the likes of Humphrey Bogart and Barbara Stanwyck.²³¹ Stiller seems to be a magnet for *femmes fatales* as well, as his multiple encounters with women and specifically with Gloria Fromm (Barbara Valentin) show. While it seems that some of the women cannot resist his charming appearance, it turns out that some of them, Eva (Mascha Rabben) and Gloria, had ambiguous motives from the start.

Stiller tries to find Lause by any means, but curiously nobody seems to remember who he was. He vanished from the database in the institute, and the police and the journalists who published a story on the incident, cannot recall his existence. Stiller is confused, but as he keeps digging for more information, he soon recognizes inconsistencies in the computer simulation. During a routine transfer of Stiller's mind into the world of Simulacron-I via projection link, Stiller recognizes Lause among the identity units.²³² From this moment on, Stiller begins to question his sanity and is afflicted with recurring headaches. What is going on? How did Lause appear in the

²³⁰ See *World on a Wire*, "Interview with German-film scholar Gerd Gemünden," (New York: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD Disc 1, 0:01:56.

²³¹ See *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944).

²³² A projection link means the transfer of the mind into a virtual body inside the simulation with a helmet-device in the computer control room.

simulation of Simulacron-I? Stiller is more and more convinced that Vollmer's death was not an accident. While a political conflict develops at the institute because Siskins wants to sell parts of the research for profit to a private steel company, Stiller begins to question his perception of reality: is his world also just another simulation that is programmed by a higher level?²³³

Stiller is indeed trapped in a simulation, and his hunch that he might be another "identity unit" forces him into an existential crisis in the second part of the film. Similarly to Vollmer at the beginning, this realization leads to the computer system turning against him. Suddenly, the police blame him for the murder of Prof. Vollmer, and Stiller escapes to the countryside. After multiple failed attempts by the system to kill Stiller (by falling stones and trees or an attack by an aggressive German shepherd), Eva reveals the truth about the world that Stiller thought to be real. She has been sent from the "real world above" to monitor Stiller and to ensure the stability of the simulation. She admits that it was probably a mistake to allow them to have another simulation (Simulacron-3) inside of the simulation, but in order to extract "authentic" data, the model had to be as close to their own world as possible. Surprisingly, Eva does not kill Stiller, but rather decides she wants to help him. She reveals that he is the copy of another Stiller, who is the computer specialist from her World. She was in love with him, but as he became increasingly corrupted by his power over the system, she is now more attracted to the copied, virtual version, our "hero" with whom viewers have identified, which is why she decided to help him. In order to solve this dilemma, she exchanges their consciousness just in the

²³³ The first part of the film establishes precisely this question. Similar to the character of "Einstein" (Gottfried John), who is the contact person in Simulacron-I, only Eva Vollmer (another *L'Eve Future*) is aware that the world Stiller perceives as real (and the diegetic reality that is established at the beginning) is in fact a simulation as well.

moment in which the police shoots Stiller during a worker's strike in the yard of the institute. While the Stiller from Eva's world above dies, the other Stiller wakes up unharmed in a closed room with Eva.

"I am, I am," says Stiller. But what did he become? And where is he?

Recursive Worlds

We're alive. They are like people dancing on TV for us. – Fred Stiller²³⁴



Fig. 1 – Poster/DVD Cover

A closer look at the illustration used for *World on a Wire*'s film poster introduces several of its main themes. If the title functions as the vantage point, its white letters on black background establish the *World on a Wire* from the basis of its text. Above every letter a line extends vertically—as wires—and these form a grid-like structure that expands through two circles. The two circles include two smaller circles on top that resemble the

²³⁴ *World on a Wire*, (New York: Criterion Collection, 2012) DVD, Disc I: 0:14:41.

pupils of eyes, implying the importance of vision, observation, voyeurism, and surveillance. In the lower center eye, the pupil includes the black and white silhouette of a man (Fred Stiller) on the run.

The two larger circles evoke the existence of multiple simultaneous worlds that are arranged in hierarchical order—above, below and in-between. Stiller's running silhouette and its position show him being caught in a space that overlaps between both worlds. While this signifies a transitory space that enables him to traverse between these worlds, it also implies a panoptical state of surveillance, as the shape of the eye (of the camera and also ourselves, the viewers) suggests. This transitory space is the diegetic reality that Fassbinder introduces at the beginning of *World on a Wire*. This world is under surveillance and controlled by a higher invisible power that is constituted and sustained by media technologies: computers, television screens, video monitors, server rooms, and video-telephones.

The existence of a simulation inside of the simulation makes *World on a Wire*'s diegetic realities so confusing in the way they consistently reflect and relate to each other. The film manages to pull the spectator into the narrative by the way its interior spaces and characters' looks are organized. Nevertheless, this relationship remains ambiguous and transitory: "via the looks that circulate within these spaces and across them, Fassbinder invited his spectators not only to 'enter' his world, but also managed to pull the ground from under them."²³⁵ In *World on a Wire*, this loss of reference crystallizes with the realization that the diegetic world is a simulation itself at the end of part I. In consequence this revelation also calls the stability of the other layers into question.

²³⁵ Elsaesser 58.

In a previously unreleased note, Fassbinder describes the layers of multiple simulated worlds in *World on a Wire*.²³⁶ In total he describes three separate worlds in numerical order: World I, World II, World III, and World I presumably represents the only ‘real’ world. World I created a simulation World II—the diegetic reality that the film establishes at the beginning—for future planning purposes. Therefore, World II is closely recreated to simulate World I in order to make accurate and credible predictions for economic and scientific research purposes. The inhabitants of World II (and also III) are called identity units and have their own consciousness but are unconscious about the artificiality of their world.

As World I equips World II with knowledge and experience, the technological and cultural skills provided by World I are now used by World II to create a simulation of its own, World III—called Simulacron-I in the film. World III is used for the same purposes as World II is utilized by World I, but in a more rudimentary and less developed version. Due to the civilizational knowledge and skills provided, World I lays the foundation for World II to eventually emancipate itself. Stiller is the symbol for this process, which implies the Hegelian dialectic of master and servant. In the end, the computer programmer Stiller, from World I, reproduces himself in the simulation of World II and the virtual copy (servant) replaces the original (master) in World I with the help of Eva. Nevertheless, World I is so invested in sustaining World II that the two worlds have entered a parasitic dependency. As World I becomes more highly developed and starts to outsource tasks to the simulation of World II, World I also becomes more and more dependent on it. Fassbinder expands on this power dynamic in his script notes:

²³⁶ See Rainer Werner Fassbinder, “Rainer Werner Fassbinder on World on a Wire,” in *World on a Wire - Press Kit*, ed. Sarah Finklea (Janus Films, 2010): <http://www.janusfilms.com.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/worldonawire/woawpressnotes.pdf>

Ideology: Is it possible that World I has not only created World II as the subject of observation, but also puts it to work for its own purposes? In other words, once World I has become highly developed on the basis of its own achievements, it becomes parasitic since it has everything done for it by World II. This is why it is so interested in preserving World II. If World II were to stop performing its services and become independent, World I would teeter and collapse since it has long forgotten how to reproduce itself (or, for that matter, how to generate a new simulation). It is thus a parable of a master and his servant: as the master's needs become more refined and he increasingly relies on his servant to ensure they are met, the servant becomes more and more refined and the master increasingly stupid. Although the master cannot live without the servant, the servant can live without him.²³⁷

On a closer look this seems to be a recurring theme throughout many of his films, but usually this dependency applies to the relationships between specific people, as it is the case between the characters in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* or *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, for instance.²³⁸ Fassbinder gives an example for the practical implementation of such a dialectical relationship between the simulated worlds: “when a power plant fails in World I, the error is quickly programmed into a power plant in World II. Its inhabitants find a solution that is then adopted by World I.”²³⁹

In *World on a Wire*, government research agencies as well as private commercial corporations are interested in taking advantage of the simulation processes, which causes a central conspiracy in the narrative that aims to replace Stiller with Mark Holm (Kurt

²³⁷ Fassbinder, “Rainer Werner Fassbinder on World on a Wire,” in *World on a Wire - Press Kit*

²³⁸ Fassbinder, “Rainer Werner Fassbinder on World on a Wire,” in *World on a Wire - Press Kit*. In *The bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, the emancipation of Petra's assistant Marlene (Irm Herrmann) becomes apparent as she leaves Petra's apartment in the final scene. It is a paradigmatic scene for the recurring “master/servant” power dialectic between characters in Fassbinder's films.

²³⁹ See Rainer Werner Fassbinder, “Rainer Werner Fassbinder on World on a Wire,” in *World on a Wire - Press Kit*.

Raab). Holm is hired as Stiller's assistant but he is simultaneously the contact person of the United Steel Corporation, a private company that wants to use Simulacron-I to make profits without the government's knowledge. In any level of simulation, the outsourcing of complex calculations establishes a relationship of dependency between the higher and the lower levels.

The interesting aspect of *World on a Wire* is precisely that there seems to be little to no contrast between the different levels of simulated worlds, which leads to its recursive and infinite structure. It makes the distinction between these layered realities increasingly difficult and blurred: hyperreal. In contrast, this relationship of dependence and exploitation is turned around in *The Matrix* (1999), as the 'real' humans are used as batteries to power and sustain the simulation while their minds are connected to it. The disparity between the virtual world of the Matrix, which resembles 1999 and 'reality' is stark. In the 'reality' of the film, machines have taken over and enslaved the human race in a hostile and dark world without any sunlight.

Besides the multilayered structure of the separate simulated worlds, *World on a Wire* addresses questions of artificial consciousness as well as existence and identity. How can the characters or "identity units" who have recognized their own artificiality cope with that knowledge and still be controlled by the system in order not to endanger it entirely? It is this kind of rogue anomaly that is a recurring structural and narrative device across films that adapted similar material (such as *The Matrix* (1999), *eXistenz* (1999), *The 13th Floor* (1999), *Westworld* (2016)). In *World on a Wire*, the rebellion after this realization is a *leitmotif* that is present from the very beginning: Prof. Vollmer, who is killed after becoming aware that he lives in a simulation on the one hand; and Fred

Stiller, who takes his place and becomes hunted by the system from the moment he realizes he is trapped in a simulation. The rebellion of the conscious “person” is met with hostility by the overarching system.²⁴⁰

The Simulation of Virtual Reality in Film

The visualization of computer environments is simulated through depth of field, various layers in the image and the inclusion of other images in the images. In the simulation grid, all depicted objects are subjected to the same computer code. Reading *World on a Wire* as a simulacrum of simulation establishes its diegetic reality in a state of total operationality, which is defined by the dominant and underlying code. As the binary code becomes the underlying abstraction code for the creation of digital images and virtual worlds, the virtual world of *World on a Wire* exhibits this underlying code metaphorically in the film’s visual language. Similarly to the binary conditions between 0 and 1, everyday objects such as doors become symbols for binary oppositions such as open or closed.²⁴¹ While multiple characters are consistently framed by doors that can be read as indications for potential instability, it is particularly Stiller, who repeatedly opens doors (or tries to open them in vain at the very end!) and moves in circles through spaces or even multiple rooms. These circular movements of characters allow us to read them as

²⁴⁰ In order maintain the illusion for the remaining identity units, these murder attempts have to look like accidents. In a self-reflexive ‘meta’ moment, Stiller reminds psychologist Hahn how they have deleted identity unit „Christopher Nobody“ and made it look like an accident. Attempts on Stiller (by World I): *World on a Wire*, (New York: Criterion Collection, 2012) DVD, Disc I: 0:33:25: Attempt with falling stones from construction crane; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 0:25:16: Interference with mind in hallway (similar to Vollmer); *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 0:46:25: IKZ employees trying to pick up Stiller with straight jacket; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:17:13: Stiller is attacked by a German shepherd; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:18:52: Falling Tree.

²⁴¹ For further inquiry on cultural techniques and the binary state of doors, see Bernhard Siegert, “Door Logic, or, the Materiality of the Symbolic,” in *Cultural Techniques - Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham, 2015).

(computer) “circuits” visualizing the unconscious ‘program’ the identity unit’s follow.²⁴²

Stiller is almost never still, and there are multiple examples that illustrate this. In the meeting with Siskins and the CEO of the United Steel AG, Stiller walks in a circle in Siskins’ office. Meanwhile the camera remains somewhat steady and slowly pans along his movement as he opens two double doors, becomes visible in the mirror and sits down at the conference table at the other end of the room. In another example, Stiller follows Eva into her house to look for her and circles through multiple rooms as the camera pans along his movement until he exits the main entrance door.²⁴³ In yet another scene in Siskins’ office, both Stiller and Siskins start spinning in their chairs while they discuss the arrival of the new assistant Mark Holm.²⁴⁴ Holm is directly tied to the capitalist United Steel AG and is hired to supervise the secret research that Siskins ordered to make profits. Here, too, the circular movement reads as an indication that the identity units are following the circuits of their programmed narrative.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

²⁴² *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:12:32 Stiller and Siskins walk in a circle around the pool; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:45:40 Stiller walks in circle and opens doors in Siskin’s office; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:35:00 Stiller and Siskins spin in circles in their office chairs; *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:41:50 Stiller and Eva dance and spin in circular motion in the room of World I at the end.

²⁴³ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:29:51 – While looking for Eva in her house, Stiller walks in a circle across the rooms and the camera slowly follows his movement. The camera seems to be motivated by the movement of the characters and simulates a mode of surveillance.

²⁴⁴ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:34:54: Stiller and Siskins turn in circles in their chairs while talking in Siskin’s office. Shortly after Mark Holm takes Stiller’s chair and literally takes his place. (In the conspiracy against Stiller, Holm is supposed to take his place and facilitate the secret cooperation with the United Steel Company).

While the circular movement of the characters represents the unconscious execution of their respective programs, the camera also engages in a circular motion, yet to a different signification. In multiple instances the camera begins to float and circle around the center of action indicating a higher system of control and surveillance that is tied to the perspective of the spectator. In the scene at the newspaper office of “Der Tagesanzeiger”, the camera slowly circles around Stiller and journalist Rupp during their conversation in a full 360-degree motion (Fig. 2).²⁴⁵ This movement has an inherent voyeuristic quality; it seems detached from the ground and follows the movement of assistant Uschi in the background while it simultaneously keeps the conversation of the two men in focus (Fig. 3).

Another full circle camera movement that indicates surveillance becomes apparent when Stiller escapes to his cabin in the countryside.²⁴⁶ After he mistakenly targeted and almost shot Eva with his hunting rifle (he is a fugitive and on the run from the police at this point), they enter the cabin while the camera remains at a distance outside. As a jarring noise slowly amplifies on the soundtrack, the camera circles around the house offering short glimpses of their conversation inside. The recurring electronic noise on the soundtrack and the floating camera is another indication of the intervention by World I.

