THE REPRESENTATION AND CARE OF ILLNESS
VISUAL CULTURE, TRAUMA, AND MEDICAL HUMANITIES

EDITED BY SILVIA CASINI, ALICE CATI, AND DEBORAH TOSCHI

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Contents / Table des matières

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Sick and Injured Bodies: Medical Imagery and Media Practices of Care[1]

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RETHINKING THE BODY THROUGH NEW DISCIPLINARY TRAJECTORIES

The recent pandemic has confirmed that images are a powerful and complex instrument of political and social negotiation, shaping precise forms of representation of suffering, medical disorder, and the sick body, taking root in a particular historical and cultural context. As David Serlin argues, 'contemporary public health crises would be literally unimaginable without these visual representations'.[2] Visual and audiovisual production has not simply favoured phenomena of re-semantization of reality, but has also engendered social practices and symbolic actions practical to orient the intersubjective process, self-perception and the perception of the other through physicality or its simulation. Within this framework, this special issue provides a new reading of some theoretical concepts and methodologies. The perimeter we construct deeply intertwines the field of Visual Studies, particularly, the area investigating the visual culture of medicine,[3] assigning images a crucial role, and establishes a multidisciplinary and open dialogue between two other fields: Trauma Studies and Medical Humanities. Starting from different methodological positions, both these traditions have questioned the possibilities of representing trauma and illness through images and narrations, and they have assigned a therapeutic potential of media representations and practices. As Elaine Scarry argues, pain belongs to invisible geography; pain cannot be perceived without the image of a wound; the body must be visible to others in order to communicate pain.[4] It is precisely towards this invisible and incommunicable dimension that Medical Humanities has moved, proposing a reconceptualisation of cure/care, no longer limited to the objective clinical sphere (cure), but conceived in a nuanced and integrated perspective on the fundamental aspects of illness, suffering and healing (care). Starting from the assumption that the subjective

experience of illness is something distinct from the biomedical attribution of disease, the Medical Humanities have embraced a new concept of care and, in the contemporary debate, of self-care, which is empathic and person-centred, but at the same time, collective and relational. Additional space for dialogue with Trauma Studies opens up in the individual and collective fold of care.

In this perspective, the body is a very fertile theoretical object. If the 'represented body' becomes a crossroads where the cultural and aesthetic question and the biological and medical discourse meet, the 'embodied body' helps one to reflect on the subjectivity of the patient and her/his specific way of experiencing illness, disability and suffering. The body becomes a terrain of exploration that connects the construction of visual imaginaries related to particular medical issues (disfiguration — Suzannah Biernoff, eating disorders - Clio Nicastro, autism - Anna Chiara Sabatino) to the impact, discursiveness and collective assumption of responsibility that such imaginaries provoke. In this first line, more adherent to the Medical Humanities, the essays focus on the reincorporation of lived experiences and the 'acting' capacity of images. The second perspective of analysis, the contributions of Nicole Miglio-Giulio Galimberti and Lorenzo Donghi-Simona Pezzano, pertains to the data visualisation of the body through medical imaging processes. Widespread beyond the narrow clinical perimeter, images pose various questions about their epistemological status and the combination of the indexical, iconic and symbolic modes of signification. Reflections on imaging, particularly on the role of the thermal camera, feed on the recent experience of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, which is explored in the essays by Samuel Antichi and Aleksander Sedzielarz. These essays address the iconography of pandemic imagery, attempting to relate Medical Humanities and Trauma Studies, and focusing on the experience and memory of individual and collective trauma.

Images of the body have played an essential role in medical discourse and practice since the illustration of anatomical texts. Still, it is thanks to the advent of photography that they become inextricably linked to the definition of the physiological and pathological body.[5] They then move through the new frontiers of medical imaging, towards the conquest of human interiority and new forms of visualisation.[6] The human body is grasped about the connection between the representation and the epistemological plane of the construction of knowledge and forms of control in the trajectory already noted by Michel Foucault. The depiction of illness, of the pathological body, of the wound, firstly, draws iconographic connections with the historical-artistic context of reference; Secondly, it literally acts, identifying and structuring specific biomedical practices. In this perspective, Suzannah Biernoff's essay is illuminating because, on the one hand, she can read Vicky Knight's (*Dirty God*, S. Polka 2019) body in the light of the iconographic theme of the disfigured female face. On the other, the scholar can reason about how the film constructs a process of subjectification of physical and emotional pain on this truly scarred body. The authenticity of this disfigured face explodes the film representation by posing the problem of communicating (and listening to) the pain of the other and reclaiming the value

of vulnerability, difference, and subjectivity, all crucial elements to access the space of self-care.

