

Imaginary Video Landscape: John Cage, Mugam Music, Video Art

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Abstract

The essays focuses on a video by Robert Cahen and Matias Guerra, *Imaginary Video Landscape. For a random number of cuts from 14 archive videos*, 2017. This short work, presented in some international festivals, is based on *Imaginary Landscape n.5* by John Cage (1952), and offers a profound and interesting intersection between the avant-garde and popular music. Moreover, this “dialogue” is articulated and represented in electronic images by the French video-artist Robert Cahen and the Chilean multimedia artist Matias Guerra. The artists conflate their respective video archives: the images and the music produce a “video landscape” intertwining two different musical experiences, two different approaches and identities. The essay offers a critical analysis of this artwork in relation to John Cage’s influence on video-art, the several existing versions of his musical work, Robert Cahen’s *musique concrète* as well as to Guerra’s multimedia approach and to the composer Jahangir Selimkhanov’s studies and music inspired by Mugam musical tradition in Azerbaijan.

The correlation between musical research and video art develops on various levels starting from an electronic intuition, a sort of affinity, between sound and visual signals: one of the first discoveries made by artists experimenting with video recording equipment (available on the market since the mid 1960s) was that ‘images and sound were coming from the same source: images were formed by tension and frequencies and sound too, at least the electronic ones or those coming from an electronic equipment. The most important thing was that image and sound differed only in the way tension and basic frequencies were organized in time. This unicity was the most interesting discovery’, as Steina and Woody Vasulka have observed.² According to Bill Viola: ‘video is closer to sound than to

¹ As an artist and music expert, Matias Guerra co-authored the project with Sandra Lischi and contributed to the essay by writing its more specifically musical parts and by providing a general revision.

² Steina and Woody Vasulka, interview in Galleria Flaviana, Locarno (Switzerland), October 4,

film or photography, you find the same relation a microphone has with the person talking. A microphone, and suddenly the voice travels through the room [...]. A dynamic living system, an energy field. There isn't an instance of discontinuity, of immobility of time.³

The members of the Fluxus movement, in which Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell formed, are considered the 'founding fathers' of video art; within it the role of the musical experience goes from desecrating performances, 'silence', noise and disturbance to an openness to chance and to the unpredictable, simple playfulness. Paik had started as a musician: he played the violin and had written his university dissertation on Schönberg. Steina Vasulka was a violinist too, Vostell was a painter, but also author of sculptures and *oeuvres* that produced sound effects. Bill Viola himself declared the importance of music at the beginning of his career; Cahen, too, whom we'll discuss further subsequently, was educated as a musician. Among these few examples – of many, even if we limit ourselves to Fluxus – it is also worth recalling the collaboration between the video artist Gianni Toti with Cage: the composer realized the sound concept for the video-poem *Tenez Tennis* (1992, 15'), based on the sound of tennis balls during a game.

Considering the relationship between music and video, alongside the "incubator" of Fluxus outlined briefly here, we might also recall *Musique concrète* (a term coined in 1948 by the theorist and composer Pierre Schaeffer). Fluxus embraced the beginning of video art with ephemeral act poetics, with the casual combinations and the mocking of myths and rites of the classical show; *Musique concrète*, composed without a score and exists only in recording – it's in fact from these recordings that sound is re-created, processed and modified – indicating methods of transformation for the material fixed on tape, methods that will be applied by video artists to the recording of images. These provide two different, almost opposing views, since the playful transiency, the dispersion, the ways of Fluxus are far from the "concrete" (concretely fixed on tape), meditated, elaborated and structured construction of the research and works of *Musique concrète*. The derivations and complex entanglements we briefly mentioned here form a multidisciplinary and undisciplined whole in video art: music, cinema, theatre, painting which together transcend definitions and borders.

An equally complex plot intertwines art experiences like video (long considered "avant-garde" or "experimental", with all the necessary terminological precautions) and popular culture. According to a misleading theory, video art was born in opposition to television: this is can be undoubtedly true for single episodes and some counter-informative approaches, but inaccurate when you consider the several artist residencies in television structures and the

1984, in *Catalogue V International Videoart Festival* (Locarno, 1984). Repr. in *Techno-Graphia* (Locarno: Videoart festival, 1993), 71 (our translation).

³ Bill Viola quoted in Raymond Bellour, 'La sculpture du temps (entretien avec Bill Viola)', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 379.1, January 1986, 35-44 (our translation).

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Fig. 1: Nam June Paik,
Global Groove, 1973

importance of experiences such as those of RAI's Studio di Fonologia in Milan or ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française), the public radio television broadcast in France (in which in fact Pierre Schaeffer developed his research). This is further troubled by figures such as Ernie Kovacs in the USA, who put artistic experimentations and popular television genres in dialogue; or Jean-Christophe Averty's career, which started in ORTF documenting jazz concerts, combined pioneering electronic effects and surrealist fascinations with traditional TV genres, and renewed musical TV programs by introducing avant-garde aesthetics for songs, long before the music video, by singers like Yves Montand, Jane Birkin, Serge Gainsbourg; the same can be said of certain significant production experiences in television, especially during the eighties.