²⁴⁵ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 00:13:00.

²⁴⁶ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 01:13:00.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The aesthetic of simulation and surveillance related to the interventions of World I are also exposed by camera zooms and color manipulations of the image. When Stiller has a conversation about the “nature” of Simulacron-I and its identity units with Gloria Fromm (Barbara Valentin) at Siskins’ party, the camera switches from the shot-reverse-shot pattern to a wide shot that centers the journalist Rupp (Uli Lommel), who is eavesdropping on the conversation (Fig. 4).²⁴⁷ As the conversation continues, the camera zooms in on a close-up of Rupp’s pensive face while Stiller comments off screen: “We’re alive. They’re like people on TV dancing for us” (Fig. 5).²⁴⁸ The zoom indicates an intervention by the surveillance system of World I that focuses on an identity unit in doubt, a potential threat to the stability of the system, in this case the journalist Rupp (Fig. 6).

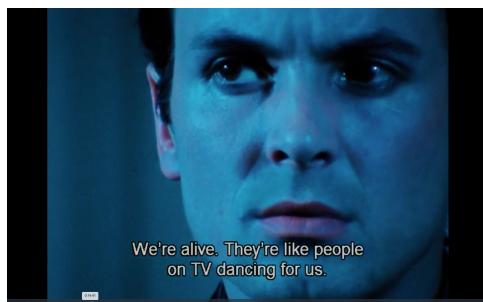


Fig. 6

²⁴⁷ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:14:37.

²⁴⁸ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:14:41. I would suggest that this particular video screen is one of the surveillance monitors in the room when Stiller wakes up with Eva in the end.

The exaggerated blue color scheme is subtle but clearly recognizable when compared with the shot before. Rupp's skin color is notably bluer, which makes the image appear as if it were being watched on a video screen in one of the computer rooms that appear later (Fig. 6).²⁴⁹ The re-signification of the image as a surveillance image enables the reading that somebody else than the spectator watches the action unfold through another screen (similarly to Stiller, who observes Simulacron-I on monitors in the computer room). In this way, the sequence establishes a dynamic relationship of gazes that familiarize the audience with the same voyeuristic surveillance gaze of whoever is watching from World I (presumably the 'original' Stiller). On the narrative level, Stiller's line "They are like people on TV dancing for us" adds to the self-reflexive irony of the scene as it applies to the identity units of Simulacron-I (World III), but also on the characters having this conversation (who are identity units in World II without being aware). Accordingly, the "us" in "they are like people on TV dancing for us" allows for multiple identifications that highlight the transitory state of identity in *World on a Wire*. It is neither stable nor isolated to a singular form of identification. Expressions like these function on a structurally deeper level. The "us" referred to in this scene relates to Gloria and Stiller as well as it relates to Stiller from World I, who is watching the action from his own screen. Additionally, we, the audience, are placed in a similar position, as we are watching "people on TV dancing for us."

The use of camera zooms is a recurring technique that indicates the controlling aesthetic of the surveillance and the perspective of a privileged spectator that is able to

²⁴⁹ A technique that Michael Haneke uses frequently in his films, in particular *Benny's Video* (1992), *Caché* (2005).

watch the scene from the outside on a screen.²⁵⁰ Zooms in both directions are used, either inwards or outwards, and they signify different interventions by the overarching system of control. In the example above the zoom is directed inward, from a wide shot to a close up, and the focus of the image draws attention to a specific moment of doubt that is perceived as a potential threat to the system (Journalist Rupp questions the idea of Simulacron-I's identity units). This technique can be traced in multiple other examples, especially when Stiller begins to question the state of his own reality and whether he might be another identity unit in a simulation himself. This signifies the state of surveillance of the world presented and that the audience partakes in the similar voyeuristic surveillance as the master programmer "Stiller," who is watching the struggles of his virtual copy with increasing pleasure (as we find out towards the end).

The reversed zoom motion on the other hand, outwards from a detail or close-up to wide shot, is also related to surveillance albeit in a different way. It establishes multiple nameless and mostly female characters as the "eyes and ears" of the system, who observe and listen in on Stiller's and other protagonists' conversations.²⁵¹ With the exception of Eva, Gloria, and Maya, who all have a surveillance function in their respective systems, the other characters are rendered mostly passive and observing, sometimes eavesdropping on conversations or distracting from revealing moments in conversations.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ The use of zooms is highly unconventional in traditional filmmaking as it draws attention to the manipulation of the image by the camera. It is an alienation technique that exposes the artifice and works against the illusion of filmmaking.

²⁵¹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I 0:15:21; 00:28:33; 00:42:21; 00:49:07. The only male character with similar attributes is the nosey superintendent in the staircase of Stiller's personal assistant's house. Also in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, shot in the same year, neighborly surveillance and prejudice in Germany are central themes.

²⁵² See *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 00:28:33; 00:42:21; 00:49:07.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

When Lause arrives at Siskins' party and wants to talk with Stiller, the scene is established from the perspective of a woman that briefly talked with Stiller before (Fig.7). Her gaze is directed slightly off screen as if she would be watching somebody else, and as the reversed zoom of the camera reveals Lause and Stiller in a three shot, we know that she focuses on the two men in the door frame (Fig.8).²⁵³ The zoom outwards begins with a detail shot of her eyes and the blue color scheme (eyes and dress) matches the surrounding environment (walls and pool). Similarly to before, the blue color highlights the artifice of the characters and the environment and relates to the aesthetic of video surveillance.



Fig. 9

Gloria Fromm, Siskins' personal assistant and *femme fatale*, is assigned to spy on Stiller by Siskins. At the party, she is the one that distracts Stiller just in the moment

²⁵³ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:15:20

before Lause magically disappears. The zoom to an extreme close up of Stiller's face in combination with the electronic noise on the soundtrack indicates the intervention of the overarching system. In this instance, the system acts and deletes Lause from its program to cover up Vollmer's "death" and prevents further endangerment for the stability of the system.²⁵⁴ In the illustration above, the self-reflexive framing is particularly apparent. The multiple frames of the sliding door and its reflection resemble singular film frames on a film roll (Fig.9). Lause's disappearance can therefore be read as a literal cut from one film frame to the next and the mirrorings and imbrications that the film thematizes.

Glitches



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Faulty circuits can occur and lead to the distortion of perception for the identity units. In another meta conversation about the transient state of "Simulacron" (World III) and their own reality at a bar, Stiller asks his assistant Fritz for examples of glitches that can occur in the simulation model. Fritz explains that the simulated reality is perceived as real by the identity units as it is the only reality they have experienced (Fig. 10).²⁵⁵ Still,

²⁵⁴ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:17:51.

²⁵⁵ In this sense the setup resembles the framework of Plato's famous allegory of the cave. The captive in front of the shadows also takes the shadows to be the only representations of the world that he is exposed to until he eventually frees himself and reaches a higher level of insight. Especially in the second part of the film, Stiller starts musing about philosophical concepts on the nature of perception by Plato, Aristotle and Descartes.

when glitches occur this perception can be challenged, which poses a potential threat to the stability of the system. For example, Fritz mentions that streets could suddenly disappear when they are not yet completely programmed. Later in the film, Stiller experiences this glitch twice while driving in his corvette. During a night ride with Eva that is strikingly stylized and dark, the street suddenly disappears and the image fades to black while we are still able to hear their conversation on the soundtrack (Fig.11).²⁵⁶

Later, when Eva reveals that she has been sent to this world from the “original” Stiller of World I, she explains to him that a faulty circuit was the reason for the street’s disappearance.²⁵⁷ These moments of doubt indicate the artificiality of the perceived world for the protagonists and the audience alike. While the audiovisual aesthetic with its grids, mirrors and reflections hint at the simulative character of the established world from the very beginning, it becomes increasingly obvious as the film progresses and Stiller becomes more conscious about the fact while he spirals into an existential crisis.

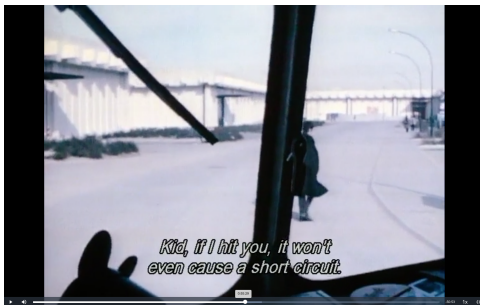


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Unfinished streets appear in another instance. Hunted by two employees of the IKZ, Stiller escapes over the roof of his apartment and into his corvette. He drives into an area of new housing and street construction, where multiple streets are still unfinished

²⁵⁶ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:00:26.

²⁵⁷ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:32:52.

(Fig. 13). The desolated look of the setting (which are actually housing projects under construction in the suburbs of Paris in the 70s) implies an unfinished area of the program. Additionally it resembles Stiller's excursion into the world of Simulacron-I via "projection-link" as the driver of a truck (Fig. 12).²⁵⁸ The similarity of the color scheme and the notion of roughness related to glitches establish the analogy between World III (Simulacron-I) and World II on a visual and narrative level. By exposing the errors of the underlying code of the simulation, the appearance of glitches throughout the film relates to Baudrillard's concept of total operationality. Streets and characters can be programmed, added or deleted at the arbitrary will of an unknown invisible higher authority.

Copies/Replicas



Fig. 14

But it is not just the exterior setting that supports the notion of simulation and artificiality in the diegesis. Sculptures—or their replicas—are recurring visual themes that imply the notion of reproducibility throughout the film. The sculptures evoke questions of mimetic representation relating back to the myth of Pygmalion and link the

²⁵⁸ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:55:29.

artificial body of the identity units—especially Stiller’s—to questions of reproducibility and existence (Fig. 14).²⁵⁹

The reproducibility and doubling of characters is another central theme in *World on a Wire*. This *doppelgänger* motif can be observed as early as at Siskins’ party. A double of Marlene Dietrich (Solange Pradel) sings “The Boys in the Back Room” while the camera slowly pans from left to right to reveal several characters and the indoor pool setting at Siskins’ house party. The song is an intermedial nod to the 1939 classic *Destry Rides Again*, starring Marlene Dietrich and it introduces the notion of replaceability of original and copy from the very beginning.²⁶⁰ Shortly after, Stiller walks into the frame and is approached by a woman, who seems to be flirting with him: “These are no muscles, it’s the padding,” Stiller responds to her as she lays her hands on his shoulders.²⁶¹ Ironically, it is Stiller himself that attributes artificiality to his body. He tells her that she could look him up in the phone book if she is really interested. The phone network as a predecessor of the Internet and its name register are introduced as constitutive elements for having an identity in this world.

The theme of the *doppelgänger* becomes increasingly complex and confusing as the exchange of consciousness between different identity units becomes possible and is particularly apparent at the end of the first part of the film. Einstein (Gottfried John), the contact unit from Simulacron-I (World III) that wants to escape to a higher level of ‘reality,’ manages to exchange his mind with Stiller’s assistant Fritz (Günter Lamprecht)

²⁵⁹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 00:46:00. Stiller’s body is visually juxtaposed to sculptures and replicas in multiple scenes.

²⁶⁰ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:08:20. Anticipating Fassbinder’s own film *Lili Marleen* (1981), the same Marlene Dietrich double sings Lili Marleen later in the film (*World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:04:58)

²⁶¹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:08:50.

and arrives in the cafeteria of World II, where he is confronted by Stiller.²⁶² Stiller immediately realizes that Fritz is Einstein and is surprised about this anomaly, but Einstein makes him aware of the possibility that the “real” reality might be one level above. This realization at the end of part I initiates the repetition of Einstein’s narrative for Stiller himself. From this moment on, Stiller starts questioning his reality and considers that he might be trapped in a simulation himself, while his increasing anxiety leads everyone to think that he has lost his mind (like Prof. Vollmer in the beginning). Similarly, there is a narrative analogy between the placeholder character of Christopher Nobody, the former contact unit in Simulacron-I, and Günther Lause. Because both became threats to their respective systems, they are deleted to ensure its stability (Christopher Nobody was programmed and deleted by World II. Günther Lause was deleted by World I).

Einstein’s narrative also repeats itself with Stiller as he manages to traverse World II to World I with Eva’s help. There is a decisive difference though: Stiller exchanges his consciousness and body not with somebody else but with the higher version of himself. Towards the end of the film, Eva explains that it was Stiller (from World I), who programmed himself into the simulation of World II.²⁶³ At this point, the copied version of Stiller accepts his artificiality to the extent that he is indifferent about his own fate; however, it is Eva who tries to persuade him not to go back to the IKZ where he is destined to be shot by the police. Nevertheless, he decides to go there the next morning and Eva manages to exchange the consciousness of the copy with the

²⁶² *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:39:50.

²⁶³ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:29:00. Eva elaborates on the Hegelian master-servant dialectic in conversation with Stiller. Stiller from World I programmed a double of himself into the simulation of World II similarly to how this copy of Stiller programmed Siskins into Simulacron (World III) before.

original Stiller, therefore establishing a new order in which the artificial consciousness not only emancipates itself, but actually replaces the original in the process (Fig.15).



Fig. 15

Mirrors/Screens

The film's excessive use of mirrors and reflections are particularly important for the aesthetics of simulation inherent to *World on a Wire*, as it addresses questions of perception and mediation of identity in virtual spaces. The visible distortion in the images and reflections consistently hint at the virtuality of the simulated spaces on a visual level, even if we are not aware of it on first viewing (Fig. 17).

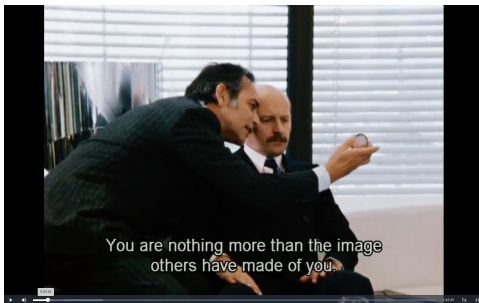


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

The conversation between Prof. Vollmer and the state secretary in Siskin's office at the beginning of the film introduces the transitory nature of the (self) image on the visual and narrative level. Vollmer confronts him with a pocket mirror and asks him what he sees. After the state secretary hesitates, Vollmer replies: "You are nothing more than the image

other have made of you.” (“Was Sie sehen, ist nämlich genau das Bild was man sich von ihnen gemacht hat. Nichts anderes. Das ist alles.”)²⁶⁴ The network of gazes between Vollmer holding the pocket mirror in his hands while speaking into the state secretary’s ear, establishes the instability of the diegetic space. It is subject to control by an invisible other, a privileged spectator that sees through the simulation at work (Fig. 16). This privileged position relates to the spectator from the world “above,” as well as to ‘us,’ the audience, and places us in a similar position in the framework of surveillance. As we are not aware of the fact that we are actually watching a simulation on first viewing, this position becomes “privileged” with the knowledge once we have seen *World on a Wire* in its entirety. Since Vollmer is the only person that is conscious of his own artificiality in the beginning, everyone else perceives him as ‘crazy,’ similarly to Stiller later. In conversation with his security chief, Vollmer hints at his essential discovery and claims: “It would mean the end of this world.”