Images of the body are the starting point for establishing a bridge with the Medical Humanities. This theoretical paradigm is recognisable but still elusive in its definition, which not surprisingly oscillates between 'Health Humanities'[7] and 'Critical Medical Humanities',[8] etc. Medical Humanities have urged the paradigm of cultural history, disability studies, and gender studies to share a critical approach to clinical gaze, afflicted body and social pathologies. In the *Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities* at Interdisciplinary Entanglements: Towards a Visual Medical Humanities (Edinburgh 2018), Fiona Johnstone emphasised the need to pay more attention to the visual dimension. A first trajectory is an intersection between medical practice and the visual arts, which can take many configurations. The development of narrative medicine, a tool that can give voice to the patient, explore the embodied experience of illness, and understand the uniqueness of each clinical course, has received particular emphasis in the form of somatic narratives and, to a lesser extent, graphic medicine. The focus of Medical Humanities on autobiographical writing and illness narratives has naturally extended to the forms of portraiture/self-portraiture that are widespread in social media and the current media landscape. These portraiture practices can be placed side by side with other practices that more explicitly resort to art and the use of visual/audiovisual media within psychotherapeutic pathways that aim at re-elaborating the experience of illness or the acquisition of greater self-awareness in the role of the patient.[9] The paper of Clio Nicastro has the merit of capturing the ability of images both to shape the body according to specific cultural expectations and to translate the fragmentation, alienation, and objectification that the patient makes of her/his own body affected by a disease into a very personal and unconventional language. Our lived bodily experience shapes our self-image and, thus also, our narrative identity. In this logic, visual narratives become a powerful tool for approaching and understanding the patient's experience and reconfiguring their identity.[10] Anna Chiara Sabatino's contribution focuses on the ability of audiovisual language to redefine the image of ourselves and our self-awareness. This essay leans more decisively into dialogue with therapeutic practices and, not by chance, is obligatorily in conversation with doctors and psychologists. Sabatino' deviates from the path of cinematherapy as much as from that of film therapy, and structures a theoretical reflection on the use of the cinematographic device in a therapeutic context, updating an original Italian experimental pathway started between 2007 and 2012 with the Memofilm project. Therapeutic filmmaking helps the young patient get involved in a visual representation balanced between self-portraiture and participatory narrative. Images literally act in the representation of the body, trauma, and illness.

Furthermore, there are images that, precisely because of their close connection to the medical field, deserve special attention. That is, the visualisations of the body produced by scientific/medical imaging technologies. The theme of vision devices in medical practice and how they objectify disease in instrument-based

evidence, how they change the narrative, and how they alter the doctor-patient relationship, is grasped by Stanley Reiser with the advent of the stethoscope, and widely revived with the spread of medical imaging and a 'total optical system'.[11]

MOVING BEYOND A REPRESENTATIONAL FRAMEWORK: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MEDICAL IMAGES

As the historian of science Lorraine Daston puts it 'The time is ripe to think about images beyond representation',[12] that is to move beyond the correspondence theory of truth paradigm and regard images as productive agents in the epistemic process. The performative character of images might be valid for images *tout court*, but it is especially applicable to scientific images. Namely, in science and medicine the 'technical image'[13] has become an autonomous tool of thought independent from its referent: it is often the image or data-visualisation itself which become the working object of science and medicine.[14] The field of visual science and technology studies (STS) has long preferred to talk about practices of making visible that mediate, enact, and visualise.[15] If we leave the representational framework behind, what is at stake, then, in these types of images is not only a question of ontology (what an image is) but also of epistemology (what type of knowledge an image enables or prevents), and ethics (what kind of uses/actions are encouraged or prevented by a certain image).

Authors such as Miglio-Galimberti and Donghi-Pezzano seek to conceptually clarify not only what scientific/medical images are — biomedical imaging and thermography, respectively — but also what they do and how they can be used beyond their immediate context of production. In this respect, the wider cultural and socio-political context comes to the foreground as the kaleidoscopic prism through which one can look at the visual event and its multiple facets. Images do things, because they *present* rather than represent a phenomenon, they enact reality that, therefore, becomes tractable. Attention, however, cannot be paid to images as if they were isolated from the practices and technologies/techniques that enable their production, use and circulation. As the literary historian Sander Gilman argues 'To study "medical technology", without understanding how its generation of representations is the key to its understanding, is limited [...]; to study the representations without understanding the technology and the knowledge it generates is equally one-sided'.[16] Implicitly responding to Gilman's call, Donghi-Pezzano and Miglio-Galimberti keep the detailed analysis of the technology and its representational output side by side.