Besides experimental niches and single events, some artists came close to the television medium in its actual popular and homogenized values. Without calling Warhol or Schifano into question, let us consider Cage's participation in the popular Italian TV show *Lascia o raddoppia* in 1958.⁴ Paik himself took advantage of the TV medium in several ways, playing with daily TV images as sources for fascination and unusual combinatory practices, or creating anthropomorphic families with TV monitors and programs such as *Global Groove* in 1973. This programme takes (and elaborates) a patchwork of images from the television universe: *Global Groove*'s non-linear structure includes tap dancing, ice-skating, Native American drumming, a Pepsi commercial, and Allen Ginsberg chanting – all gliding through a video landscape processed by the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer.⁵ (fig.1) In *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984), the live split-screen satellite transmission from Paris to

⁴ See Marco Senaldi, *Arte e televisione. Da Andy Warhol al Grande Fratello* (Milan: Postmedia, 2009).

⁵ John Hanhardt, *Nam June Paik Global Groove 2004*, ed. by John Hanhardt and Caitlin Jones (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2004) p. 33.

New York plays with television conventions, entertainment and electronic effects (we could say “mass culture” and “avant-garde interventions”). These are only a few of the many examples of Paik’s works on and with television, even in the most strictly commercial and mainstream terms, with assembled references, quotations and compresence of visual stimuli. These characteristics make this artist the main figure in post-modern art, according to Fredric Jameson (though we will not enter into this slippery territory).⁶ Collages of popular television images also appear in Paik’s video dedicated to the composer, *A Tribute to John Cage (1973-1976, TV Lab WNET/Thirteen, 29’)*.⁷

Video art hence formed and grew in dialogue with music and television, even in its more widespread and popular forms. If the music video (in its commercial declination since the 1980s) owes much to certain video art experiences, video art has in turn dealt with types of music that cannot be considered ‘cultured’. This is evident in the work of an artist like Dara Birnbaum, not only with her *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978-79)*, a pop development from the TV series of the same name, but also in her music videos that put together pop musical and cultural icons. For the series *Pop-Pop video* “she mashed together a shootout from the crime drama Kojak with a commercial for Wang Laboratories computers to make Kojak/Wang (1980)”, as Alex Greenberger writes, recalling also Birnbaum’s experience on MTV, “creating a work that involved the MTV logo, a Max Fleischer cartoon, and blurred images of a female animator all in a matter of 30 seconds. It showed at the time on airwaves shared with “antic music videos” by the likes of U2, Whitney Houston, Madonna, and Bon Jovi”.⁸ *In different ways, other authors who are also considered part of the video art field, like Pipilotti Rist, have dealt with pop images and music, and Zbigniew Rybczynski, animation cinematographer that turned to video, dedicated an entire season of his career, between 1984 and 1989, to the creation of music videos (some of which are distinctly avant-garde in reference to the electronic effects and the visionary staging) even for mainstream and pop groups and musicians (the likes of Art of Noise, Lou Reed, Simple Minds, Cameo, Mick Jagger, Yoko Ono and John Lennon).*⁹ The most recent video works in which avantgarde and pop-

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). In the part regarding Paik and the spectator to whom the impossible is asked, that is, to watch all the screens at the same time, Jameson also quotes David Bowie in *The Man who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976). The considerations on Paik had appeared also in a smaller text of the same name published in *New Left Review*, 1.146, July-August 1984.

⁷ See also the chapters devoted to Paik, Cage and “Fluxus” in Inkyung Hwang, *Il lungo treno di John Cage* (Milano: O barra O, 2007).

⁸ Alex Greenberger, ‘ArtNews’, March 27 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/27/icons-dara-birnbaum/> [accessed 7 December 2019].

⁹ On the relation between music video and video art see Alessandro Amaducci and Simone Arcagni, *Music Video*, (Turin: Kaplan, 2007) and, more recently, Giacomo Ravesi, *Occhi tagliati che danzano. Forme sperimentali della videomusica italiana degli anni Duemila*, in *Fuori norma. La via sperimentale del cinema italiano*, ed. by Adriano Aprà (Venice: Marsilio, 2013); Bruno Di Marino, *Segni, sogni, suoni. Quarant’anni di videoclip da David Bowie a Lady Gaga* (Milan:

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culture meet include the case of *Your body must be heard*, by Özlem Sariyldiz (Germany, 2018, 10'), a sort of re-imagining of Peter Campus' video art classic *Three Transitions*, 1973. Here, the chroma-key inlay is revealed by fragments of scenes from old movies (from Turkish melodramas), assembled also as collages and in split screens with popular songs and music.

