

Miriam De Rosa

Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*:

Notes on Desktop Cinema

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The computer graphic interface, or desktop, is so pervasive as to have become almost "invisible" (Parikka 2023, 75 quoted in De Rosa 2024, 71) and certainly unremarkable. Recently, an IT specialist took remote control of my screen in search of corrupted files. I was immediately disconcerted, as the rogue cursor sped across the surface, opening and closing my folders. The experience was as affectively invasive as if someone had read my diary or was rummaging through my drawers. I felt kind of exposed. In other words, the familiarity of the desktop is such that it feels like it's mine, but it is also yours and ours. Towards the end of her book, *Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue. Notes on Desktop Cinema*, Miriam De Rosa encapsulates this slippery, capricious nature when she describes desktop cinema as "a method to make sense of something that is not fixed" (154). Reading these words, I imagine the ears of scholars of experimental cinema, video and artists' moving images pricking up. For De Rosa phrasing seems to point to the opening maneuver of a long tradition of critical cinema, as per Scott MacDonald's series of books (see, for example, MacDonald 1998) to examine films that make the conditions of production and consumption of a particular medium strange. Certainly, it is the case in this book that those interested in how desktop cinema interrogates the desktop will find their curiosity sated. But it

is to De Rosa's credit that, via the heterogeneity of this surface, she intertwines significant recent debates around media archaeology, post-cinema, digital aesthetics, and the post-digital. In desktop cinema, De Rosa argues, we witness "things happening, ongoing, unfolding" (69) resulting in spectatorship being dominated by a "processual aspect" (130). Crucially then, *Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue. Notes on Desktop Cinema* draws our attention to the desktop as a verb.

Herein, then, lies a valuable study of the emerging genre of desktop cinema. This term was first used by De Rosa to describe Kevin B. Lee's video-essay *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) (De Rosa and Strauven 2020). The term captures work that includes the desktop environment in the diegesis and that may include "pre-recorded desktop footage and other sources, including original or found footage, as well as PC-delivered data" (De Rosa and Strauven 2020, 248). Let us not forget though the excuse for such a study: visual artist Camille Henrot's 2013 video artwork *Grosse Fatigue*. In a recent poll of the 100 best artworks of the 21st century (Anon, ARTnews, 5 March 2025), *Grosse Fatigue* was allotted 7th place. The intention of the poll was not to be exhaustive, but rather to draw attention to works that characterise art of the first 25 years of this century. Miriam De Rosa concurs with the editors of the poll when she claims that *Grosse Fatigue*



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should be seen as the first example of desktop cinema. We can see these two different claims as showing how Henrot's video serves two masters: first, it engages and holds attention as a double-sided single screen hung in a gallery that refers to desktop subjectivity; second, Henrot's video bears scrutiny as an exercise in becoming critical about the artistic affordances of the unfixed nature of the desktop.

As one might expect of a study focused on a single work, the book includes a wealth of visual material. High resolution screen shots from specific moments in the video that are discussed by De Rosa are combined with images from other examples of desktop cinema, cited in later chapters. The images from *Grosse Fatigue* are essential since they reiterate how the video serves two masters. Not only do the images illustrate how the visual appeal to perambulating art visitors is sustained by an array of brightly coloured desktop backgrounds, but they also record medium specific techniques, such as mise-en-abyme, to interconnect images opened on the desktop (24), and "stacking" (66) of numerous open windows, which contributes to creating a sense of depth on the surface. Sadly, absent though are shots showing how the video has been installed. Returning to its appeal when it is exhibited, the video attracts visitors through visuals and a powerful, driving soundtrack. Aurally, the video involves an iterative poetic narration that draws from "a variety of creation myths [...] from Navajo to Shinto, from Islamic sacred texts to Kabbalah" (124), accompanied by percussive instrumentation. Crucially, the aural components extend the artwork's reference points from digital art towards narrative and performance art. In acknowledgement of the importance of the latter, De Rosa dedicates one chapter to sound and includes a transcript of the narration. Yet the former, the exhibition of the video, is not recorded visually. The fact that it is not dwelt upon reveals De Rosa's otherwise implicit agenda, encapsulated in the two parts of the book's title, which appears to be using

Grosse Fatigue as a point of origin, but not a final destination.

Enacting her agenda, De Rosa structures the book as a dispersal from the singular video, which is used to locate the origins of desktop cinema, to an array of other examples, culminating in a round table involving scholars in digital aesthetics—Darren Gary Berkland—and post-cinema—Shane Denson—and makers—Iris Blauensteiner, Belit Sag, and Suneil Sanzgiri. Such a structure is effective in opening up rather than closing down an area, in anticipation of further research. So, what does De Rosa establish, and what remains to be studied through desktop cinema? For those inspired by media archaeology, with its interest in materiality, the continuities and differences explored between "desk top" and "desktop" (see also De Rosa and Strauven 2020) are suggestive of the need for continued excavations, following in the weighty footsteps of Giuliana Bruno's study of surface/s (2014). Post-cinema scholars, when approaching desktop cinema, should be mindful of how the weave of the desktop as a "networked texture of everyday life and practices" (De Rosa 2020) both calls to us (as per the affective attachment I described at the start of this review) and keeps us at a distance. Finally, understandings of the post-digital are enhanced by considering the oxymoronic ways in which the two-dimensional materiality of the desktop surface is able to make tangible our multi-dimensional experience of life in 21st century (35-36). To encapsulate De Rosa's evolving thesis, we could say that this book contributes to our understanding of how "spectator-surface" relations work in the 21st century.

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