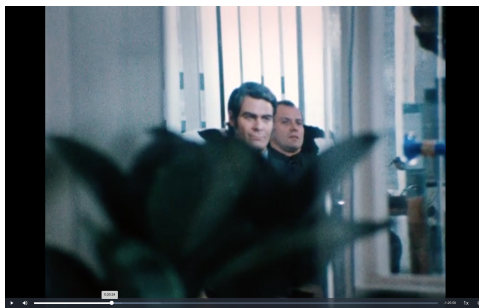


Fig. 18

The ubiquity of mirrors in *World on a Wire* blurs the clear distinction between image and reflection and therefore makes it difficult to detect the original reference.

²⁶⁴ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 00:02:14. “You are nothing more than the image others have made of you. Nothing else.” (The English translations are taken from the english subtitles).

Many times it is impossible to decide whether or not we are looking at a mirror image until the camera actually reveals the mirror frame.²⁶⁵ The spatial arrangement, the camera perspective, and the gazes of the characters establish the space outside of the film frame as an essential part of the diegetic space that includes the audience in its framework (Fig.18). As the distinction between the original reference and the reflection is increasingly blurred, the diegesis is established as its own hyperreality without clear original referent.

Nevertheless, the characters' gazes establish the off-screen space as integral to the diegesis by the way their gazes meet in the reflections outside of the frame. In several instances, multiple actors are framed in the same shot communicating with each other while looking in the same direction off screen and without directly looking at each other. The ubiquity of mirrors implies that their gazes meet in the (imaginary) mirror located off-screen.²⁶⁶ While one might think that this meeting of gazes in the off-screen space signifies an opportunity for transgression, the pervasive presence of enclosed spaces and grid structures in the fore and background suggest that the characters are trapped inside a simulation where surveillance is omnipresent.

There is another remarkable scene at the house of the institute's psychologist, Franz Hahn (Wolfgang Schenck). Stiller visits him to discuss his persistent headaches and his concerns about Vollmer's death and Lause's disappearance, since both

²⁶⁵ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 00:20:20; 01:09:37.

²⁶⁶ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:09:43. In the example above, Stiller just returned from a projection link to Simulacron-I (World III), where he was confronted by the contact unit 0001 named Einstein. He is the only unity that is aware of the artificiality of Simulacron and is the connection between the two worlds (World III and II) that is needed in order for the simulation to function properly. Einstein cannot cope with the knowledge of living in a simulation anymore and asks Stiller to take him with you. He wants to know how life in the "real" world looks like, but Stiller does not grant him his wish and comes back to what he assumes to be the real world (World II). He saw "Günther Lause", the former security chief of the IKZ that disappeared at Siskins' party and nobody can remember anymore. Later, Stiller finds out that Prof. Vollmer programmed another version of Lause into Simulacron-I that he was not aware of.

increasingly challenge his faith in the authenticity of his own reality. In another layered self-reflexive frame, Stiller looks through an aquarium while Hahn muses how Stiller's godlike abilities in Simulacron-I must have taken a toll on his mental health and that this might be the reason for his recurring headaches and mental problems.²⁶⁷ Similarly to before, both characters' gazes are directed off-screen and connect via an imaginary mirror image, therefore sustaining the diegetic space through the inclusion of the space outside of the frame by way of their seemingly disconnected looks.²⁶⁸



Fig. 19

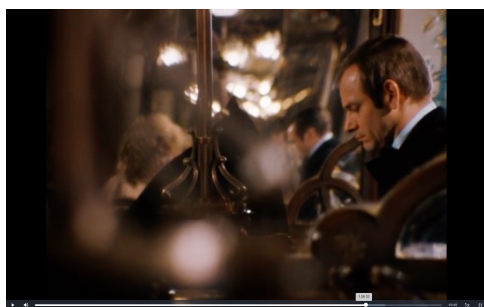


Fig. 20

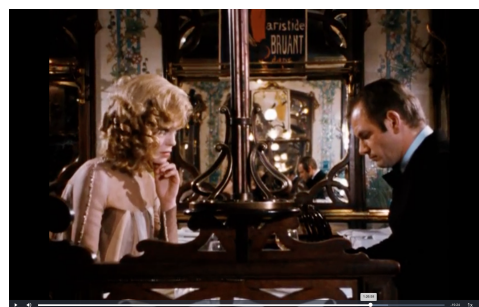


Fig. 21

Other examples that expose the artifice of World II combine mirror reflections and camera techniques simultaneously. Slow outward zooms from mirror reflections are used to establish the scenes and immediately destabilize the image by revealing the

²⁶⁷ This is another recursive narrative allusion as the same problem also applies to the “original” Stiller from World I. He becomes increasingly paranoid and obsessed by the power he has over the simulation of World II.

²⁶⁸ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:14:11

reflection (Fig. 20). When Stiller meets Eva for lunch in a restaurant that visually resembles the hotel lobby where he met Einstein in *Simulacron-I* before (Fig. 19), the camera starts out on Stiller's profile, which is doubled in another mirror. As it zooms out, it slowly reveals that the initial image was a reflection (Fig. 21).²⁶⁹ The cinematic apparatus is once again drawing attention to the manipulative and deceptive ability of the initial image. The relation between World III and World II is also established on the auditory level. The music playing in the background is reminiscent of Stiller's meeting with Einstein before, supporting the artificial character at work on multiple levels in the scene.²⁷⁰



Fig. 22

Fassbinder not only consistently exposes the cinematic apparatus with the help of zooms, he also draws attention to the materiality of the image surface, as in Vollmer's death at the beginning of the film. Shortly after the scene with the pocket mirror, Vollmer breaks down in one of the computer rooms of the IKZ, and Lause eventually finds him dead on the floor. The camera zooms out from a close up of his face to a frame that resembles broken glass, or a broken screen (Fig. 22).²⁷¹ Similarly to the reappearing noise

²⁶⁹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:26:43.

²⁷⁰ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 1:03:00; Meeting with Einstein in *Simulacron-I* (World III) (01:04:50).

²⁷¹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 00:08:08.

on the soundtrack, I would like to suggest that the camera zoom indicates an intervention of the simulation of World I on the visual level. Again, it shows the perspective of a privileged spectator, and the cracks in the screen along with the zoom, expose the materiality of the (TV-screen) image and the intervention from a higher perspective, which is reflexive on multiple levels simultaneously. On the narrative level of the film, the broken glass signifies Prof. Vollmer's death as a broken grid or circuit. From the perspective of the audience, it introduces the notion of surveillance by a higher world—World I—and makes the audience aware of the glass of their own TV-screens. Elsaesser confirms this observation in Fassbinder's 'fetishizing' of the cinematic apparatus, which draws attention to an "extra presence, whether originating from the camera, the audience as voyeurs, or some other perceiving instance. While the classical Hollywood cinema disguises such a presence by either motivating it internally or by leaving this extra look unacknowledged [...], Fassbinder often makes us – more or less uncomfortably – aware of our invisible presence, and by extension, of the fact that the 'frame' is not a window on the world outside."²⁷² In *World on a Wire*, this 'frame' is precisely what turns on itself. It includes us viewers on the same voyeuristic perspective as the 'invisible presence' of World I, the higher level of diegetic reality that operates as the cinematic apparatus throughout the film.²⁷³ In this sense, the Brechtian notion of alienation and active inclusion of the spectator in the 'epic theater' has evolved to a cinematic technique that includes the audience in ways that reflect on their mediated nature.

²⁷² Elsaesser 58-59.

²⁷³ The sequences of the videotapes in *Caché* establish a similar relation between the image, cinematic apparatus and '**invisible presence**'. The spectators become complicit in the act of looking by aligning themselves with the apparatus.

It is the screen, and particularly the TV screen, that the camera and the characters are consistently drawing attention to. The materiality of another layer that is in between the characters and the camera is consistently exposed. It reveals the enclosed glass cage of the simulated world, in which the identity units are trapped, and from which there seems to be no escape.

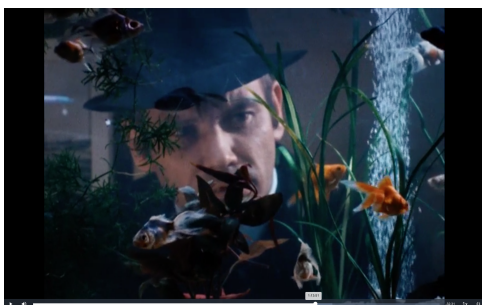


Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Furthermore, framing characters through glass and other reflective surfaces or screens is paradigmatic for Fassbinder and signifies a potential threat to them, which possibly even expands to the viewer. The screenshot above shows Stiller's assistant, Maya Schmidt-Gentner (Margit Carstensen), as she presses her hands against the glass in Stiller's office as if she were trying to look outwards from the inside of a television screen (Fig. 24). The gesture exposes the materiality and tactility of the screen.²⁷⁴ Elsaesser highlights the excessive need for symmetry, repetition, doubling and infinite regress in this context, which is reinforced by drawing attention to the mediated representation of the frame in the frame, through items such as photographs, newspapers and television screens.²⁷⁵ Moreover, these “two structures – the viewer/film relation and the relation of the characters to the fiction itself – mirror each other infinitely and

²⁷⁴ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc I: 0:21:27.

²⁷⁵ Elsaesser 59.

indefinitely, while putting the other in crisis and pointing to an underlying paranoia, which obliges one to read these perfectly shaped and doubly framed moments as portents of some sort of danger that the characters find themselves in, or perhaps even the viewer.”²⁷⁶

Maya’s gesture also relates her to the “fish in the aquarium” that Stiller is looking through during the scene at the psychologist’s house (Fig. 23). In reference to Claude Chabrol’s cinema, Fassbinder gives an apt description about the connection between characters and spectators that also applies to his own style of directing: “the director keeps characters and audience like “insects in a glass case.”²⁷⁷ Elsaesser adds that “if, for instance, neither suspense nor enigma drive the events, then this supplement of ‘vision framed’ adds an element of fascination, keeping the viewer held under a spell, since there is always someone’s look inscribed in what one sees, though one often does not know whose look it is, making it both a threat and a source of uncanny power, holding viewer and protagonist in place.”²⁷⁸

In that sense Maya’s undirected look outward is defined through its ambiguity and in its relation to us, the viewers. Fassbinder’s ability to draw the spectator into the filmic space is as remarkable as it is uncertain, precisely because he is able to “pull the rug from underneath our feet” and therefore destabilizes the intra- and extra-diegetic space simultaneously to establishing it.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 59.

²⁷⁷ Fassbinder quoted in Elsaesser 60.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. 60.

A Matter of Faith



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

The successful transfer of Stillers' consciousness at the end suggests that he managed to escape the simulation and made it to the real world, while another scene in which Stiller tries to escape from the *World on a Wire* subtly relates to the final scene in the control room of World I. In the scene, which is an extreme wide shot and long take, Stiller descends from the top left corner of the frame, down some stairs, jumps over the handrail, crosses a highway, and climbs multiple fences before he literally hangs on the wire (Fig. 26). Suddenly the journalist Rupp appears with his car. "Get in, there is no escape," he says, before they drive away (Fig. 27). Besides the obvious symbolic and failed attempt to escape the wired grid of the electronic simulation, it is remarkable that we hear church bells on the soundtrack. The sound of the bells allow the connection to the final scene after Stiller wakes up in World I and has exchanged his consciousness with the body of the "original" Stiller from which he is a virtual copy. Here, when the two layers of blinds finally open, the only glimpse through the windows outside reveals a cross on a church building, adding the symbolic connotation of faith into the mix of possible interpretations. Is the perception of reality in the end a matter of faith?

The final parallel sequence after Stiller is shot on the car in the yard of the IKZ and simultaneously wakes up in the room of World I with Eva by his side, signifies the

simultaneous death of the original and resurrection of the copy of Stiller. As the camera slowly moves upwards from a close frame of Stiller's dead body, the camera movement signifies the transfer of Stiller II's consciousness into the level of World I above. But where did he wake up? Heaven? Reality?



Fig. 27



Fig. 28

A closer analysis of the setting where Stiller wakes up suggests otherwise. Even though he wakes up next to Eva, the carpeted and minimalistic room interior combined with their matching wardrobe also call this layer of reality into question. Is World I a simulation as well in the end? Stiller wakes up and is ecstatic. Even though silent, he gets up, starts to walk around the room and touches the floor, the closed blinds, and tries to open the door, which is locked. Although his reaction and excitement suggest otherwise, again he finds himself in an enclosed space. Even though Eva opens the window blinds this time, the visual similarity to the enclosed space he inhabited before suggests that the aesthetics of simulation also apply in this world (Fig. 27). Additionally, he starts to walk in circles and spins around himself. The similarity of the colors between Stiller and Eva and their backgrounds suggest the fusion of the characters with their environment on the visual level, therefore implying a structural similarity between the characters and the world (Fig. 28). This supports the notion that they and their surrounding environment are

made from the same code (similarly as it has been shown at Siskins' party scene at the beginning).²⁷⁹

Moreover, the prominent use of grey as a color between contrasts speaks for the transitory state in the depiction of World I. Stiller exchanged his shirts and suit from World II for a grey wool turtleneck. The curtains, blinds, and windows have different shades of grey, whether they are open or closed, and the telephone, which has been featured in colorful variations consistently in World II, is now also turned grey. Taking into consideration the matching color schemes and their significance as evidence that highlights the artificiality of the world, Eva and Stiller's playful happiness and laughter can hardly gloss over the many allusions to the aesthetics of simulation that are still at work in the final scene of the film.²⁸⁰



Fig. 29

After the glimpse outside the window, Eva and Stiller move closer together and start touching each other before Stiller starts to spin her around. The dance includes multiple 360-degree moves that recall the circular movements of the characters and the camera that have been related to computer circuits before. Additionally the camera slowly pans to the background with the carpeted floor and curtains, which reveals another

²⁷⁹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II – 1:39:36

²⁸⁰ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc II: 1:40:13.

layer of theatrical performance to the dance of the characters. Monotonous colors in carpet and curtains establish the space as a performance or theater stage. “Ich bin, ich bin,” (I am, I am) is the only and final thing that Stiller mutters in the end. What is he really? The aesthetic of simulation at play in the *World on a Wire* suggests, “they are like people on TV dancing for us.”²⁸¹

²⁸¹ *World on a Wire*, DVD, Disc: 0:14:41. I would like to suggest that this particular video screen is one of the surveillance monitors in the room when Stiller wakes up with Eva in the end.