Imaginary Video Landscape

Within this context, a further interesting instance is found in the collaboration between two artists with different backgrounds and origins, Robert Cahen and Matias Guerra, facing the proposal of Jahangir Selimkhanov to work on the video part of his piece based on *Imaginary Landscape n.5* by John Cage (1952). The subtitle indicates: *for magnetic tape recording of any 42 phonograph records. Imaginary Video Landscape* is hereby born.¹⁰ Here two experiences intertwine what we can, with due caution, define as avantgarde (Cage's piece and the video art) and a popular musical tradition, that of Mugam music from Azerbaijan, which is revisited over an entire century from the 1920s until today. The meeting between Cahen and Selimkhanov happens in Azerbaijan, where the French video artist held a video workshop in 2016, after other invitations in the precedent years. Cahen writes: 'Thanks to Jahangir Selimkhanov I discovered Baku jazz. He is well aware of the music of Cage, Schaeffer, Stockhausen and Boulez and we've talked about contemporary music. He once came to Strasburg for an Azerbaijani music concert...'.¹¹ Selimkhanov is a musician and musicologist, cultivator of the traditional Azerbaijani music, expert in the music of the 1900s and cultural organizer; he involved Cahen in the creation of a version of *Imaginary Landscape n.5* based on Mugam music, taken from various recordings. In asking Cahen to take care of the video part of Selimkhanov's project, the latter writes:

Meltemi, 2018); Luca Quattrocchi, *Musica per gli occhi. Interferenze tra video arte, musica pop, videoclip* (Milan: Silvana, 2018) catalogue for the art exhibition held in Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, 10 august-4 november 2018). Concerning the relationship between image and sound (up to video and video art a reference to Michel Chion's work) remains crucial, first of all *L'audio-vision. Son et image au cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 1990) and, on music and video art in particular, *Suono nel cinema, suono nel video*, in *Cine ma Video*, ed. by Sandra Lischi (Pisa: ETS, 1996). For the relation between experimental cinema and sound see *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, ed. by Holly Rogers, Jeremy Barham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Again, regarding the relationship between video art and music, and with references to Cage and Paik, see Marco M. Gazzano, *Kinēma. Il cinema sulle tracce del cinema*, (Roma: Exorma, 2012), in particular the chapter 'Comporre audio-visioni. Suono e musica sulle due sponde dell'Atlantico, alle origini delle arti elettroniche'.

¹⁰ *Imaginary Video Landscape*, Azerbaijan-France, 3' 48", 2017. HD 1080p video; Video editing and post-production: Matias Guerra; Footage: Robert Cahen, Matias Guerra; Music: Interpretation of John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape n.5* with Mugam music of Azerbaijan, conceived by Jahangir Selimkhanov

¹¹ Robert Cahen to Sandra Lischi, e-mail correspondence, 3 April 2018.

I'm working currently on a music performance project where the traditional Mugam music will be put into the context of electronic sounds - from noises to recorded sounds of the planets, and with some music references in between (including generative music based on samples from Mugam and also a reconstruction of Alvin Lucier's experiment on revealing the sound portrait of a particular room through circular recording onto two recorders). One of the electronic 'interventions' I'm planning to do is to make a version of *the Imaginary Landscape n.5* by John Cage based on the bits of Mugam music – both in the pure form and electronically processed. I came to an idea in this regard which I dare to share with you. Do you think it might be interesting to precisely follow the Cage's score which he composed for 42 scrapes of music and make a parallel video score with 42 scraps of video [...] Wouldn't it be interesting for you (it's a sort of homage to your idea to convey the logic and techniques of *Musique Concrète* to the medium of moving image)?¹²

Robert Cahen (Valence, France, 1945) is one of the most important and well-known artists and pioneers of international video art, he was trained at the end of the 1960s within Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique Concrète* school,¹³ at the Paris Conservatory and at the radiophonic studios of the public radio and television in France. A cinematographer and photographer, too, Cahen's first video dates back to 1973, inspired by the desire to experiment the electronic effects obtained with the *Musique Concrète*'s method, recording first and developing afterwards, testing the effect generators of the TV studios that were next door to the radio ones. From his formative years, his path was marked by a particular emphasis on the relation between image and sound design (often authored by Michel Chion) in almost total absence of speech. He experimented in this way both in his own videos and in musically inspired ones (*La recherche instrumentale à l'IRCAM* (1983), *Boulez-Répons* (1985); *Instantanés* (1987), portraits of three IRCAM musicians, *Compositeurs à l'écoute* (1998); *Le deuxième jour* (1988), with the music of John Zorn). The video installation *Le Maître du temps - Pierre Boulez dirige Mémoire*, 2011, is dedicated to Pierre Boulez, whilst *Hong Kong Song* (1989) is the result of interdisciplinary and international research on the sound of urban spaces (fig. 2). Work on John Zorn's composition *Godard ça vous chante? Tribute to Jean-Luc Godard*, commissioned as an international co-production for an author video music series, shows the search for non-linear and variable rhythmical correspondences with the musical composition, and the succession of urban images linked also with constant variations of space and time. Music penetrates all of Cahen's work: aside from the composers with whom he collaborates and to whom he has dedicated the aforementioned works, he uses music from different times and styles, both famous and unknown, and often only via quick evocations: Schumann, Crumb, Chopin, Strauss, Ravel, Verdi,