Contemporary medicine trades in images: anatomical atlases, radiographic X-rays, MRI and CT scans, foetal sonograms, and endoscopic exploration of the human viscera, to name just a few. The changing role of diagnostic visuality in

contemporary medical practices has been boosted by the advent of computer-assisted imaging technology[17], inaugurating a new era in the investigation of the body at both molar and molecular level, that is the one composed of organs, muscles, blood, and tissues (the molar scale) and the body composed of neurons, cells, and molecules invisible to the naked eye (the molecular scale).[18] Imaging is a central feature of diagnostic and treatment procedures, and of the patient experience. To be a patient is increasingly to become an image. The pervasive role of digital technologies does not imply, however, that humans have been side-lined. After all, science and medicine like any other human practice are still very much a matter of 'thinking with eyes and hands'.[19]

Visual STS and the turn to matter embraced by humanities and social sciences disciplines have prompted scholars to focus on the material aspects of the visible, pointing out at the networked character of contemporary biomedical vision even when it is increasingly accompanied by non-optical forms of computational imaging.[20] Using the framework of materialist philosophy, Miglio-Galimberti theorise the performative network among bodies (at molar and molecular scale), imaging technologies, data and the visual outputs obtained from them. The authors explain how sense-making is the often-neglected qualitative dimension proper to biomedical imaging: human subjects attempt to make sense of medical images when they *see* them even without possessing the knowledge required to *read* them. Sense-making takes on a phenomenological rather than semiotic nuance since it relies on the subject's own experience of undergoing a certain procedure. Miglio-Galimberti illustrate and put to work the concepts of *agential realism* and *intra*-action coined by the feminist theorist Karen Barad who is one of the most influential representatives of contemporary feminist materialist scholarship.[21] To summarise an elaborate argument, agential realism contends that wide-ranging apparatuses (including medical imaging technologies) do not measure but produce material realities. This relational ontology, the ability to engage with the body-image-technology *ensemble* is key to challenging further the myth and ideology of the transparent body,[22] making us aware that scientific/medical images and data-visualisations not only mediate knowledge of the body, but also obstructs and fragments that knowledge.

Rather than the body understood in generic terms, current literature in materialist scholarship engages with the incarnate and material dimension of corporeality. First elaborated by Foucault (1995) and articulated in its dependency on historically bound discursive and social practices, corporeality can be put at work to better grasp the relationship between bodies and medical imaging technologies.[23] The challenge is to move beyond the dichotomy between the fragmentation of the body operated by medical imaging practices and the body as a totality to be reified and essentialised. The body, then, should be theorised as the 'body multiple', always intertwined with the technologies and practices that sustain it.[24] This is where the passage from ontology to politics starts to become thinkable.

Keeping these planes together — the ontological and the political — and

embracing a Foucauldian and an Agambian theoretical framework, Donghi-Pezzano coin the concept of *thermo-power* as a form of new biopolitical management, exposing the biopolitical power of thermal cameras beyond their immediate function of body contagion prophylactic. They too embrace a relational ontology by considering the body as a medium contiguous to thermal imaging and bodily heat. Their analysis is enriched by a close reading of the work *Virus* created with a thermal camera by the photographer Antoine D'Agata who roamed through the streets of Paris as a witness during the time of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Private spaces (bodies) and public ones (parks, hospitals, etc.) are sensed through a thermal camera that, in the hands of D'Agata, becomes a prosthetic device able to capture traces of humanity and care. The unexpected result of an artist's practice is to make us understand that care should not necessarily be other than technology, that care includes both technologies and embodied practices.[25]

The practice of photographers, filmmakers and other artists is well represented in this special issue which creates intellectual space for the objects and methods proper to the arts and humanities, putting them on equal epistemic terms with the scholarly debates animating the field of the critical medical humanities. According to Fitzgerald and Callard, who have been engaged in collaborative work with artists, those working in the medical humanities either as scholars or practitioners should ask

> *what a more* critical *medical humanities would look like: how might the methodological and intellectual legacies of the humanities intervene more* consequentially *in the clinical research practices of biomedicine – situating accounts of illness, suffering, intervention and cure in a much thicker attention to the social, human and cultural contexts in which those accounts, as well as the bodies to which they attend, become both thinkable and visible?* [26]

This special issue shows how to start taking this call seriously.