Chapter IV: Ambiguous Images: The Image as Projectile in Michael Haneke's *Caché*

Michael Haneke's interest in the manipulative quality of moving images is evident in his approach to cinema. Many of his films, for instance *Benny's Video* (1992) or *Code Inconnu* (2000), play film, TV and video images that expose their mediated artificiality. Challenging and involving the audience are fundamental strategies for Haneke that result in the unexpected alienation or production of cinematic "shock" effects for the spectator. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of long takes and static sequences in his films invite contemplation to fill in the blanks that have been purposefully left empty. *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005) is a paradigmatic example for all these aesthetic strategies. It leaves most of the violence and action, but also the obvious answers 'hidden' and off-screen.

Caché is Michael Haneke's third French production after *La Pianiste* (The Piano Teacher, 2001) and *Code Inconnu* (Code Unknown, 2000). Although the film references the massacre of Algerian demonstrators during the Front de Libération Nationale demonstrations in Paris in 1961 and therefore includes an explicit political dimension in addressing French colonial history, *Caché* also underlines the universality of other prevalent and recurring themes in Haneke's films.²⁸² These include but are not limited to:

²⁸² On the 17th of October in 1961, the „Front de Libération Nationale“ (FLN) demonstrated on the streets of Paris against the emergency laws and curfew that was aimed at North Africans in Paris. The demonstrations were brutally suppressed by the police under the command of Chief Maurice Papon, which resulted in 200 deaths, 200 missing, 12000 arrests and 1000 deportations to the Beni Messous prison camp in Algeria. There was a steady effort to misrepresent and conceal the tragic events by the French authorities and the media. Official reports named 3 deaths. Decades later the event became public with the trial of police chief Maurice Papon (October 1997 to April 1998). Still, he was not tried for the massacre in Paris, but for human rights violations during the Second World War (against the Jews of Bordeaux). Cf. Celik 60. In several interviews, Haneke recalls his shock about an ARTE documentary on the 1961 incident and that he had never heard about it before. The disparity between France, a nation that prides itself on freedom (of the press) and the suppression of these events in public discourse motivated him to include the events in the narrative of *Caché*. See Richard Porton and Michael Haneke, "Collective Guilt and Individual Responsibility: An Interview with Michael Haneke," in *Cinéaste*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Winter, 2005), 50.

childhood and collective guilt, the denial of responsibility, miscommunication or disturbances of privileged family life, the representation of violence in the media, intergenerational revenge (*Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon*, 2009); the defying of audience expectations, and the active involvement of the spectator in the film's fabric.

In the following analysis, I seek to establish the "image as projectile," which reflects on the notion of the inherent violence and the projective force of technical images as well as on the notion of 'shock.' I will use *Caché* in order to illustrate a combination of theoretical concepts by Walter Benjamin, Vilém Flusser, and Jean-Luc Nancy in relation to violence and technical moving images. Benjamin uses the term *Geschoss*, when he introduces the notion of "shock" in relation to cinema in his influential essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility."²⁸³ He states that this shock value is manifested in the rapid succession of images through cinematic montage.²⁸⁴ I would like to introduce the term 'projectile' as a more fitting translation to *Geschoss* in this context as it includes the notion "to project," which is a central concept in Flusser's theory of projection in relation to technical images. Benjamin's "shock" and Flusser's "project/projection" are juxtaposed in the image of the "projectile," which becomes a metaphor for the ambiguous power of images possessing destructive and creative qualities simultaneously. In Flusser's distinction between traditional and technical images, technical images work as projects or projectiles that are directed towards the future. Therefore they are able to serve as models that have the ability to influence human behavior and form habits. Flusser fleshed out this concept in multiple publications, and it is an essential idea for his utopian idea of the telematic society. Jean-Luc Nancy's

²⁸³ In the English translation *Geschoss* was (1968) originally translated as "bullet," in the later translation by Edmund Jephcott (2008) as "missile." (39)

²⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 39.

differentiation between the “violence of the image” and the “image of violence” in *The Ground of the Image* (2005) proves helpful in distinguishing the violent character of technical images further. *Caché* provides an opportunity to address both: the “abstract violence of the image” (which operates on a structural level) and the “concrete image of violence” (which operates on the level of content, or specifically to what is seen in the image). In *Caché*, the purposely open-ended narrative and the position of Haneke’s camera provoke a multitude of different interpretations that exist simultaneously on the narrative as well as the audiovisual levels. Accordingly, the following analysis does not claim to have *the* key to “solving” *Caché*’s mysteries; rather, I will try to expand on the questions raised in the film as well as in the context of this work. By looking at a range of secondary sources, I intend to give an overview of the vast existing critical landscape on *Caché* in order to filter and contextualize the ideas related to my framework.



Fig. 30 – *Caché* Poster

On the narrative level, *Caché* follows the life of the bourgeois Parisian Laurent family. The father Georges (Daniel Auteuil), the mother Anne (Juliette Binoche), and their son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky) begin to receive anonymous surveillance video

tapes on their doorsteps. First of the outside façade of their home in Paris, but with the arrival of the second tape, the family also receives ‘childish’ drawings and other tapes showing different content that points to Georges’ childhood home in the province and an apartment complex in a suburban area of Paris. While the video images do not pose any immediate threat and it remains unclear who recorded and sent the tapes, their presence and the knowledge of being watched sets paranoid reactions into motion, slowly revealing traumatic memories related to Georges’ childhood. Georges’ parents employed an Algerian family on their estate, but the 1961 massacre following the FLN demonstrations left their son, Majid (Maurice Bénichou), orphaned. Because of childish jealousy and not wanting to share his family and home, six-year-old Georges lied about Majid with the goal of having him sent away. Eventually he succeeded by making Majid decapitate the family’s rooster and telling his parents that Majid was sick because he coughed up blood. As a result, Georges’ parents send Majid to an orphanage, never to be seen or heard of again.

In the present, the anonymous videotapes and drawings bring back the traumatic memory and guilt that Georges associates with this childhood moment. Georges’ decision to search for their creator by himself results in multiple conflicts with his family and friends. Georges tries to track down Majid after another videotape seemingly points to the building in the Parisian *banlieue* where he currently lives. When Majid opens the door and is very surprised to see Georges, whom he recognized because of Georges’ celebrity status as a TV host in a literary criticism talk show. Georges, who is convinced that Majid is the sender of the tapes, confronts him aggressively about his intentions and threatens him with violence if the videotaping does not stop. Majid denies having

anything to do with the tapes and after Georges leaves in rage, he breaks down crying. The next confrontation, which follows after Majid calls Georges at his office, ends in a horrifying incident. Shortly after Georges arrives at Majid's apartment this time, Majid closes the door, thanks him for his presence, pulls out a razor blade and slits his throat in front of Georges. A big splash of blood—similar to the one seen on the film's poster and DVD-cover—sprays the wall (Fig. 30, Fig. 32). Georges is perplexed and shocked by this surprising twist (as is the audience, upon first viewing), and he leaves the apartment without alerting the police. Eventually George tries to forget about the horrifying suicide he just witnessed by watching a movie at the cinema.²⁸⁵

A few days after Majid's death, his teenage son (Walid Afkir) confronts Georges in an awkward encounter at Georges's office about the incident, although Georges tries to escape the conflict and denies any wrongdoing or responsibility. The film ends with a final static wide shot of the entrance to Pierrot's school. Similarly to the opening sequence, the final scene stretches over several minutes and features a short (hidden) meeting between Pierrot and Majid's son on the steps of the school (on the left side of the frame).²⁸⁶ Because of the wide angle of the shot and multiple people roaming the scene, the two sons' encounter can be easily missed without paying close attention to the details. Could both sons (representing the new generation of men) have something to do with the tapes and drawings? We cannot be sure, as we are not able to listen to their dialogue.²⁸⁷ Ultimately, the final scene adds another layer of possible interpretations to the question of

²⁸⁵ *Caché*, DVD: 1:30:10.

²⁸⁶ *Caché*, DVD: 1:54:14.

²⁸⁷ Haneke has admitted to have written dialogue for this scene in the script but purposely left it out.

who might be responsible for sending the tapes and leaves the audience hanging with an unresolved ending.

Catherine Wheatley reads *Caché* as a “filmic Rorschach blot,” whose patterns might reveal more about the spectator’s own concerns, interests, fears, and desires.²⁸⁸ Therefore, while also highlighting the multiplicity of possible interpretations in *Caché* and Haneke’s films in general, she highlights the interactive nature of Haneke’s films that invite the audience to incorporate their own experience into his films. *Caché* is paradigmatic for this, she argues, as it is consciously engineered to be obscure and therefore challenges viewers to fill in the blanks with their own imagination.²⁸⁹ Wheatley gives a comprehensive overview of the diverse critical responses the film provoked after its premiere in Cannes in 2005.²⁹⁰ Central to her observation is the presumed “unifying vision” many critics have offered in their interpretation of the film’s “theme.” What combines all these reviews in Wheatley’s view is the shared appreciation and respect for the film, but she problematizes the various attempts to ‘explain’ the film to its audience and to offer a singular vision as something that would limit its actual scope. She discerns four major themes in reviews of *Caché*: “1. the film as thriller; 2. bourgeois guilt; 3.

²⁸⁸ Catherine Wheatley, *Caché* (London: Palgrave 2011), 15.

²⁸⁹ Wheatley 15.

²⁹⁰ “The *Evening Standard*’s Alexander Walker states unequivocally that Haneke’s ‘theme is bourgeois guilt, which he clearly believes we should all share’. For the *Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw the film is ‘a compelling politico-psychological essay about the denial and guilt mixed into the foundations of western prosperity’; for the *Times*’s James Christopher it is a critique of ‘guilty national memory’ and for the *Independent*’s Anthony Quinn *Caché* is ‘an oblique mediation on national guilt’. The *Daily Paragraph*’s Tim Robey claims it is concerned with both the ‘complacent underbelly of the European bourgeoisie’ and, more concretely, ‘a response to the events of October 17, 1961, when hundreds of Algerian protests were drowned in the Seine’. Mark Lawson, also writing in the *Guardian*, argues that it tackles ‘two of the biggest political issues of our time: the surveillance society and national and political guilt’. *Time Out*’s Dave Calhoun, meanwhile, describes *Caché* as: ‘a smart marriage of the thriller genre with a compendium of strong ideas about guilt, racism, recent French history and cinema itself’, but concludes that ‘this is largely a character study – the study of a repressed man and the chaos that ensues when the valve is finally opened.’” See Wheatley 16.

political accountability; 4. reality, the media and its audiences.”²⁹¹ Accordingly, she structures her BFI publication on *Caché* offering a perspective that combines all of these approaches and leaves room for multiple interpretations.²⁹² The question remains whether these four categories are sufficient to categorize the issues raised by *Caché*.

In agreement with Wheatley’s assumption “that the privileging of one theme, one reading, one pattern, over others closes down the multiplicity of meanings that *Caché* contains and the consigning of a fixed meaning to the film entails a loss of richness,” I want to refrain from giving a unifying interpretation of the film.²⁹³ I want to use the film’s self-referential structure and its innovative use of various types of footage embedded in its narrative in order to illustrate and discuss theoretical concepts by Jean-Luc Nancy, Walter Benjamin, and Vilém Flusser, in the contexts of image creation and reception as well as the perception of violence in relation to the image.

²⁹¹ Wheatley 16.

²⁹² The book is structured along the following themes: Whodunit?, Home and the Family, Politics and Memory, and Screens and Spectators. See Wheatley 17.

²⁹³ Wheatley 17.

Differentiating Technical Images: The Abstract Violence of the Image and the Concrete Image of Violence



Fig. 31



Fig. 32

Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the interrelated triangle of violence, truth, and the image by establishing various distinctive pairings. Beginning with a closer analysis of the relationship between violence and truth, he proceeds towards their relation to the image, while also frequently emphasizing the inherent ambiguity of all three terms. The distinction between the “image of violence” and the “violence of the image” are applicable to *Caché* in interesting ways. The “image of violence” relates to scenes in the film where violence is depicted explicitly, for instance in the decapitation of the rooster or the suicide scene;²⁹⁴ and, the “violence of the image” is inherent in the surveillance videos, as they function as a penetrating force with social and psychological consequences in the narrative of the film.²⁹⁵ Nancy’s distinction is helpful in the discussion of how these images operate on different levels. In the section “Violence, Image, Truth”, he writes:

Two assertions about images have become very familiar to us. The first is that images are violent: we often speak of being “bombarded by advertising,” and advertising evokes, in the first place, a stream of images. The second is that images of violence,

²⁹⁴ *Caché*, DVD: 0:36:23-0:37:10.

²⁹⁵ *Caché*, DVD: 1:24:14-1:25:19.

of the ceaseless violence breaking out all over the world, are omnipresent and, simultaneously or by turns, indecent, shocking, necessary, heartrending.²⁹⁶

In *Caché*, the “violence of the image” of the videotapes operates on an abstract and structural level as it intrudes into the home as an image of surveillance and does not contain any explicit violence.

In contrast, two specific instances to which the film builds up to show concrete and explicit “images of violence.” The first is the flashback/dream sequence in which the young Majid beheads a rooster with an axe (Fig. 33). The second is Majid’s suicide in his apartment (Fig.34). In both instances, the explicit on-screen violence is raw and unexpected, which leads to a tactile shock experience for the viewer. The unexpected outburst of violence has a physical effect on the recipient, a visceral quality of violence that is a recurring theme throughout Haneke’s oeuvre.



Fig. 33



Fig. 34

According to Nancy, violence has its own significance and therefore has no reference to any higher authority.²⁹⁷ This defines the link between violence and the image, and means that violence is understood as an image for itself in that it presents itself and its effect. In other words, violence makes present, as it is the case in the suicide

²⁹⁶ Jean Luc-Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham, 2005): 15.