¹² Selimkhanov to Robert Cahen, e-mail correspondence, June 2017.

¹³ See Robert Cahen's *Compositeurs à l'écoute*, 1998, outcome of a visual montage (drawing mainly on photographs of yesterday and today) starting from compositions from various *Musique Concrète* authors, and produced on occasion of the 50 years since 1948.

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Fig. 2: Robert Cahen, *Hong Kong Song*, 1989

Max Roach, Bartók. For some videos he also worked as sound designer, mainly in the first period of his career.

In a different way, Matias Guerra (1973, Santiago, Chile) also works on the relationship between music and image; he is a painter, musician and author of works that dialogue with music, cinema, the electronic image as well as literature and astronomical references. Regarding the latter, a musical composition and sound installation (one permanent and two temporary) from 2016 within the “Moby Dick” festival at Piane di Bronzo (Tuscania) are worth mentioning.¹⁴ Guerra has an education in information technology and philosophy, and a particular attention to science. His research marks works with rich networks of references, which are not presented as explicit quotations but as structural and deep affinities with the matter in question: this is very pertinent in *Nekrotzar*. *Following the rainbow*, with a study of the works of Stanley Kubrick as its starting point (paint on canvas, digital prints, video, sound, collective work and research and more- fig. 3). This same piece has also a sound and video-loop installation version.

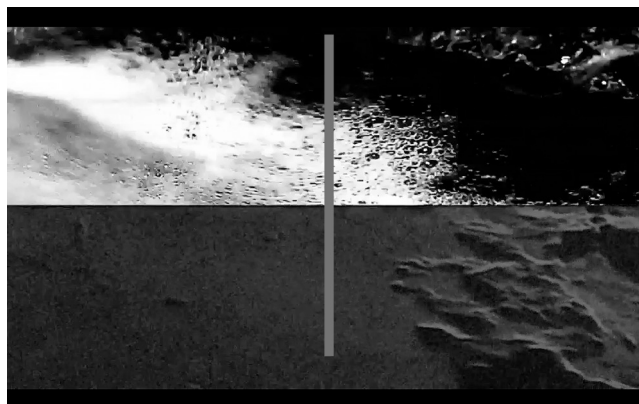
Compendium K for soundscape, electric guitar, live electronics and sometimes video, *Nekrotzar*, is part of a series of pieces called *Compendia*, namely live musical performances and elements, such as video or painting, reflecting a specific knowledge. *Compendium K* (the K stands for Stanley Kubrick) puts together soundscapes, live music performance and a video with a fixed duration and narrative. [...] It is not a montage-film, it's not by any means a film. It's another mechanism for sense and non-sense, an instrument to play with. Each device pertains a certain quality of my vision of Stanley Kubrick's work. The video work can be ideally divided in four macro scenes as in *Der Grosse Makabre* of the Ligeti/Meschke libretto, where quotations, cites and references to past musical styles are the devices to create its pastiche form. The choice here of Ligeti is manifest, but maybe the choice of the libretto as a baseline for the narrative is less obvious, as occult and evident are certain routes of Kubrick's vision.¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://www.matiaguerra.com/moby-dick.php> [accessed 9 December 2019].

¹⁵ M. Guerra, “Nekrotzar. Video and Performance”, <http://www.matiaguerra.com/nekrotzar.php>

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Fig. 3: Matias Guerra, *Nekrotzar. Following the rainbow* (2016-2017)



Guerra also wrote the musical score and contributed to the editing of Andrea Semerano's film *Dedalo 2018* (2018), radically and decisively experimental and rich in loving, existential and cinematographic visions. Cahen and Guerra had met for the realization of a video, *This is an Unknown Surface* (2014) from an idea and a text by Alessandro De Francesco – another artist that is comfortable with different media, but mainly with the formal elaboration of language and *augmented writing*.¹⁶ Also thanks to this collaboration Cahen decided to call Guerra, by Jahagir Selimkhanov's invitation, writing to the French artist,

That would be so great to visualize Cage's score! I thought that 8 levels of sound volume (equivalent to pp to fff) in his score could be applied to 8 levels of opacity of video images, so that landscapes appearance vary from extremely blurred, as in a fog, to very bright, as under sunshine, and the zones of complete silence represented by TV screen 'white noise' [...]. We are working now on sonorization of the score with 42 fragments from recorded samples of Azerbaijanian music of all genres – folk, traditional, symphonic, jazz – up to underground synth-pop. A sort of imaginary soundscape of the national music in 3 minutes...¹⁷

Cage, Mugam Music, Video

Imaginary Landscape n.5 was composed by Cage in 1952, constituting the last of the *Imaginary Landscapes* series, the first of which is dated 1939. *Imaginary*

[accessed 9 December 2018].