It is encouraging to see that articles using a variety of critical approaches from disparate fields (film and media studies, philosophy, visual and cultural studies, to name just a few) ultimately ask readers: why keep making images, still and moving? What purpose do they serve? The answers to these questions, albeit not explicitly formulated, are a recurring motif in many authors' contributions. Borrowing Biernoff's own words, film (the film in question is *Dirty God*) is 'a way of figuring things out, a way of coping'.[27] One could say that still and moving images are transformative, sometimes even therapeutic and lifesaving. This power of images seems to depend more on their emancipatory potential rather than on their indexicality. Sabatino discusses the potential of patient's empowerment when given the opportunity to move from being passive consumers of images they do not control to become image-makers. In her essay on the visual narratives of eating disorders, Nicastro credits moving images with the possibility of interrupting a chain of self-harming repetitive gestures; Miglio-Galimberti recognise how the interaction with medical visualisations

possesses a self-reflexive power in so far as it prompts us to explore ways in which our bodies can be reconfigured and thought anew.

PANDEMIC TRAUMAS

A large frame encloses, sometimes explicitly, sometimes latently, the contributions in this special issue: the fracture generated by the Sars Covid-19 pandemic, still perceived at a social level as an experience without historical precedent. In fact, the memory of past experiences could have provided the keys to interpreting the viral contagion, as well as tools to repair collective grief. This phenomenon has also made clear the manifestation of an actual transcultural trauma. For the first time, the whole world found itself, to a large extent, simultaneously on the side of those suffering and on the side of those who were observing the suffering of others.

As well known, the subject of individual and collective suffering, the different ways of recounting and representing it, and trauma of various kinds and scales, has always been the prerogative of Trauma Studies.[28] By taking its etymology from ancient Greek, the concept of trauma itself draws on the figure of the wound, a laceration produced by a collision between outside and inside not always understood in the event, but experienced with time as a psychological and physical violation. The body is, in fact, the object of interest where Medical Humanities and Trauma Studies converge, with different but complementary attitudes. It will come as no surprise that, just recently, to explain the symbolic processing of trauma, Nick Hodgin and Amit Thakkar contrasted the concept of the wound with the scar, clarifying the difference in strictly medical terms.[29] While the wound refers to the tearing of tissue due to the traumatic event, the scar 'is not identical to the original tissue but a simulacrum of it'.[30] Furthermore, the mark possesses a plastic-visual nature that differs in colour, elasticity and shape, even changing over time. This does not mean that all scars are visible to the naked eye; rather, the idea is to conceive of the traces of trauma not as the reproduction of the wound itself, but as the sign of having been wounded.

Over the years, the visibility of breaches has changed with the use of different technologies capable of passing through tissues and detecting multiple layers of organic matter, sometimes even showing traces of psychiatric trauma at the neurological level (e.g. PTSD). Medical tropes or motifs applied to trauma discourses thus raise the need for a deeper understanding of the agent instances that shape cultures of remembrance and representations of the individual and collective traumatised body.[31] As Amit Pinchevski states, 'the concept of trauma might then be regarded against the cultural techniques of its making: the alignment and interrelation of bodies, knowledge, technologies and practices — from the clinic to the lab, from the "talking cure" to the MRI scan — that have given rise and sustained the traumatised condition'.[32] In this sense, each historical epoch and culture constructs its own narrative of trauma not only in line with institutional rhetoric, but also about medical insights into

the injured body and mind, as well as the technologies to treat them, including visual devices.

The visual representation of the COVID-19 pandemic and its iconography, as it has been constructed and conveyed by the media (television, newspapers, web, etc.), has been consolidated, on the one hand, through the popularisation of medical-scientific imagery. The collective exposure to the traumatic event, in its twofold dimension of exhibiting and undergoing, was in fact often played out through the global proliferation of images dedicated to the isolation of the virus, the tracing of bodies, and the representation of the disease effects on the bodies affected by the contagion. On the other hand, the hypertrophic production of visualised scientific data has attempted to compensate for the blind spots of this traumatic event. The thresholds of the unrepresentable have been redefined not so much by the assumption of an ethics of the gaze towards the sick, but rather by the impossibility of accessing the spaces of the cure, in the most tragic situations condemning the bodies overwhelmed by the virus to disappearance. For this reason, borders between visible and unseen, between scientific and non-scientific imagery, have been constantly challenged and traversed.

Within this volume, the contributions by Alexander Sedzielarz and Samuel Antichi, together with the essay mentioned above by Donghi-Pezzano, specifically address the figures of suffering and the experiences of care related to the recent trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, Sedzielarz and Antichi identify the filmic form and, specifically, documentary production as the privileged place to observe the representability of traumatic facts and the discourse of the traumatised body as the object of care. Alexander Sedzielarz focuses on the analysis of two documentaries — Wang Nanfu's *In the Same Breath* (2021) and Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama* (2021) — to show the complexity of a biopolitical apparatus capable of determining and shaping the life and death of vulnerable subjectivities in different geopolitical and cultural contexts affected by a state of crisis. On the one hand, the author explains how, in documenting the realities and effects of catastrophe, the films work on the traumatic scene not only in spatial, but also in temporal terms: by creating interconnections between heterogeneous temporal levels, the filmmakers propose an act of resistance to that perpetual repetition, both symbolic and concrete, of the original event that prevents the wound from healing. On the other, these cinematic works show how trauma is subjected to the dominant discourse elaborated by the state in order to manage emergency. Indeed, the spaces of care (i.e., hospitals), technologies and representations become the cogs in an institutional system in which the visible order of trauma is regulated and distributed.