²⁹⁷ Nancy 20.

scene, where Majid expresses his gratitude to Georges for being present (“I called you because I wanted you to be present”).²⁹⁸ For Nancy, the notion of imprinting a mark on somebody or something defines the relation between the image and violence: “The violent person wants to see the mark he makes on the thing or being he assaults, and violence consists precisely in imprinting such a mark. Even if the violence is self-destructive, as it is in the case of the suicide scene of *Caché*, the notion of imprinting a mark applies on a visual and narrative level. Majid wants Georges “to be present” and he wants to “make present” by “presenting himself” and his violent suicide, so he leaves his final mark. This image of violence imprints itself into Georges’s and the viewers’ minds in a last desperate but calculated act of self-destruction. It is an act of calculated projection that results in a violent and traumatizing image. In this sense, the image functions as a projectile in a combination of a perceived shock for the spectator and the self-destructive violence that projects and extends itself beyond its present moment.

²⁹⁸ *Caché*, DVD: 1:29:04.

The Concrete Image of Violence: Explicit Violence



Fig. 35

Majid's suicide scene stands in stark contrast to the subtlety of the opening sequence.²⁹⁹ Partly due to the slow rhythm and montage of the film in general, the excessive violence of the scene and the climactic surprise multiplies the shock experience for the audience and makes it tangible. Witnessing this violent act is so startling because the projected violence is doubled as well. It takes place on the structural as well as on the level of content: a traumatic image is created in the "present" realm of the film's narrative with the concrete intention of traumatizing Georges as well as the viewer. For Georges, this means living with his guilty conscience, emphasized by the last statement of Majid's son in their confrontation: "I wondered how it feels, a man's life on your conscience."³⁰⁰ For the audience, it means having a lasting image of violence imprinted

²⁹⁹ *Caché*, DVD: 1:24:14-1:25:19

³⁰⁰ *Caché*, DVD: 1:45:14.

on their mind, which is an act of violence in itself. The image as projectile operates in this instance as an exaggerated form of Benjaminian shock that is not just tangible in the abrupt dissociation from the image—as opposed to the opening sequence and also the ending, which invite contemplation because of their long duration—but, it is the immediacy and unexpectedness of the erupting violence that leaves the mark. When describing cinematic shock, Benjamin refers to the French author Georges Duhamel, and states:

Duhamel, der den Film haßt und von seiner Bedeutung nichts, aber manches von seiner Struktur begriffen hat, verzeichnet diesen Umstand mit der Notiz: “Ich kann schon nicht mehr denken, was ich denken will. Die beweglichen Bilder haben sich an den Platz meiner Gedanken gesetzt.” In der Tat wird der Assoziationsablauf dessen, der diese Bilder betrachtet, sofort durch ihre Veränderung unterbrochen. Darauf beruht die Chockwirkung des Films, die wie jede Chockwirkung durch gesteigerte Geistesgegenwart aufgefangen sein will.³⁰¹

Duhamel, who detests film and knows nothing of its significance, though something of its structure, notes this circumstance as follows: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.” The spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind.³⁰²

The structural insight that Benjamin attests to Duhamel’s observation applies to *Caché* as well. The inherent shock in the montage and the way that a certain sequence is framed by the images that precede and follow have a decisive influence on how the sequence is

³⁰¹ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 39.

³⁰² Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968): 238 (This passage is not translated in the newer English translation otherwise quoted here).

perceived. Association is the key word in this passage, and Haneke consciously plays with the repetition and recontextualization of several sequences, which leads to the blurred association and perception of actual, video, or memory images.

In the context of the suicide scene, Majid's incentive is self-destructive but directed and projected towards Georges's future. In this sense, the scene does not just transport a physical shock that is represented by the explicit violence of the scene and the structure of the montage, but additionally Flusser's notion of projection can be illustrated in an extreme but concrete example. Read in this way, the self-inflicted violence gives agency back to Majid's character; it works in this case as an ultimate punishment and raises the question of responsibility and guilt for Georges and the audience as bystanders and witnesses.

Adding to the context of the critical depiction of violence in Haneke's film and particularly *Caché*, Ipek A. Celik addresses notions of "Guilt and the History of Violence" in relation to the film's historical background and its implications of colonial violence and guilt in today's France. Starting with an analysis of *Caché*'s suicide scene, Celik focuses on the notion of (unmediated) presence that intensifies the violent force of the image for the spectator through the diegetic presence of Georges in the scene. The camera affirms this by situating the spectator alongside Georges in a similar static shot from a heightened position above and the suicide inverts the power dynamic between the two characters as it turns the alleged criminal (Majid) into the victim, and the formerly alleged victim (Georges) into the aggressor.³⁰³ In Celik's view, "the film's shift of focus, with the suicide scene, away from the resolution of the mystery accomplishes both a

³⁰³ See Ipek A. Celik, "I Wanted you to Be Present": Guilt and the History of Violence in Michael Haneke's *Caché*," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Fall 2010): 59/60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40962837>; also see Naqvi 29.

temporal and spatial extension of guilt and responsibility” that also extends to the audience.³⁰⁴ Celik reads the scene as a specific moment that confronts the (French) spectator with the repressed guilt of the historical context of the film: the October 1961 massacre in Paris. Yet Celik also recognizes the inherent and shocking violence of the image with which the audience is directly confronted: “The manner in which this suicide scene is performed and shot aims to violate both the protagonist’s and the spectator’s vision with an explosive accusation.”³⁰⁵ Apart from the recurring focus on the involvement of the spectator, Celik also addresses the critique of mediated images in Haneke’s films. *Caché* particularly reflects on how mediated images make an event and the personalities involved invisible.³⁰⁶ The ambiguity of the images in *Caché* and their reference to silencing historical events become meta-narratives and question the representative quality of images as well as their reception.³⁰⁷

Majid’s violent actions update the traumatic image that plays on the idea of presence in a doubled sense: On the one hand it marks the climax of Georges’s journey into the repressed images of his childhood past, and at the same time it confirms his character’s inability to confront his emotions and responsibility in the present. For the viewer, who is incorporated into the aesthetic and cinematic framework, the scene unfolds as a doubled shock in the suspenseful build-up and unexpectedness as well as for the violent excess that unfolds.

³⁰⁴ Celik 60.

³⁰⁵ Celik 60.

³⁰⁶ On the notion of mediated visibility in *Benny’s Video*, see Naqvi 22-23.

³⁰⁷ Celik 70.

The Abstract Violence of the Image: Video Tapes



Fig. 36



Fig. 37

In contrast to the expressive violence of the suicide scene, the duration and self-reflexive nature of the opening sequence invites contemplation and establishes itself with a subtle but penetrating force (Fig. 36). Nancy adds that both notions are inextricably interlinked: imagination and presence, inclusion and exclusion as well as the recurring theme of what is present and absent in the frame. In their duality, these concepts form a kind of necessary totality. The one cannot exist without the other:

The image must be *imagined*; that is to say, it must extract from its absence the unity of force that the thing merely at hand does not present. Imagination is not the faculty of presenting something in its absence; it is the force that draws the form of presence out of absence: that is to say, the force of “self presenting.” The resource necessary for this must itself be excessive.³⁰⁸

By intruding into the house and resulting in a paranoid reaction, the presence and the images of the videotapes transmit an abstract inherent violence that operates on a structural rather than a content level.³⁰⁹ The audience is included into the cinematic framework of surveillance as the film places the spectator in the same diegetic space as its characters: while the camera seems to be positioned outside observing the house

³⁰⁸ Nancy 22.

³⁰⁹ See Naqvi 18. On temporality in videotape. Past is experienced as a crisis of authenticity of the present.

façade in a wide angle shot, we are actually looking at the close-up of the TV screen inside the house which we are seeing from the outside. This establishes not only an ambiguous position but simultaneously operates on the inside and outside, and also reveals the manipulative power that tricks us into perceiving something as diegetically real that is in fact mediated. On the narrative level, the knowledge of being watched is reason enough for the Laurent family to feel violated.

Todd Herzog argues that most articles and reviews focus on the question of who is watching whom and why. Hence he examines the victims of surveillance and how this possibility of ubiquitous surveillance affects behavior and self-perception.³¹⁰ In film history, there is a long tradition of films that deal with notions of surveillance, spectatorship, and voyeurism that addresses and exposes different constellations of power, depending on who is looking or who is being looked at.³¹¹ As cinema is an inherently self-reflexive medium, the spectator is included in the network of gazes as well. Herzog claims that while there are multiple theories that focus on the gaze, the notion of “being looked at” did not receive the same attention.³¹² Consequently, he reads *Caché* as a film, which focuses on the subjects of surveillance in a post-private world. Moreover, Herzog argues that “rather than a search for who produced the tapes, the real

³¹⁰ See Herzog, “The Banality of Surveillance: Michael Haneke’s “*Caché*” and Life after the End of Privacy, in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Special Issue: Michael Haneke (2010): 25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24649795>

³¹¹ Examples include *Rear Window* (1954), *Lost Highway* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), *The End of Violence* (1997), *Brazil* (1985), *Blow-Up* (1966), *Blow-Out* (1981), *The Conversation* (1974), *Psycho* (1960), *Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (1960) et. al. Herzog argues that the surveillance topic is present from the inception of film as the POV shot enabled looking through “the hole in the fence” or the wall. See Herzog 26.

³¹² Several authors focusing on film-audience relations are mentioned: David Sorfa: Complicity and guilt evoked in audience; Robert von Dassanowsky: No safety net for audience; Jonathan Thomas: revitalizing spectatorship as a pensive enterprise; Gail Hart (compares to Schiller): both promote a “didactic aesthetic” that manipulates audience into reflection of their own spectatorial position; Roy Grundmann: Viewers as passive witnesses that correspond with the hopelessness of the film; Mattias Frey: transformations of perspective and digital culture. See Herzog 27.

search in *Caché* [...] is turned around: the tapes become texts in search of an authorial agent.”³¹³ In this view, Georges is practicing a kind of self-surveillance. The tapes enable him to see himself from the outside and therefore activate associations of the past that drive the narrative.

Because of their ambiguity and simultaneity, the videotapes manage to penetrate the fortified façade of the house as a projectile and are simultaneously able to be present in multiple spaces and times. This ambiguous presence is what I would like to categorize as the abstract violence of the image. The presence of the image unfolds its full potential in a combination of projection and imagination while the long duration of the static sequence invites contemplation. It engages the viewers’ imagination to enhance what is purposely hidden in and outside of the frame. At the end of *Caché*, we are left with more questions than answers, but some of the answers might just be hidden in our own imagination.

Arne Koch adds to this context in his discussion of multiple films by Haneke as examples of the function and challenge to Johan Huizinga’s notion of *homo ludens*.³¹⁴ In “(Virtual) Reality Games: Michael Haneke as Auteur and Stalker,” Koch argues that Haneke’s films examine the function of play and games as a gray area between the virtual and the real, which thereby can alter the viewers’ perceived reality through filmic estimations of the world as its own hyperreality.³¹⁵ Koch’s reference to Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality and its relation to Haneke’s films is indebted to the notion that

³¹³ Herzog 30.

³¹⁴ Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938) discusses the notion of play as a constitutional element of civilization and society. For Huizinga, the notion of play is a biological and cultural phenomenon in societies that he approaches historically. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949) ix.

³¹⁵ See Arne Koch, “(Virtual) Reality Games: Michael Haneke as Auteur and Stalker,” in *KulturPoetik*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010): 87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40621808>

their diegetic reality is usually highly mediated and that this has consequences for the characters and the spectators alike. This is particularly interesting in the connection between mediated reality and the image. Drawing on Haneke himself, who said that “the world is not much more than its own mediated image,” Koch makes the conclusion that while there is a reality outside of the mediated sphere—even if not graspable—Baudrillard’s “closed system” of simulacra and hyperreality translates real people into news images without their awareness that this mediated reality exists as real even after the “evening news” are over.³¹⁶ I would like to stress the relationship between spectator and film, which is emphasized here: while Koch is interested in the implications of Huizinga’s game theory for Haneke’s oeuvre, he clearly reads him as a filmmaker who challenges the spectator’s understanding and perception of reality.³¹⁷ Furthermore and supporting my claim to establish the moving image as a “projectile,” Koch reads the characters in Haneke’s films as “projection surfaces” that engage the viewer’s imagination and expectations.³¹⁸ In that sense, the projective force of the images does not just relate to the characters themselves, but also extend to the spectator. By filling in the purposely-placed blanks, the film engages the viewer and transcends traditional “thriller” tropes by consciously denying any resolution to the mystery of who sent the tapes. Additionally important for the context of violence that I would like to address in *Caché* is Haneke’s depiction of violence in the media. The inclusion of the spectator in its voyeuristic framework challenges viewers towards a more conscious and critical

³¹⁶ Koch 90/91.

³¹⁷ Koch 87/88.

³¹⁸ Koch 90/94.

approach towards mediated images.³¹⁹ In this sense, Haneke's work is a mirror for the audience to reflect on their own position in relation to the screen and its images, to reassert their responsibility from passive image consumers to active image producers, as it leaves crucial questions open and reinforces further ambiguity that invites reflection.³²⁰ Moreover, this activation of the spectator falls into the Brechtian tradition of alienation in the epic theater that Walter Benjamin transferred to the capabilities of the cinema.³²¹

The Image as Projectile

Haneke expressed in multiple interviews that he is not interested in giving a clear solution to the origin of the tapes and to the film in general.³²² While *Caché* seems to operate in the genre of a thriller and a classical "whodunit" on the narrative level (especially on first viewing), the ambiguous video images complicate any genre specifications and enable causalities that motivate the past and the future of the narrative simultaneously.³²³ On the one hand they evoke repressed memories of Georges' childhood and on the other they provoke (re)actions that ultimately end in a new traumatic image: Majid's suicide.³²⁴ Eventually, the question of who really sent the tapes becomes secondary (as we can just speculate) and leaves room for multiple interpretations that coexist at the same time.

Along the lines of Wheatley's distinction between different critical responses that *Caché* has triggered, I want to focus on the interrelationship between reality, the media,

³¹⁹ Koch 95.

³²⁰ Koch 96/97.

³²¹ For a detailed discussion of Haneke's "Wirkungsästhetik," which transcends the Brechtian alienation, see Jörg Metelmann, *Zur Kritik der Kino-Gewalt – Die Filme von Michael Haneke* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2003): 153-180

³²² Porton and Haneke 50.

³²³ Wheatley 18-38.