¹⁶ <https://docplayer.fr/14932490-Alessandro-de-francesco-portfolio.html> [accessed 9 December 2018]. On the international collaborations of Cahen and Guerra, see S. Lischi, 'Videoarte nomade. Cinema, immagine elettronica, musica, scrittura. Percorsi, dialoghi e intrecci planetari (e cosmici): dalla Patagonia all'Azerbaijano, con echi di Cage, Kubrick, Ligeti', *Alias (il Manifesto)*, 14 April 2018, <https://ilmanifesto.it/videoarte-nomade-dalla-patagonia-allazerbaigian/> [accessed 9 December 2018].

¹⁷ J. Selimkhanov to R.Cahen, e-mail correspondence, June 2017.

Landscape n.5 is for 42 records to be re-recorded on tape, as Cage's version was originally composed for a dance piece by Jean Erdman, *Portrait of a Lady*, using 42 jazz records to be played in eight simultaneous tracks. The score indicates that any type of recording can be used, focusing in fact on the length of the excerpts being played and further characteristics such as amplitude, *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, and changes of records, all notated on block graphic paper forming a graphical score that anticipates not only the musical concept of sampling but also its graphical presentation – in fact, Cage's score resembles the interface of any modern audio sequencer software. The final piece is a set of indications or rules that create a system where the sound content produced will vary according to the records used, and the recording of such system will create a different, set *musical object* every time. As a result, there have been many different versions of the score, of which the most interesting to date is Michael Barnhart's, on the prestigious Mode record label, using recordings of Cage's music.¹⁸

Jahangir Selimkhanov, as one can understand, is interested in national music, a theme on which he often writes and to which he is dedicated as a musicologist and curator of events and festivals, also with the Musicians' Society of Azerbaijan. His work consists, among other aims, in revamping popular musical traditions including Mugam, and also circulating them abroad: dissemination that becomes easier and wider after 1989.¹⁹ The artistic value of Azerbaijani Mugam and its cultural importance was acknowledged in 2003 by UNESCO, when it included Azerbaijani Mugam on The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is worth noticing that the video, which premiered at the Baku Festival (International Symposium on Azerbaijani Carpet, from October 17 to 20) was projected for the first time at an evening with live performed Mugam music.

Mugam is not merely the main form the national music tradition – one could say it's one of basic cultural values which constitute national identity of Azerbaijan people. Historically and in contemporary use, this term has various meanings – it may simultaneously refer to specific categories of tone scale, melodic pattern and genre. The history of mugam dates back to ancient times. Azerbaijanian mugam bears similarities with various forms of Eastern music – the common principles of modal composition and melodic elaboration could be observed in Indian raga, Iraqi maqam, Magreb noubah, Uzbek and Tajik Shashmakom, Iranian destgah [...]. Since early 20th century Azerbaijanian mugam started to attract the attention of listeners beyond the circle of devoted connoisseurs. Many music groups perform mugam regularly

¹⁸ There are many renditions of the score and concept of *Imaginary Landscape n.5*, too many to count, nevertheless to our knowledge there has never been a video realization that has actually taken into account the score, the concept and the principle of Cage's work in the process of creating images. The video is hence not merely an accompaniment to the music, but more similar to a transposition, where the conceptual and artistic value of the piece is inherent to the relation between sound and image.

¹⁹ See Jahangir Selimkhanov, 'Music: Then and Now', *Azerbaijan International*, 3.1 (Spring 1995), 36-37, 45.

in festivals and concert programs all over the world [...]. The Azerbaijani Mugham is a traditional musical form, characterized by a large degree of improvisation. The Mugham, though a classical and academic art, draws upon popular bard melodies, rhythms and performance techniques and is performed in many venues throughout the country.²⁰

Thus Selimkhanov turned to Mugam music for his interpretation of *Imaginary Landscape n.5* by Cage, summarizing the operation in the following way:

The 'collage' made out of bits of Azerbaijanian music is a precise realization of the *Imaginary Landscape n.5* (1952) by John Cage, a seminal work in the history of electronic music. The composer has created a graphic score, where 42 scraps of magnetic tape to be chosen randomly are given the precise indication of duration, dynamic level and are distributed between 8 channels. There are countless renditions of this 'author instruction', which differ quite substantially, however, the composer's intention was not to present a final 'product' completely under his control, but rather to initiate a situation allowing to show contemporary soundscape which is disruptively simultaneous, non-linear, fragmented. The idea to use 42 fragments of recordings of Azerbaijanian music from archive recordings of 1920-ies up to very contemporary ones was related to the desire to show a condensed landscape of the national music in all its variety - traditional and new urban folk, jazz, rock, pop, classical and contemporary classical. This fragment of recorded sound appears all of a sudden - as an expression of forced 're-formatting' all the musical perception of the participants of the performance.²¹

As Selimkhanov had written to Cahen, the reference to the performance is due to the version of which this experimentation, entitled *Bahariya*, with the sound artist Farhad Farzaliyev.²² This inspired the idea to call Cahen, who had been trained in the *Musique concrète* school:

I thought about a precise 'translation' of the score intended for 42 sound fragments into 42 video fragments to be constructed following the indicated length and intensity of each fragment - in a way, that might be a parallel to what Cahen did in the Seventies - a 'translating' approach to sound into the realm of vision [...] Robert Cahen replied very enthusiastically, however, he didn't choose to follow the exact instruction of the Cage's score, and rather has constructed his video work created jointly with Matias Guerra as an evocation to the music piece we have sent to him. Most important point is that the authors of the video have picked up the historical spirit of an archived memory which is felt in our rendition of the Cage's piece, and Robert and Matias have decided to attract their own early works as layers into the translucent, polyphonic imagery of this piece.²³

²⁰ J. Selimkhanov to S. Lischi, e-mail correspondence, 11 December 2018.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqaMomtwp6I&t=10s> [accessed 18 December 2018]

²³ J. Selimkhanov to Sandra Lischi, e-mail correspondence, 11 December 2018.

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'For a random number of cuts from 14 archive videos'

Robert Cahen and Matias Guerra therefore worked together on the video score, analysing first Jahangir Selimkhanov's musical montage. They retrace their archives, intertwining different fragments, including those of their faces on camera today, and in fact the subtitle indicates *For a random number of cuts from 14 archive videos*. Guerra's account is useful here:

This short work, presented in a few international festivals by now, is based on *Imaginary Landscape n.5* by John Cage (1952), and offers an interesting intersection between avant-garde and popular music (in this case between Cage's score and the Mugam musical tradition, here re-created by the Azerbaijani musicologist and scholar Jahangir Selimkhanov). Moreover, this 'dialogue' is articulated and represented in electronic images by the french video-artist Robert Cahen and myself. Our video-strategy actualizes the fragments, which in a new time and space create unexpected micro-narratives. We have chosen excerpts from our respective video archives to create a 'video landscape' intertwining two different musical experiences, two different approaches and identities, two different histories and aesthetics. The main elements in play become the key references within the images, like the small narratives that open up from second to second and the recognizable repetitions which not only give a rhythm but a semantic context too. We were commissioned the piece and had the music given to us first, instead of focusing on the Azerbaijani *Imaginary Landscape n.5* version we decided to go back to the root, thus not analysing specifically actual 'mugam' distinctive marks like it's tempo or 'mood' but studied the original score breaking down elements of main interest to follow the score not blindly but as a transposition for video, in the end the score was for sound and not image, where the principle and the baseline ideas from Cage's work are respected.²⁴

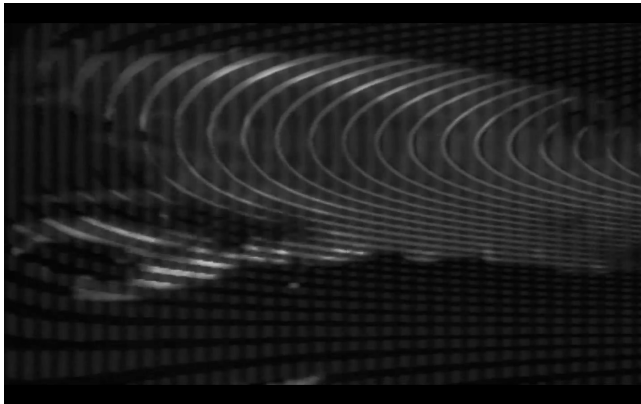
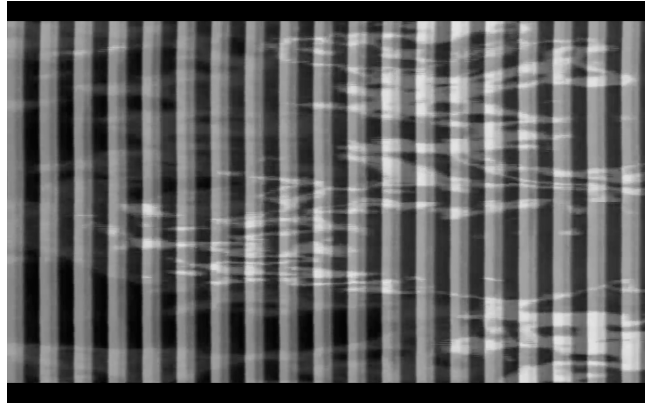
Cahen has commented on this collaboration with Guerra,²⁵ highlighting the necessity to adopt a pre-existent piece of music (with a commissioned work: two characteristics that recall his work at the end of the 1980s on the music of John Zorn in *Le Deuxième Jour*), but deciding to 'fabricate a mosaic' with pre-shot images that were not filmed for the occasion and opting for less recent and more geometric videos, with saturated colours: what he calls 'the primitive côté of the first video gestures transformed in image (figg 4 - 5). Also in Cage, as a matter of fact, we find great liberty in composing a piece done with scraps of other works. A correspondence of assemblies'. With this approach in place, the editing was done