By questioning documentary realism in the pandemic age, Samuel Antichi reflects on pandemic imagery, considering the function assumed by data visualisations and infographic material in representing and rendering the devastating effects of viral propagation intelligibly. As the author points out, a large part of the Trauma Studies debate takes on a visual-aesthetic view, as it questions the ways and possibilities to represent trauma through images and

narrations, which are considered the primary mediators for historical knowledge, private and cultural memory and human healing.[33] However, central within pandemic mediation processes of trauma is a shift in the indexical paradigm, in which the contours of reality are reworked through testimonial strategies that oscillate between the storytelling of experienced dramas and the progressive replacement of photographic representation, that is, images of quantitative and biological digital renderings. These media artefacts are created without visual reference to give evidence and credibility to invisible and elusive objects such as the SARS-CoV-2 particle.

In consolidating the discourse of the body as an object of care, contemporary media culture shapes its narratives around certain key concepts, now recurrently used to understand and respond to the collective state of suffering and traumatic experiences, namely the idea of resilience, of regaining good health, and well-being. Not by chance, the articles in this issue recall these recent traumatic events, reflecting on how they tested the resilience of community formations.

In following this prompt, visual culture and media scholars can also question this renewed connection between the representation of illness and the horizon of resilience. Susan Sontag, Donna Haraway, and more recently Jeffrey Olick, all argued that in the face of disease and the experience of trauma, we need to reflect on the ideological substratum that aims to promote positive thinking at all costs, as the outcome of a neo-liberal logic in which the individual and society must strive to overcome difficulties by demonstrating strength, a vocation for struggle and a commitment to overcoming one's vulnerabilities.[34]

The pandemic has forced global society to look at the vulnerabilities of the body and mind with greater awareness, recalling the duty not to impose a closure of the experience of trauma in the illusion of a definitive cure. However, other difficult experiences, such as those analysed, for instance, in Biernoff and Nicastro's essays, also testify to the capacity of images to foster processes of healing, through which the relationship with the original trauma is continuously developed, thanks to the recovery of other representations, both scientific and non-scientific, documentary and fictional.

To conclude, this special issue of *Cinema & Cie* traces a novel cross-disciplinary framework to conceptualise care work in relation to the sick and injured body. Ultimately, the aim is to foreground the healing potential of art and media practices capable of emancipating the body vulnerable to illnesses, as well as to forms of visual scrutiny and intervention. Scholars in the critical medical humanities have invited to widen the scale and sites of the 'primal scene', that is of the doctor-patient encounter.[35] Distributing care work across a network of humans, images, and technologies means inscribing care into the materiality of these circuits instead of side-lining care to the doctor-patient encounter.

Notes

[1] The three authors shared their contents, methodological approaches and the entire editorial work through a constant exchange of ideas. For the introduction to the volume, Deborah Toschi wrote the paragraph *Rethinking the body through new disciplinary trajectories*, Silvia Casini *Moving Beyond a Representational Framework: The Transformative Power of Medical Images*, and Alice Cati *Pandemic Traumas*.

[2] *Imagining Illness. Public Health and Visual Culture*, ed. by David Serlin, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), XIII.

[3] Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body. Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). In this trajectory but closer to Cultural Studies, see: *Wild Science. Reading Feminism, Medicine and the Media*, ed. by Janine Marchessault and Kim Sawchuk (London, New York: Routledge 2000); Catherine Waldby, *The Visible Human Body. Informatic Bodies and the Posthuman Medicine* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

[4] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[5] *The Face of Madness. Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman (New York: Brunner-Mazel, 1976); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representatuion. Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39 (1986), 3-64; Martin Kemp, '"A Perfect and Faithful Record": Mind and Body in Medical Photography Before 1900', in *Beauty of Another Order: Photography in Science*, ed. by Ann Thomas, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 120-49; Tom Gunning, 'In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film', *Modernism/Modernity*, 4.1 (1997), 1-29.