³²⁴ Celik 71-72.

and its audience and read *Caché* as a self-reflexive cinematic discourse that incorporates its viewers by consciously manipulating audience expectations and defying cinematic conventions. Furthermore, the conscious choice of digital HD-video and the blurring of different layers of images, deny the clear distinction between them and establish the video image as its own hyperreality.³²⁵ The associative power that images are able to evoke is a central theme in *Caché* and the film consciously relates this to its characters and spectators alike. Catherine Wheatley summarizes the multiple possible perspectives of the spectator accordingly:

Where and when are these images occurring when we see them – or put otherwise, where and when are we watching them from? Are we supposedly staring down the camera with Haneke’s production team? With the shadowy cameraman as he films Anne and Georges’ comings and goings? Are we sitting next to the protagonists on their sofa, watching alongside them? Perhaps we occupy each of these positions in turn, perhaps a place beyond them all.³²⁶

The re-contextualization of images and the change of signification that the images can induce are based on their framing and context. Haneke applies this method throughout the film. It is the case in the opening shot and also in the final shot of the film, which both provide a frame of ambiguous images that escape clear interpretations. The camera takes a specific heightened position that the viewer associates with the surveillance image from the beginning.³²⁷ As a consequence, the following images are destabilized in their relation to the diegetic reality, which leads the audience to question the validity and source of the medium. Are we looking at Haneke’s film? Anonymous

³²⁵ See Naqvi 19. Audience forced into role of voyeur and witness. See also Koch 87-88. Haneke as filmmaker that challenges spectator’s understanding and perception of reality.

³²⁶ Wheatley. 15. See Wheatley 22 for an examination of Haneke’s awareness and appropriation of the Thriller genre in the context of *Caché*.

³²⁷ See Naqvi 17-18.

video footage? Flashbacks of Georges's dreams and memories? TV-images? In any case, the status of the images remains ambiguous; specifically when the film implements static wide shots that resemble the opening sequence. The image exposes itself to be something other than the audience might have taken it to be, and in the process, it creates its own simulated hyperreality.

Jonathan Thomas recognizes an "epistemological shock" in the moment the spectator realizes that the initial opening image is, in fact, not unfolding in real time in the diegesis of the film, but pre-recorded video material.³²⁸ This opens up a multitude of questions for the spectator concerning surveillance and notions of time in their relation to past and future. Additionally, Thomas differentiates several different types of images in *Caché*: first, images of the dramatic present of the diegesis (the film); second, pre-recorded video (the tapes); third, television images of the news media and pre- and post-production images of Georges' talk show; and lastly, images that are subjectively related to Georges' character, such as those of his dreams, flashbacks, and fantasies. Thomas claims that Haneke's choice to shoot all of these different images in digital HD makes the effective distinction between them impossible, as there is no difference in the quality and composition of the images, therefore supporting the notion of indistinguishability in hyperreality that has been mentioned before.³²⁹

³²⁸ See Jonathan Thomas, "Michael Haneke's New(s) Images," in *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Fall 2008): 81.

³²⁹ The grain of 8mm film or VHS video footage would be easier to distinguish for that matter.

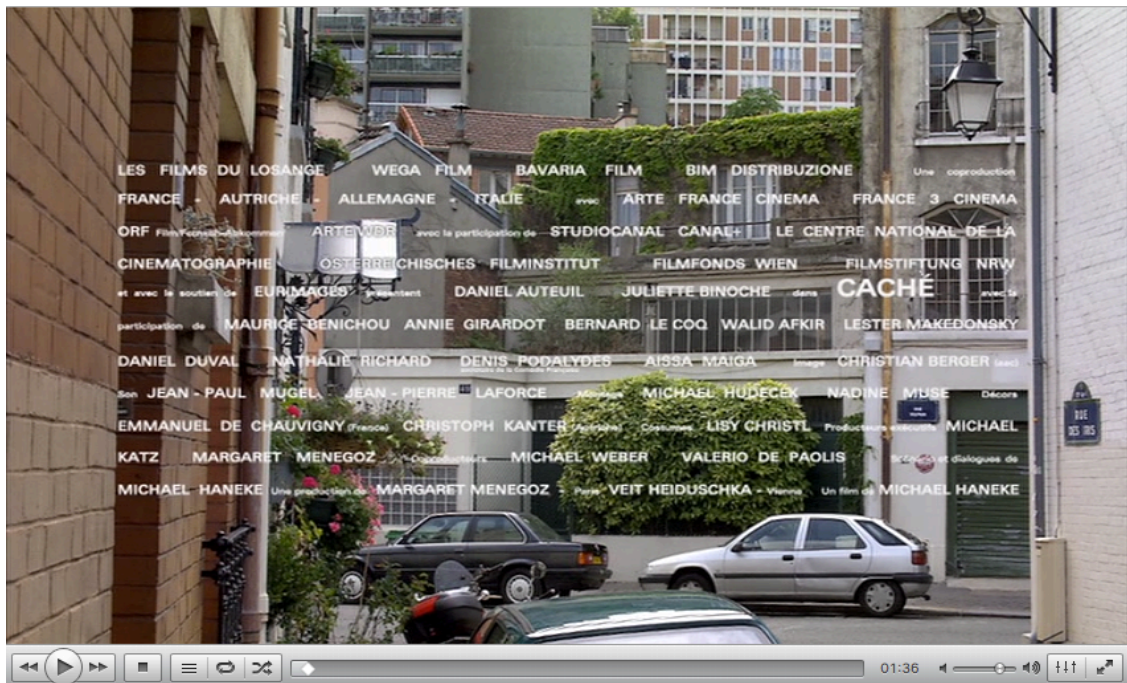


Fig. 38

Caché opens with a static wide shot of a Parisian side street and several apartment buildings with one particular house in the center of the frame. The credits and the title of the film inscribe itself in white letters on the image and the film's title, *Caché*, is slightly emphasized in large, bold letters in the text pattern and stands out from rest of the credits (Fig. 38). Therefore it is not "hidden" in the pattern and the title sequence already signifies an inversion of its meaning. While the emphasis of *Caché* as the title makes sense in terms of introducing the film, it is the only word in the text credits that truly stands out and is therefore not 'hidden' among the rest of the credits. This reads as an early hint towards the ambiguity of the interplay between what is and what is *not* seen, what is inside and outside, what is repressed and present.³³⁰ Wheatley argues that the opening sequence plays with different layers of filmed reality and therefore also time, which is both established as central theme of the film:

³³⁰ See Naqvi 15.

At least four different kinds of films are intermingled here, then: ‘A film by Michael Haneke’, which has credits running across it; the static diegetic tape filmed by an unknown cameraman and featuring diegetic background sounds; the fluid, continuous image of Georges crossing the street, the background sound running in tandem with a conversation with his wife (her distant, muffled voice issues from an off-screen space, from its direction and her command to come inside we assume she is standing in the house, while George’s is much clearer, locating us nearer to him); and the televisual image, playing, rewinding, replaying on the Laurents’ screen while we watch along with them, listening to their voices debate the nature of the tape – once more, the clarity of these voices and their quality of directionlessness suggests we are ‘located’ in close proximity.³³¹

In its static simplicity, the opening sequence manages to disorient the spectator to prompt an active effort to make sense of what is seen in the image. The vanishing point of the frame highlights the fortified house with multiple floors in the center. The second and third floor windows are slightly obscured, the first covered by a big green bush, the second by opaque windows, thereby adding to the notion of something being “hidden” on the visual level from the very beginning.³³² The name of the street on the wall of the building to the right reads: “Rue des Iris,” which emphasizes the importance of seeing, and the background consists of several high-rise buildings from the 70s, clearly establishing modern day Paris as the setting. When the camera finally reveals that we are looking at the same video image as the main characters, while they are commenting on it via voice-over on the TV-screen of their living room, the status of the image is radically questioned and modified.

Following Fatima Naqvi’s perspective, Haneke’s camera frequently utilizes the specific “aerial view” (“Blick von oben”), which simulates a neutral perspective of

³³¹ Wheatley 14.

³³² Jonathan Thomas, “Michael Haneke’s New(s) Images,” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Fall 2008): 80.

observation that actively involves the spectator.³³³ *Caché*'s opening sequence is one example in which this perspective is applied. It creates multiple authorial positions that destabilize the image and it also enables multiple interpretations to exist simultaneously. For Naqvi, this signifies the “epic modernity” (*epische Modernität*) in Haneke's oeuvre, which functions—in reference to Benjamin—as a counter-initiative to the disappearance of the narrator in modernity.³³⁴ It is in particular the ability to “give advice” (“um Rat wissen”) that is revived in Haneke's epic modernity. For that matter, Naqvi attributes to Haneke's films the moral desire to reinstate the lost humanism of modernity by way of taking an authorial narrative position that she equates with the epic perspective of the camera from above.³³⁵

In addition to this specific heightened camera position, the terminological differentiation between *cadre* and *cache* becomes essential for the description of the signifying levels of the opening sequence and makes the self-reflexive mode of *Caché* visible from the very beginning. According to Andre Bazin, ‘cache’ stands for the opposite of the cinematic idiom ‘cadre’ in French. While ‘cadre’ is used to talk about what is being shown or seen inside of the frame, ‘cache’ defines the diegetic outside of the frame, everything that is off-screen but still has influence on the diegetic ‘reality’ of the film.³³⁶ Similarly to the multiple meanings and self-referential relations that are

³³³ See Fatima Naqvi, *Trügerische Vertrautheit* (Wien, Synema, 2010), 16.

³³⁴ See Naqvi 16/24/25.

³³⁵ Naqvi 29.

³³⁶ André Bazin, *What is Cinema ?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967): 105. The distinction between “le champ” (inside the frame) and “le hors-champ” (outside the frame) is used synonymously and is more common in French film terminology today. “Le cadre, c’est le rectangle qui délimite l’image au cinéma. À l’intérieur de ce rectangle, s’inscrit l’image : c’est **le champ**. À l’extérieur, le noir de la salle: c’est **le hors-champ**. Le premier *inclut* une partie de la perception, tandis que le second en *exclut*.” See Cécile Paturel, “Le cadre et le fonctions du cadre,” in *Transmettre le Cinema*. <http://www.transmettrelecinema.com/video/le-cadre-et-les-fonctions-du-cadre/>

established in these very first minutes of the film, the protagonists Georges and Anne Laurent are introduced from off-screen via voice-over, *cachés*.³³⁷ On first view, this has an alienating effect, as their voices are disembodied until the next cut—which switches time and perspective—and their appearance on the street.³³⁸

Here, the camera takes a new position around the corner to the left of the house's entrance, and we see both Georges and Anne exit the front door of the house, which is covered by another gate. The change of light indicates it is now dusk, as opposed to the dawn from the image before. The camera slowly pans and follows Georges as he opens the gate and goes out to the street, trying to find the vantage point of the previous shot, looking off and commenting on screen: "He must have been there."³³⁹ Anne, who never really left the entrance of the house, asks Georges to come back inside immediately ("Rentre!") as if she is scared of the dangers from outside on the city's streets.³⁴⁰ Georges returns into the house and as the door shuts there is a cut back to the previous video image filling the entirety of the frame. The voice-over, which can now be identified as Anne's, resumes: "The tape goes on for two hours like that..."³⁴¹

This crucial montage sequence that switches from the video image to the film image and back in two cuts establishes the notion of the unstable image, which in consequence poses a constant challenge to the audience. The relation to unwanted observation and surveillance adds to the uncanny and intrusive quality of the video image and establishes the mistrust of what is seen through the mediated filter of images. That

³³⁷ *Caché* (Culver City: Sony Classics, 2005) DVD: 0:02:20.

³³⁸ *Caché*, DVD: 0:03:45.

³³⁹ *Caché*, DVD: 0:03:15.

³⁴⁰ *Caché*, DVD: 0:03:20.

³⁴¹ *Caché*, DVD: 0:04:01.

vantage point of the mysterious video camera is placed in the ‘Rue des Iris,’ alludes to the aperture of the human as well as the camera-eye, which underlines the self-reflexive mode in which the film operates and highlights the importance of seeing (or not seeing) what is presented in mediated reality on screens.³⁴²

The decision to zoom in and fill the entire frame with images that the audience as well as the film characters view at the same time, transfers the characters into the same ontological hidden space as the audience and vice versa (in front of and in relation to the screen). As the audience is made aware that the source of the image is not to be trusted, all following static sequences (whether stemming from a videotape or not), which resemble the shot from the beginning, connote doubt, instability, threat, and danger. *Caché* consciously plays with the repetition of the same images, but their connotative codes are reestablished or re-composed throughout the film. As the audience gathers more context and information about the narrative, their initial connotation changes.



Fig. 39



Fig. 40

³⁴² In an interview with Richard Porton about “Collective Guilt and Individual Responsibility” in the magazine Cineaste, Haneke jokingly refers to Godard when he is asked about the role of film and manipulation: “My perspective on that, my article of faith, is that I’ve adapted Godard’s observation to read, “Film is a lie at twenty-four frames per second in the service of truth.” (laughs) Or a lie with the possibility of being in the service of truth. Film is an artificial construct. It pretends to reconstruct reality. *Caché*, DVD: 0:03:12. “Rue des Iris” and the house actually exist in Paris and the scene was shot on location. But it doesn’t do that – it’s a manipulative form. It’s a lie that can reveal the truth. But if a film isn’t a work of art, it’s just complicit with the process of manipulation.” See Porton and Haneke 50.

In addition to the opening sequence, this happens in several other instances. For instance when we see Georges as the host of his TV show for the first time. The film cuts from a static wide shot of the Laurent's house by night to Georges delivering his epilogue directly into the camera as if we were watching his show on a TV screen (Fig. 40). As the camera slowly zooms out from a medium single shot to a wide shot that reveals the other guests of the show, we are able to hear the voice of the director who tells the guests and Georges to remain in their chairs while the credits roll. Instead of seeing the credits of the show, the camera remains on the scene and we see a production assistant approaching Georges with a phone. While still on the same long take, the camera pans to the right and follows Georges behind the studio set, thereby seamlessly blending the diegetic reality of Georges's TV show with the diegesis of *Caché*. Without any cut, the image blends from TV image to film image and exposes the artificiality of the studio setting (Fig. 41). The slow zoom outwards and the camera pan to the right redefine the initial connotation as TV image, therefore exposing the image as something different as initially expected. The opening shot of the film is supposed to be the establishing shot of the narrative diegesis of *Caché*, but turns out to be a video image on a TV-screen; in this example, it is a TV-image that turns out to be an image of the narrative diegesis. The same movement is inverted this time, further destabilizing the status and definition of the image.³⁴³ Thus, the diegetic reality is blurred and the viewer is challenged to categorize the images by the way they are framed or in relation to the preceding or following images (either through montage or camera movement such as zooms, pans). In this sense, the visual grammar at work is exposed in the montage and the images that precede or follow each new image.