²⁴ M. Guerra, <http://www.matiasguerra.com/imaginary-video-landscape-n5.php> (accessed 18 December 2019). See also *Origini/Origins*, catalogue 27th edition of the festival *Invideo-Video e cinema oltre*, 16-19 November 2017. The video was presented at its world premiere at the Festival ISAC, BAKU 2017; then at the INVIDEO 2017 Festival, Milan; at Nasimi Festival, Baku, 2018; at cinema Arsenale, Pisa April 2018, during *Ondavideo, Paesaggi sonori*. On this topic and the relation between sound and image, Guerra held a master's class at the IED in Milan (November 2017), and Cahen and Guerra held a seminar (again on this work) at the University of Pisa, Dipartimento di Civiltà e forme del sapere, in April 2018.

²⁵ Cahen's statements were collected by S. Lischi, in Pisa on 1 November 2018.

Sandra Lischi, Matias Guerra

Figg. 4,5: Cahen-Guerra, *Imaginary Video Landscape*, 2017



intuitively and enriched by inserting the faces of the authors – or rather the details of their faces, a sort of identification of the author with non-archival clips that were filmed in the moment. ‘The alive aspect’, Cahen observes, ‘which allows the author to escape the gesture expressed uniquely by his creation’. This reminds Cahen of Cage himself, ‘his face, his laughter, his gestures – as those of his performances, like the closing of the piano [in 4’33”, 1952]’. This ensemble in the end takes on ‘a micro-coherence of sense’, even if its fundamental impetus, Cahen concludes, is that of playfulness: to play with the archive images, to play with details of faces and the correspondences between the music and the visual score.

On the other hand, while writing to Jahangir Selimkhanov, Guerra comments as follows:

We thought that by using our archives we could match Cage’s principle and not go too far from our own aesthetic directions. The historical progression line within the works is strong but I feel it vanishes, making the fragments contemporary, which to me means mainly that they don’t have a firmly marked time distinction (the time the video was made as a distinctive element), as the main elements in play become the key references

Imaginary Video Landscape: John Cage, Mugam Music, Video Art

within the images, like the small narratives that open up from second to second and the recognizable repetitions which not only give a rhythm but a semantic context too. I've watched it without music and I think it works too, as one can ride along according to what marker each person can find or wants to find or simply receives. Anyhow it's a *paysage vidéo* that interlaces two different types of work, two identities which are put in discussion by the work itself.²⁶

As already stated, the score wasn't specifically followed and Guerra remarks:

The 3" tape unit of measure could be applied and transposed to video but it would create in some instances a convulsive visual effect that doesn't happen in sound, the score wasn't meant for film so we decided to avoid a blind faithful approach, instead, we took 14 videos, 7 of Robert and 7 mine, they were divided in units of 3 minutes taking what we recognized as having moments that visually could pertain to Cage's indications of, for example, amplitude, *crescendi* or *espressivo*, by choosing colour, rhythm, subject and narrative movements. For example a *crescendi* of 4 to 6, as per the score, in some instances is simply given through a clip with an intense colour change or upwards frequency modification, whereas a set amplitude is given by choosing an arbitrary mix of narrative, movement and colour within the clip. We re-created an eight track system in the editing software where we placed the chosen clips, to be then cut to a minimum of 1 second, the lines from 1 to 3 from the original score can be easily identified by length and as a sort of baseline for the cross-dissolving shorter clips. In a very early stage we had quite an accurate transposition of the score and it was tempting to settle for it, but the insertion of the details of our faces, if I recall properly, changed radically our approach and led us to focus on the rhythm and semantics of the video, leaving the timings chosen and a baseline, but drastically changing the resulting order, I guess that once we had a system in place given by a context and a set of rules, playfulness prevailed, not so much as in determining the ending video but as in playing around with the clips: it was like having a set of puzzle pieces that can create a different final image each time according to where you place them, they will all somehow by chance fit (thanks to the system chosen). I think that in this way we have maintained the underlining philosophy of the composition.²⁷