[6] Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles, *Naked to the Bone. Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Jose van Dijck, *The Transparent Body. A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); Silvia Casini, *Giving Bodies Back to Data. Image Makers, Bricolage, and Reinvention in Magnetic Resonance Technology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

[7] Paul Crawford, Brian Brown, and Victoria Tischler, Charley Baker, 'Health humanities: the future of medical humanities?', *Mental Health Review Journal*, 15.3 (2010), 4-10.

[8] William Viney, Callard Felicity and Angela Woods, 'Critical medical humanities: embracing entanglement, taking risk', *Medical Humanities*, 41.1 (2015), 2-7; *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. by Anne Whitehead, Angela Woods (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[9] Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Medicine and Visual Arts', in *Medicine, Health and the Arts. Approaches to the medical humanities*, ed. by Victoria Bates and Alan Bleakley, Sam Goodman (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 41-64.

[10] Deborah Toschi, 'Prenatal Portraits. Ultrasound imagery in expectant mothers' autobiographical narrative', in *Body Images in the Post-Cinematic Scenario. The Digitization of Bodies*, ed. by Alberto Brodesco and Federico Giordano (Milano: Mimesis International, 2017), 63-72.

[11] Sarah Kember, 'Medical diagnostic imaging: the geometry of caos', *New Formations*, 15 (1991), 55-66 (59).

[12] Lorraine Daston, 'Beyond Representation', in *Representation in Scientific Practice Revisited*, ed. by Catelijne Coopmans and others (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 319–323 (320).

[13] Technical images are either based on instruments or obtained through image-making procedures or they are themselves tools. Although the locution is used to describe images that originate in the field of science, technology and medicine, it can also encompass images from the arts. See *The Technical Image. A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel, and Birgit Schneider (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[14] For an analysis of images (artistic and scientific) that work at the limits of representation see James Elkins, *Six Stories from the End of Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[15] The literature in STS and visual culture is rich. See Bernike Pasveer, 'Representing or Mediating. A History and Philosophy of X-Ray Images in Medicine', in *Visual Cultures of Science. Rethinking Representational Practices in Knowledge Building and Science Communiation*, ed. by Luc Pauwels (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006), 41-62; Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, 'Missing the (Question)

Mark? What Is a Turn to Ontology?', *Social Studies of Science*, 45.3 (2015), 462–67. Two comprehensive edited collections on scientific images beyond representation that combine STS with anthropology and philosophy are: *Visualization in the Age of Computerization*, ed. by Annamaria Carusi and others (New York: Routledge, 2015); *Representation in Scientific Practice Revisited*, ed. by Catelijne Coopmans and others (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014). For a visual culture study that introduces some of the terminologies and debates see Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, *Cultura Visuale. Immagini, Sguardi, Media, Dispositivi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016).

[16] Sander Gilman, 'Representing Health and Illness: Thoughts for the Twenty-First Century', *Medical History*, 55.3 (2011), 295–300 (299).

[17] See Ilana Löwy, 'Historiography of Biomedicine "Bio", "Medicine" and In Between', *Isis*, 102 (2011), 116–122; Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

[18] The shift from the molar to the molecular body is theorised in Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twentieth-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[19] Bruno Latour, 'Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands', in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, ed. by Elizabeth Long and Henrika Kuklick, (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1986), 1-40.

[20] See, for example, Anne Beaulieu, 'A Space for Measuring Mind and Brain: Interdisciplinarity and Digital Tools in the Development of Brain Mapping and Functional Imaging, 1980–1990', *Brain and Cognition*, 49.1 (2002), 13–33.

[21] See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). The work of Wilson is also relevant to new materialism. See Elizabeth A Wilson, *Gut feminism* (Duke University Press, 2015). Both Barad and Wilson contribute to feminist theory and science studies by calling for feminist materialist scholarship to engage more directly with physics (Barad) and biology (Wilson).

[22] van Dijck, *The Transparent Body*.

[23] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison 2nd* edition, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). For a phenomenological reading of corporeality using a Foucauldian framework see Francisco Ortega, *Corporeality, Medical Technologies and Contemporary Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014). Moving beyond a Foucauldian framework, Wilson reads recent developments in biology through a new feminist materialist approach. See Elizabeth A. Wilson, 'Organic empathy: Feminism, psychopharmaceuticals, and the embodiment of depression', in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 373-399.

[24] Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

[25] See *Care in Practice. On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*, ed. by Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010).

[26] Des Fitzgerald and Felicity Callard, 'Entangling the Medical Humanities', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. by Anne Whitehead and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 35-49 (35).

[27] Susannah Biernoff, *Sacha Polak's Dirty God and the Politics of Authenticity*, infra, 32.