³⁴³ *Caché*, DVD: 0:13:22

Paying close attention to the film's visual syntax is crucial when trying to specify the *modus operandi* of the current frame—but often this is not if at all possible.

Ara Osterweil reads *Caché* in this context, as an allegory, which exposes the dilemmas of post-colonial France, while Haneke “sets the stage for a taut thriller that pivots upon the return of the barely repressed.”³⁴⁴ Besides the political allegorical reading of Georges and Majid's relationship as an implicit critique of the unresolved heritage of colonialism in French and Western societies, Osterweil emphasizes Haneke's use of reality-blurring techniques in *Caché* as a visual device in his work, which engages the audience and exposes the materiality and artificiality of the image. By breaking the fourth wall, especially during sequences when images are rewound or fast-forwarded, the vulnerability of the image to constant and real-time manipulation is exposed.³⁴⁵ Additionally, she focuses on the omnipresence of screens in Haneke's films and emphasizes the presence of the TV-screen in the Laurents' home as a mediator of Middle-East news coverage that makes its way into the living room of the fortified house. While George is able to control the TV-news images in his living room as well as in the editing room of his own TV-production office, he has no authority over the images of the surveillance tapes or of the repressed memories they evoke.³⁴⁶

The instability of the image triggers multiple interesting questions that relate to our perception of mediated reality: to what extent are images able to let us associate freely and how do they let us create narratives around them? To what extent do they manipulate our sense of reality through montage and manipulation techniques? How are

³⁴⁴ Ara Osterweil, “Caché,” in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No.4 (Summer 2006), 39.

³⁴⁵ Osterweil 35.

³⁴⁶ Osterweil 38.

they connected to trauma and violence? Do images function as substitutions for human memory or do they unconsciously produce associations that the subject has no control of? Is there an inherent violent force in all images, especially in the technical images of audiovisual media such as TV, video, and film? While *Caché* definitely raises more questions than it answers, I will attempt to answer some of the questions raised by establishing the notion of the “image as projectile” in relation to how *Caché* utilizes and addresses different forms of mediated violence.³⁴⁷

Walter Benjamin distinguishes the effect of the artwork and the image in relation to their ability to invite contemplation and association.³⁴⁸ Similarly, *Caché* experiments with the duration and movement of images, which allows different levels of association and contemplation for the protagonists as well as the audience. Haneke utilizes the repetition of the same or seemingly similar images and (re)contextualizes them by framing them differently. This results in engaging the spectators—through alienation or shock—and further destabilizes the image.³⁴⁹ Benjamin situates the origins of filmic shock experience in the artworks of Dada: “Aus einem lockenden Augenschein oder

³⁴⁷ In addition to the self-reflexive elements *Caché* carries in its title already, it also relates to the film’s narrative level of course. Read in reference to Georges’ traumatic childhood experience and his guilty conscience of being responsible for Majid’s ejection from his family, ‘hidden’ also relates to this memory, which was buried in Georges’ consciousness until the videotapes and drawings evoked associations of this repressed past. Georges is suspicious when they receive the video with the footage of his parents’ house in the countryside: he immediately associates “the house that he grew up in” with the experience with Majid. The drawings depict the scenes that were decisive for Majid’s departure: the decapitated rooster and the kid coughing up blood.

³⁴⁸ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 38. “Versedung” (sinking in or immersing oneself) in traditional images or poetry is replaced by “Ablenkung” (distraction) and shock through montage and mise-en-scène.

³⁴⁹ See Porton/Haneke 51. Haneke: “Every serious form of art sees the receiver as a partner in the undertaking. In fact, that’s one of the preconditions of humanistic thought. In cinema, this fact, which should be self-evident, has been overlooked and replaced by an emphasis on the commercial aspects of the medium.” A fact that already Benjamin realizes 100 years earlier when comparing film to the artworks of Dada when he states that the “merkantile Verwertbarkeit” (market value) would be a guiding principle for its production. See Benjamin 37-38.

einem überredenden Klanggebilde wurde das Kunstwerk bei den Dadaisten zu einem Geschoss. Es stieß dem Betrachter zu. Es gewann eine taktile Qualität.”³⁵⁰

The shock is related to the tactile quality that these artworks consciously provoke in the viewer. Although the Dadaists worked across a range of different media (literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, photography, and performance), they anticipated filmic elements in their artworks.³⁵¹ This was the first time that art and (technical) images were created with the purpose not to represent, but rather to confuse and provoke, to go as far as to result in a physical reaction: to produce a shocking and tactile element that is present and transported to the recipient. This is what Benjamin understands as “Geschoss,” which invokes a penetrating force that is directed from the image outwards and therefore relates to the Flusserian notion of “Entwurf” (to project/to draft).³⁵² In Flusser’s view, the vector of signification of the technical image is not directed inwards, (a deeper meaning or truth in the image) but outwards. Therefore, it possesses an inherently projective quality that is able to give the subject, the *agency* (*Handlungsspielraum*) to project (*entwerfen*) the future and to actively make present.³⁵³

The force of the projectile relates to the shock experience and passive reception of the spectator, and on the other hand, the ability to project enables active reception or even participation. In other words, Flusser’s notion of projection is invested in giving agency back to the subject by reading technical images as projects that enable one to actively

³⁵⁰ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 38. In English: “From an alluring visual composition or an enchanting fabric of sound, the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile quality.” Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, 39 (English)

³⁵¹ Benjamin 37.

³⁵² Benjamin 38.

³⁵³ See Florian Rötzer, “Project,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox* 331; Daniel Irrgang, “To Project/To Draft,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 333.

choose from a range of possible actions.³⁵⁴ In his model of cultural history that compresses and distinguishes historical paradigms of images and text, the computer and the evolution of technical images—since the invention of the photographic apparatus—enabled the simulation of complex realities through higher levels of abstraction to an extent where dots and pixels are interchangeable in the zero-dimensionality of binary code. As a consequence of this rising level of abstraction, the level of alienation from experience and the concrete world has increased, according to Flusser. However, he suggests the notion of projection is the subject's opportunity to counter this alienation by using techno-imagination and technical images in order to project or to draft the future.³⁵⁵ Deciphering technical images for what they really are—images based on texts and programs—and not falling into the “pagan” trap of reading them as traditional images, signifies the opportunity to regain agency on behalf of the subject and positively counters perspectives along the lines of Jean Baudrillard, who reads projections as simulations that ultimately lose their referent and become indistinguishable.³⁵⁶ Flusser on the other hand understands this moment as a chance to actively intervene; however, in order to do that, a new criticism of images has to be learned and developed.³⁵⁷ He summarizes this in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985):

To Envision: If technical images are actually mosaics and not really surfaces, how can we regard them as pictures? By way of the capacity we are currently gaining of seeing something solid in the most abstract things (particles). This does require us to stop trying to tell real from fictional and concern ourselves with the difference between concrete and abstract.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 331-333.

³⁵⁵ See Yuk Hui, “Technical Imagination,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 389.

³⁵⁶ See Daniel Irrgang, “To Project/To Draft,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 332.

³⁵⁷ See Roland Meyer, “Image Criticism,” in *Flusseriana - An Intellectual Toolbox*, 226.

To Signify: What do technical images, these calculated and computed mosaics, actually mean? They are models that give form to a world and a consciousness that has disintegrated; they are meant to “inform” that world. Their vector of signification is therefore the reverse of that of earlier images: they don’t receive their meaning from outside but rather project meaning outward. They lend meaning to the absurd.

To Interact: How do technical images function as models? They function by means of feedback between themselves and their receivers. People pattern their behavior according to the images, and the images pick up on their behavior to function better and better as models.”³⁵⁸

In this interaction with the image, the ability of the subject to project and become active stands out. Flusser conforms to Benjamin’s notion of shock in that the meaning of the technical image is directed outwards and is therefore formed in the interplay with the recipient. Additionally, the feedback loop between images and recipients has a decisive influence on patterns of behavior, while the previously mentioned notion of projection is able to actively open up this space of action.

So how does all this relate to *Caché*? While Georges and Haneke’s characters in general do not seem to learn from their behavior in the course of the narrative, it particularly the video image that have a programming function of Georges. As shown, the images of the videotapes in *Caché* have an ambivalent and simultaneous relation to space and time. The first tape of the façade of the house represents a recorded past, while it also functions as the present in the establishing minutes of the film. It simultaneously positions the audience on the outside (on the visual level) and on the inside of the very same house (on the auditive level through the voice-over). This simultaneity of time and space supports the notion that the narrative is reflected and represented on the visual level

³⁵⁸ Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 170.

and it causes a paranoid reaction from the Laurent family and particularly Georges, which motivates the narrative and the search for the origin of the tapes.



Fig. 41



Fig. 42

Also the following tapes and drawings support the simultaneity of time and point towards both past and future. They can be read as memories of the past as well as projections that are directed towards the future and motivate the actions of Georges.³⁵⁹ For example, the third videotape that shows a point of view sequence of a car driving towards his childhood and parents' home evokes traumatic associations to the past for Georges as well as motivates him to drive there to visit his mother and inquire about Majid.³⁶⁰ As the next cut after this sequence shows George having a conversation at the estate of his mother, the image of the videotape can be read twofold in this instance (Fig. 42). George starts playing the tape during the dinner with their friends. Against the belief that video would be shown again at their house, it shows a rainy day on a rural street leading to the estate of Georges' parents (Fig. 41). On the one hand, the POV relates to the mysterious stalker, on the other, this driving sequence also represents Georges' movement towards his parents' house, as we see him waiting in his mother's bedroom

³⁵⁹ Celik 71.

³⁶⁰ All of these shots could be filmed as POV-sequences. Haneke forces the viewer to occupy the space of the outside observer. Despite the fact that the viewer therefore inherits an ambivalent and insecure perspective, the remarkable thing is, that these seemingly 'normal' every-day images that people are confronted with frequently when they would come home from work etc. receive a different and violent quality when recorded and shown/framed in a different context.

after the very next cut.³⁶¹ The framing of the preceding and following images to this sequence enables to read Georges in the same driver's seat as the mysterious creator of the videotapes, therefore quite literally establishing him as the "driving force" of the narrative. The images of the videotape motivate him to make those decisions and therefore give agency to his character, which opens up a range of possible interactions with which we clearly see him struggle.³⁶² This is especially true in the driving sequences that place Georges in the same position as the point of view of the unknown camera. The image has a double connotation that works in the realm of the videotapes and the film's diegesis simultaneously.

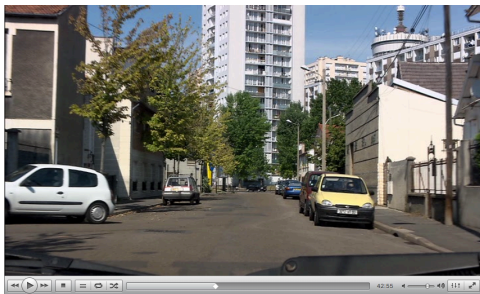


Fig. 43



Fig. 44

The fourth videotape portrays a car driving in the Parisian suburbs and the rundown hallway of an apartment building (Fig. 43 & 44). Both are also directions that Georges will take shortly after. In order to find any clue about the location of the hallway building in Paris, Anne and Georges engage in an exercise of frame-to-frame video analysis as they rewind and pause the tape. Eventually they manage to recognize a street sign ('Avenue Lenin') and the area in which it located. It is this recurring moment of

³⁶¹ *Caché*, DVD: 0:33:10.

³⁶² Subtle inquiry about Majid with his mother. He is not pushing further when she tries to find out more details. Before going to Majid's apartment Georges is having a coffee in a small shop and seems hesitant. See *Caché*, DVD: 0:33:30; 0:58:27.

recognition that motivates Georges to investigate the street and building on his own, which finally brings him to Majid's apartment and sets the events in motion that end in the tragic confrontations and finally Majid's suicide. Also the preceding tapes had these moments of recognition that had both Laurent's engage in analyzing the video. In the first tape it is the moment of self-recognition that adds to the uncanny quality of surveillance when both of them recognize themselves when leaving the house to go to work. In the second tape, it is Georges returning from work and entering the house that makes them stop the tape. In both instances and in the difference between day and night this establishes the notion of surveillance but at the same time adds a specific personal quality. In the third tape the moment of recognition does not shift to a human subject, but to an object that is associated with the trauma of the past: George's parents house. In the fourth tape the moment of recognition—the street sign of Avenue Lenin—seemingly points into the unknown. Nevertheless Georges takes it as a motivation to investigate and follow the driving traces of the video as he did before when visiting his mother at their estate.

In this sense, the images of the videotapes function as projectiles or projections in the Flusserian sense as they serve as models that foreshadow and motivate Georges' behavior. The feedback loop between recipient and image is established and transforms with every tape. The initial shock consists in the notion that meaning is directed outward from the image of the videotape and created in interplay with George and the audience. While the first two tapes establish the perception of surveillance, the following tapes three and four add calls to action, not just by foreshadowing, but rather by representing the path that Georges is going to take in order to confront his past wrongdoings.

The fifth tape, which shows Georges and Majid's first confrontation in Majid's apartment, adds another layer to uncovering Georges's lies and therefore contributes to the reversal of the victim/aggressor dynamic between Majid and Georges. Georges denies having met Majid when his wife Anne asks him about his trip to the suburbs, but when she finds the fifth tape—which has also been sent to Georges' boss at his TV channel—Georges' lies are exposed as she witnesses his aggressive behavior towards Majid. Even though this leads to Georges' revealing that Majid's parents worked for his parents and they eventually were killed in the FLN demonstrations, he still keeps the details about his sabotage of Majid's planned adoption to himself. It is not before Majid's suicide and its shocking, violent and traumatic image, that Georges reveals his involvement in and responsibility for Majid's ejection from his family to his wife. The progression of images in the videotapes is therefore closely related to Georges' journey into his repressed past. While opening up to his wife shows progression in his character in terms of their relationship, the *mise-en scene* and his following reaction suggest otherwise. Sitting in the darkness of his bedroom—in an extreme reversal of the exterior of the opening shot—he closes the curtains, takes two sleeping pills (“deux cachets”) and lies down to sleep (Fig. 45).³⁶³ The desire to conceal his own past is strongly represented in his environment and amplifies the claim that the exterior setting is closely connected to the inner unconscious workings of his character.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ *Caché*, DVD: 1:48:26.

³⁶⁴ See Naqvi 16.