Two different approaches, then, to video composition, two different poetics that relate to each other, two video archives and two 'self-representations' with new footage, inserted in an architecture of images that is transformed by the irruption of eyes, mouths, the creases of the faces, hair, beards, ears and the texture of the skin (fig. 6). It is like a double signature or a vital and 'present' element that insinuates itself here and there in the brief video sequences of the archive footage (from the past) of the two authors. An element of surprise or mystery that in fact has radically changed the approach to the visual score, adding the touch of an apparently unexpected form of study and research. The video opens with a detail of eyes and proceeds by showing, in fast succession and

²⁶ M. Guerra to J. Selimkhanov, e-mail correspondence, September 2017.

²⁷ M. Guerra, specifically written for this text.

Fig. 6: Cahen-Guerra,
Imaginary Video
Landscape, 2017



sometimes superimposed, fragments of other works: landscapes, abstract images, a browsed book, trains and gestures, sometimes in black and white and at others in colour, solarizations, sometimes lush colours 'pop' like the first effects and the first chromatic electronic canvases, rarely they are naturalistic. Then sea reflexes, incumbent seas that seem to invade and force the surface of the image, that make the crest of the seafoam dance. Someone passes by, runs, arrives, we go forth through a green pathway, we see train tracks from above. Sometimes it is a suspension, sometimes a correspondence between sound and image, like the short sequence in which a black and white geometric grid – almost a keyboard – appears alongside piano notes in the music composition. At times, even the faces are taken in the archive images with the use of superimposition, occasionally in a single image we find two superimposed details: an eye, a mouth (fig. 7).

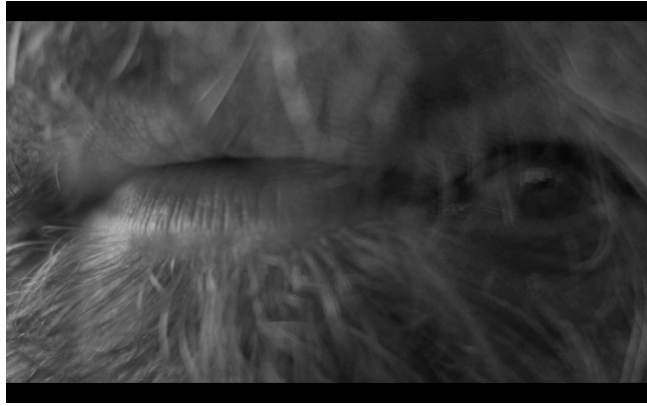
The audio track consists specifically of a succession of Mugam clips: a kind of music which was transmitted generation after generation, and which changed over time, interbreeding with other musical genres but maintaining its tradition and broad popularity. It is usually sung (by a female or male voice) and accompanied by musicians that play traditional instruments such as the *kamancha* (a four-string spiked fiddle), the *tar* (a long-neck lute), and the *daf* (a type of large tambourine).

Selimkhanov's composition, even though it consists in a set of brief, sequential cuts, maintains the melodic character of the music as audible, recognisable and driven by a well consolidated tradition. Nevertheless, its fragmentation and, in particular, its development through an extremely experimental video score modifies sense and perception, making space for an audio-vision made also of dissonances and deviations, not only within the musical part but also in the video. The procedure of confronting an avant-garde work (Cage's) with popular and traditional music finds a sort of enhancement in the union of sound and image (which is also inherent in Cage's system, considering the use of jazz, a popular music, in relation with the score and way the sound is conveyed), mainly because the visual idea avoids a 'blind faithful approach', to paraphrase Guerra.

The artwork includes definitely experimental images and definitely popular

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Fig. 7: Cahen-Guerra,
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music, weaved into Cage's avant-garde and the reflections of another avant-garde – which produced the well-known declaration *The Future of Sound* in 1928 (signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin e Alexandrov). Also known as *Statement on Sound*, the latter sought to avoid the dominance of sound over image – it was produced at the advent of sound in cinema, and it feared in particular the possible use of speech – and over editing, with all the latter's dialectic and creative power. To avoid the shoals of the illustrative dimension equates to create a “new orchestral counterpoint” between image and sound.²⁸ *Even in this orchestration*, the encounter between avant-garde and popular music finds in *Imaginary Video Landscape* an example of a profound research, one rich in echoes.

²⁸ Sergej Ejzenštejn, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Grigorij Alexandrov, 'Il futuro del sonoro. Dichiarazione', in Sergej M. Ejzenštejn, *Forma e tecnica del film e lezioni di regia*, ed. by Paolo Gobetti (Torino: Einaudi, 1964), pp. 523-524.