[28] Since the Eighties, by harmonizing humanistic, psychological and cultural approaches, this field of research helped to formulate a series/corpus of theories concerning an analysis of trauma as an interpretative model. Accordingly, trauma studies have internally developed various perspectives of research, as a confirmation of an intrinsic multidisciplinary vocation: critic-cultural approach [Jeffrey C. Alexander and others, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); *Critical Trauma Studies. Understanding Violence, Conflict and, Memory in Everyday Life*, ed. by Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016)]; affect theory [Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (2011), 434-472], neuro-cognitive approach [*The act of remembering: Toward an understanding of how we recall the past*, ed. by John H. Mace (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2010)]; post-colonial approach [*Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (Basel: MDPI, 2016)]. Moreover, the transcultural turn has been crucial in explaining in a more systematic way how contemporary

culture is increasingly characterised by cultural practices that transcend national borders and foster the action of cultures of remembrance at a multidirectional level, i.e. across both space (geo-political contexts) and time (historical periods). See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Standford: Standford University Press, 2009) and *Transcultural Memory*, ed. by Rick Crownshaw (London, New York: Routledge, 2014).

[29] *Scars and Wounds. Film and Legacies of Trauma*, ed. by Nick Hodgin and Amit Thakkar (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017).

[30] Ibidem, 16.

[31] Mediation processes of trauma are usually associated to therapeutic models (*working through, acting out, replacement, re-enacting*) in order to demonstrate the reparative potential of media representations and practices. See *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), *Trauma and Cinema. Cross-Cultural Explorations*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), Alice Cati, *Immagini della memoria. Teorie e pratiche del ricordo tra testimonianza, genealogia, documentari* (Udine, Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2013).

[32] Amit Pinchevski, 'Screen Trauma: Visual Media and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33.4 (2016), 51–75 (53). See also the recent volume by the same author, reviewed here: Amit Pinchevski, *Transmitted Wounds. Media and the Mediation of Trauma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[33] On this aspect, the following volumes are fundamental: *Interrogating Trauma. Collective Suffering in Global Arts and Media ed. by Mick Broderick and Antonio Traverso* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011) and *Trauma Theory*, ed. by Susannah Radstone, Janet Walker, Noah Shenker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[34] Jeffrey K. Olick, 'The poverty of resilience: On memory, meaning, and well-being', *Memory Studies*, 9.3 (2016), 315–324.

[35] Viney, Callard, and Woods, 2

Sacha Polak's *Dirty God* and the Politics of Authenticity

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Dutch director Sacha Polak's *Dirty God* (2019) is the first narrative film with a female lead whose scars are real, and arguably the first to tackle the assumption that scars (especially on a woman's body) are shameful or tragic. Vicky Knight, who plays Jade, a young woman rebuilding her life after an acid attack, has talked about the revelation of seeing her body on screen after enduring years of abuse because of her appearance. Polak 'saved my life' she says, by enabling her to see her scarred body as beautiful, 'a piece of art.' Like any art form, film has the potential to be transformative, and in interviews both Knight and Polak have repeatedly spoken of their work in those terms. This article uses *Dirty God* to think about what is at stake in the dismantling of stereotypes and the reclamation of beauty — a goal shared by many disability rights campaigners. Made at a time when escalating cases of acid violence in London were making headlines around the world, Polak's film prompts comparisons with Katie Piper's *Beautiful* (2011) and other survivor memoirs. Privileging imperfection over repair and fragility over strength, it challenges existing portrayals of disfigurement and, in the process, offers a more radical understanding of beauty and authenticity.

I am flesh, bones
I am skin, soul
I am human
Nothing more than human

I am sweat, flaws
I am veins, scars
I am human
Nothing more than human

(*Emmanuel Adjei*, Human)

The opening shots of Sacha Polka's *Dirty God* glide like a caress over an expanse of bare skin [Fig. 1].[1] A hand passes lightly across delicate tendrils of scar tissue and the strange, pale landscape resolves into the surface of a body. *Human*, by Iranian-Dutch singer Sevdaliza, completes the title sequence with a choric commentary.