Fig. 45

In conclusion, this leads back to the initial question whether a violent force is inherent in the (audiovisual) image. As could be shown, the illustrative power of Michael Haneke's images prove that a violent force is present, whether it is mimetic and actually visually displaying an "image of violence," or not. This means that not just the suicide scene has a self-manifesting violent force through the shock effect it shows; but also the videotapes have an inherent violent quality, even though on a more abstract level. Although violence, truth, and the image are fundamentally ambivalent terms according to Nancy, the moment of self-manifestation and the 'self-showing act' that is realized in the image through the interplay of image and imagination, inside and outside, *cadre* and *caché*, ties all of them together. The feedback loop between the image and imagination is precisely why these seemingly non-related images are disturbing for the family as well as for the viewer. The fusion between the inside and the outside as well as the image and the

imagination produces the violent force of the image. It is a unity of presence and absence that leads to the 'self-presenting' violence at work in *Caché*.

Conclusion

Reading the 20th century as an era of simulation shows that there has been a historical connection between tendencies of simulation and the invention of audiovisual media technologies that enabled the increasingly “photo-realistic” reproduction of our material reality. Since it was possible to permanently process and fix images in the photographic process (since 1839 by John F. W. Herschel), the tendency to recreate and reproduce reality not just in artworks but also in common applications became increasingly popular and entered the public imagination. Nevertheless it was writers like Villiers de l’Isle-Adam that fused the fascination with Edison’s real inventions with the fantastical imagination of the preceding romantic and symbolist literary periods. This interplay and feedback loop between reality and literary imagination created the first female android in literature, “Hadaly,” the novel’s *Tomorrow’s Eve*. A new media technological dawn was on the horizon in the outgoing 19th century, with the rise of the mechanical machines and media technological apparatuses of the industrial age and the beginning of modernity.

Using the theoretical reflections introduced in the first chapter as a springboard, I argued that the invention of media technologies such as photography and film enabled a feedback loop between literary reflection and the production of (and in) artworks. They create a reciprocal interplay between apparatus and operator and result in the simulative tendency to replace original sources with mechanically—and later codified, programmed and digital—copies. As I showed by focusing on the mechanical and mediated reproduction of the android Hadaly in Alicia Clary’s image, Villier’s *Tomorrow’s Eve* demonstrates that the simulacrum remains in a mimetic category as the effort to replace or even overcome the original is clearly present. Nevertheless the original reference never

really gets replaced or erased, with the exception of the short moment towards the end in which Lord Ewald takes the android for the “real” Alicia. Narratively and stylistically, I argued that the effort to simulate, mediate and extrapolate on existing media technologies as phonographic, photographic and cinematic cameras entered the narrative style and structure of the novel by simulating the diffuse voices and noises of Edison’s numerous inventions and machines. Following Benjamin, and consequently also Baudrillard, the distinction between original image (Bild) and copy (Abbild) remains intact, which defines *l’Eve Future* as a simulacrum of the first order, the simulacra of *imitation* in the pre-industrial period. Nevertheless the novel has a tendency towards blurring the original and copied reference and distorts reality, but it remains limited to the boundaries of the literary text.

In cinema, the imagined replacement of the original by a mirrored proliferation of copies can be achieved on another level due to the abilities of reproducibility, fragmentation and shock inherent in its technology. The ubiquitous need and consumption of digitally manipulated images today further influences and potentially changes the way human perception is organized. This changes in the medium of film and TV as could be shown in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Welt am Draht* as well as Michael Haneke’s *Caché*.

Cinematic images are an audiovisual representation of reality, which are able to change perception patterns and even function as a field of experimentation for new experiences that could reorganize human’s perceptual apparatus. Benjamin relates this to the shock experience that is primarily tied to montage techniques in cinema. Today, this distinction can be applied to the two styles of film production in mainstream and

independent cinema. While mainstream productions work with overwhelming camera movement and fast paced edits—and therefore are related to shock—many indie or art films work with static and/or long takes that invite contemplation and immersion. They engage the viewer in a different and more participatory way, as opposed to being distractive and overwhelming (which has its own appeal in a more escapist mode of perception).

Shock experiences in film externalize the modern mode of perception and make it visible on the screen. They are therefore a reflection and projection of society at the same time. We can refer to Benjamin; he mentions the artificial element in the creation of the “star persona,” which has a simulative tendency in that it establishes or replaces an image that is engineered to be perceived as “authentic.” This is precisely the same reproduction process that is the primary motivation in Villiers’ novel. The actress Alicia-Clary is reproduced via photo and film technologies, which culminates in her artificial reproduction—the android “Hadaly”— and is an idealistic example of the power of reproduced copies over unstable original sources.

With the increasing ability to establish the copy as an indistinguishable entity even surpassing the original, we enter the realm of simulacra and simulation, in which this distinction becomes increasingly obsolete, depending on the extent to which the original reference can be sustained or not. It is important to remember that the decisive difference of Baudrillard’s ideas to previous conceptions of simulation is his view that simulation is not a deficient mode of reproduced depictions in the mimetic sense. His is a unique category that reflects on the autonomous processes of signs due to the increasing distribution of technological media. Therefore it would fall short to understand simulation

as mere imitation and representation since the invention and spread of digital media.

Simulation goes beyond mimetic representation by creating its own realities. In this sense the original (auratic) reference is lost but artificially resurrected again in mediated hyperreality.

As we could see in chapter III and IV, Fassbinder's *Welt am Draht* and Michael Haneke's *Caché* represent different paradigmatic examples, as they actively integrate the spectator into their cinematic framework, which can be seen as an audiovisual and mediated evolution of Brechtian concepts in the epic theater. Both filmmakers are also representative of their respective time periods and cinematic styles. While Fassbinder's playful formal style embraces artificiality and thereby consistently exposes the *World on a Wire*'s simulative quality from the very beginning, Haneke opts in *Caché* for a realistic and formally strict depiction of its narrative, which is characteristic for his films. Haneke's moral impetus is related to the (mis)perception of technical—and in this case, digital—images, which have a simultaneously abstract and concrete violent quality. The question that Haneke transfers to the viewer is to what extent are we responsible for the violent images we are willingly exposed to on a daily basis in entertainment and the mass media. Besides that there is another similarity between the two different directors. Both integrate the spectator and the diegetic off-screen space into their cinematic framework. This forms a triangular relationship between the viewers and the narrative, which can be related to the perspective of a privileged spectator that sees through the deceptive and illusory framework of simulation at play. In the context and aesthetics of simulation, the privileged spectator is decisive, as he or she is conscious about the illusory and simulative quality of the image. In *Welt am Draht* this perspective could be illustrated in

multiple instances in the interventions by the system of World I, when we as spectators were placed on the same diegetic level as the surveillance entity of World I as the “only” reality. As it turns out, this level of reality remains unstable in the end of the film, which in consequence expands this instability and the final replacement of the original Stiller with his virtual copy. The inherent aesthetic of simulation in *World on a Wire* develops in this triangular perceptive structure between the mediated diegetic spaces, characters and the voyeuristic spectator. The aesthetic of simulation is therefore genuinely tied to the sensual perceptive experience in the cinema.

The invention of photographic and cinematic media technologies in the 19th century also inaugurates modernity as an era of simulation that proliferates the replacement of unstable originals with virtual copies. Around the turn of 1900 these analog technologies are increasingly visual and automatized. Therefore apparatuses are of increasing importance for the representation and mediation of reality, and visual copies are progressively replacing original references, which lead to their indistinguishability in the postmodern period. The invention of the computer and computing speed up this process radically; virtual, stylized or photorealistic worlds become programmable and begin to blur the lines between virtual and material realities. The indistinguishability between original and copy consequently culminates in the simulacra of the third order, which implodes the difference between the two and establishes the copy itself as an independent real as it is the case with Stiller’s character in Fassbinder’s *Welt am Draht*. Even though we are never able to see the original Stiller, we learn that the copy has taken his place in the end with the help of Eva. Furthermore, the instability between original and copy is also transferred to the multiple diegetic levels of the film. While the different

layers, World I, World II and World III, are distinct from each other, they potentially turn towards an infinite reproduction in which this distinction does not really matter anymore. Consequently Stiller's arrival in the alleged "reality" of World I must be questioned and linked to the possibility of being just another level of simulated reality, as the previous two before. Taken to its extreme, the difference between reality and its representation is lost due to the spiraling movement of simulacra, which is opposed to mimetic representation. Fassbinder's film establishes the era of simulation and hyperreality, which is founded on information and models that can be manipulated in a cybernetic game of total operability. It is the computer and its code that becomes the dominant structure for society in this order.

In the examples discussed these computed environments are simulated in the medium of film, specifically in the simulation of *Welt am Draht*. Haneke's choice to shoot *Caché* entirely in HD-Video also adds to the confusing and simulative character of the video images. The deception and ambiguity at play in the opening and recurring images of *Caché* expose the manipulative power of technical images, which Flusser described as the short-circuit and misunderstanding of technical images as traditional images. To recall, for Flusser traditional images derive from a different level of consciousness than technical ones. While the latter derive from consciousness that is based on computation as well as operability and project meaning outwards, traditional images were invented in order to explain the world and to make it visible. Haneke visualizes this misunderstanding by exposing the manipulative and deceptive power of mediated images in the examples of the videotapes and other instances as in the sequence of Georges' TV moderation. We assume the image to be something that it is actually not.

By exposing this artificiality—whether by introducing the voice over of Georges and Anne at the beginning of the film, or with the TV director’s voice over and slow camera zoom outwards that exposes the studio in *Caché*—the effect is the same in that it slowly reveals the constructedness of the mediated image, whether it is produced for surveillance or for TV. The long takes and repeating montage sequences make the initial misconception visible and potentially result in a learning experience about our own viewing habits as spectators.

I argued that Fassbinder achieved the same goal through less realistic and more stylized means. Taking into consideration that *World on a Wire* is his only science fiction genre film that he produced for TV, it still genuinely is a Fassbinder film in that it deploys different aesthetic strategies that manage to pull the spectator in “as well as to pull the rug out beneath his feet.” The aesthetic of simulation at play in *Welt am Draht* utilizes a plentitude of cinematic devices like mirrors, glass, circular movements and noise in order to visualize that we are in fact witnessing a virtual and simulated world from the very beginning of the film. Stiller’s suspicion that these worlds could potentially expand in both directions into the infinite is confirmed by multiple sequences in the computer room of the institute. When the mirrors and screens turn towards themselves, the reflections result in an endless mise-en-abyme. For Baudrillard this mise-en-abyme turns into a spiral in the precession of simulacra. The overabundance of copies make the distinction from the original referent impossible, which in turn creates a higher or different level of perception, a state of hyperreality. Stiller at the end of *Welt am Draht* arrives precisely in this dimension of reality; for him it does not really matter whether that world is material or not, but what does matter is his belief in that it is (even though

the stylistic devices implemented suggest otherwise and that it is just another layer of simulation). In the seeming indifference between original and copy, the distinction between fiction and reality ceases to exist. The decisive point of the simulation and hyperreality is the paradoxical dissolution of the distinction and its artificial resurrection in the hyperreal, for which the example with Stiller at the end of *Welt am Draht* is paradigmatic.

For Vilém Flusser, it is also the underlying code of media technologies that becomes the center of attention. Different media operate with different codes and to different outcomes. While telephone conversations are “dialogical” because senders and receivers are able to communicate interchangeably, television is a “discursive” medium due to the ability of one sender to broadcast to a mass audience without immediate feedback options. Nevertheless, interactive feedback options have recently been integrated into TV programs via social media channels such as hashtags, questions, contests etc. that try to counter this one-sided communication. Rainer Werner Fassbinder and also Michael Haneke are exceptions to this “discursive” mode of communication, as they actively involve the spectator into their cinematic framework, whether in their film or TV productions. Both directors have significant experience in TV production, which decisively influenced their approach to be invested in self-reflexive and projective processes that engage the spectators’ relationships with their films, albeit in different ways. Even though both directors deny the association with Brecht, they clearly pick up on and eventually transcend several aesthetic strategies for which the Brechtian tradition of “epic theater” became known. This is particularly the case by involving and engaging the spectator through drawing attention to the mediated nature of their films and to

include the extradiegetic space into the visual framework. After watching *Welt am Draht* as well as *Caché*, we are left with a profound doubt that extends from the represented diegetic realities to our own. The interplay between (techno)-imagination and the fragmented and elliptic narratives enable the short circuit of reality, which is to involve and engage the spectator in the potentially deceptive or enlightening viewing process. The technological abilities that film, TV and digital video enabled lead to the creative evolution of these techniques by self-reflexively pointing towards the mediated nature of “technical images.” While digital images have a decisively different production process than analog ones, the perception of both types of technical images does not fundamentally change. The feedback loop between the fragmented experience of cinema, which resembles the industrialized city at the turn of the 20th century, and the theoretical or literary reflection that consequently includes fragmentation in its structure, further develop into the interdependent relationship that Flusser describes in the Apparatus-Operator complex. We become more dependent on our machines and gadgets while they simulate us and vice versa; reality has never been as mediated.

Following Flusser, the distinction between the traditional and the technical images and the different levels of consciousness from which they derive enable us to see through the distinction from a privileged perspective that presupposes the familiarity of the percipient with the technological grammar of the images in question. The pagan short circuit of understanding technical as traditional images can be avoided by trying to read and interpret the underlying programs of the images perceived instead of solely focusing on the content and blindly following their calls for action. Flusser’s approach is therefore also concerned with the structure of perception, when the structure between image,

recipient and simulator formed the structure of perception and the aesthetics of simulation.

Nevertheless, this potential misunderstanding can lead to the manipulation and programming by an elite that is familiar with the code, who is able to influence and even change (user) habits. Nowadays, the examples for these kinds of phenomena are plenty. The “fake news” debate and social media censorship; online conspiracy theories, which are believed to have the same validity as traditional journalistic sources; or instagram pictures of restaurants or travel destinations that motivate other users to take the same pictures while boosting the economy; the tendency towards synchronization and the confusion of reality and fiction are obvious in these examples. It is the technical digital image that precedes the human action here. The image as a projectile therefore attains a different quality in this context. The combination of shock and projection is evident in the endless feeds of increasingly audiovisual online content. They resemble endless scrolling film rolls that try to “influence” our habits by igniting the desire to recreate and capture for ourselves what we have seen. The era of the proliferation of visual copies has definitely reached a new high point and decisive moment. If we are to counter the nationalist and totalitarian tendencies present in the world today, we have to transform dystopian tendencies into utopian ones by learning how to read and create images that go beyond the synchronization of copies and perpetuate the aesthetics of simulation.

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