We meet Jade as her mother Lisa (Katherine Kelly) is picking her up from
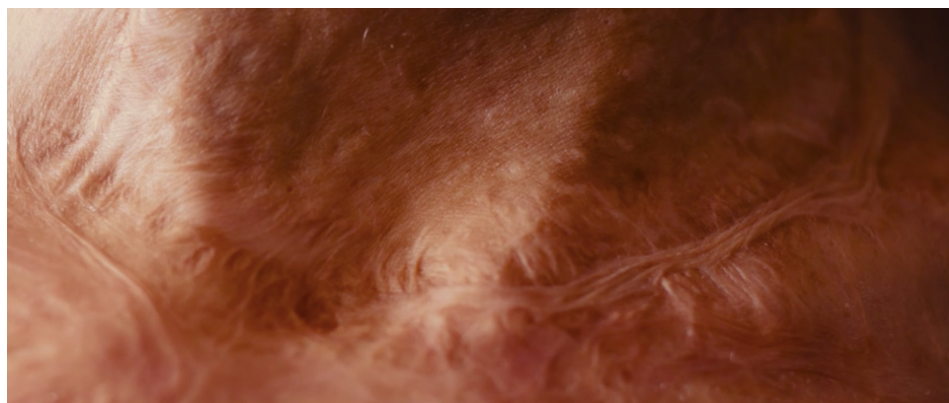
the burns unit of an East London hospital. Their taxi drives past shuttered shop fronts, Victorian railway arches, pedestrians, bus stops: people going about their everyday lives. Jade looks silently out of the window, her face expressionless beneath the transparent facial orthosis (TFO) that she has been told to wear while her scars heal. At home she is greeted by the inconsolable screams of her tiny daughter Rae (two-year-old Eliza Brady-Girard). *Dirty God* is about the physical and emotional aftermath of an acid attack, but it is also a film about living on a Hackney council estate, going clubbing, falling in love, and the fragile, fallible bonds between mothers and daughters.

In interviews on the festival circuit and in the British press, first-time actor Vicky Knight talked openly about the impact of seeing her scars on screen. Having been seriously burned in an arson attack on her grandfather's pub in Hackney when she was eight, Knight had endured 'being called a monster' through her school years. Polak 'saved my life', she says, by enabling her to see her scarred body differently, as 'a piece of art' rather than something to hide.[2] Like any art form, film has the potential to be transformative — for the makers as well as for viewers — and both Knight and Polak have spoken of filmmaking as a way of working through difficult experiences.[3]

This article uses *Dirty God* to ask what is at stake in the dismantling of stereotypies and the aesthetic reclamation of the disfigured body — a goal shared by many disability rights campaigners, and a recurring theme in the Pride and body positivity movements.[4] From its overwhelmingly positive critical reception, it is clear that part of the answer to this question, for reviewers and funders, is the film's authenticity. *Dirty God* is the first feature-length drama with a female lead whose scars are real, and the first to tackle the pervasive assumption that scars (especially on the female body) are tragic or shameful. Covering the Rotterdam Film Festival for *Screen* in January 2019, Fionnuala Halligan called it 'a giant move forward in terms of representation'.[5] For Changing Faces campaigner Ryan Foal, who was born with a cleft lip and palate, it is 'the finest cinematic portrayal of life with disfigurement to date'.[6]

Despite its presence in mainstream cinema since the 1920s,[7] facial disfigurement has been largely neglected by film scholars, who have focused instead on the filmic significance of 'the face' in general.[8] The most recent

example of this tendency, Noa Steimatsky's *The Face on Film* (2017), approaches the face as 'a privileged locus, as a measure — even as essence — of the cinema'.[9] The non-beautiful is not part of her critical lexicon, and most of the faces she analyses are conspicuously normative (if not luminously beautiful). While there are passing references to the faces of the suffering, maimed, and dead of two world wars, visible in newsreels and documentaries, they 'demand a separate enquiry'.[10] As a historian rather than a film theorist, my aims are different from Steimatsky's. This article is part of a larger project that examines the stigma of facial difference through cultural tropes that are so familiar that they have become invisible. Rather than asking what the face means for film, I am using film — and its contexts and legacies — as a way of thinking about the cultural mechanisms of stigma.[11]

Disfigurement (facial and otherwise) is also under-researched within disability studies: a significant omission given the inclusion of disfigurement in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and the 1995 UK Disability Discrimination Act — legal recognition of the fact that having an appearance at odds with conventional standards of attractiveness makes it likely that you will experience (often daily) prejudice and discrimination.[12] The major studies of film and disability, including Martin Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, focus on sensory and motor disabilities,[13] a tendency mirrored in the disability studies literature and in database and collections projects like the British Film Institute's Disabled Britain on Film and Vanderbilt's Films: Portrayal of People with Disabilities search tool.[14] Norden, whose study is the most ambitious of these sources, limits his remit to 'severe visual, auditory, or orthopaedic impairment'.[15] Disfigurement — as a *social* disability often unaccompanied by physical impairment — is neither defined nor historicized.

In November 2018 the British charity Changing Faces launched a campaign to end negative stereotypes of people with disfigurements in the media and entertainment.[16] In the *#IAmNotYourVillain* campaign video, five young people talk about their earliest memories of being bullied because of their appearance. Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series (2001-11), DC's Joker, and Scar from *The Lion King* top the list of hurtful names. 'It would be quite nice to have a hero or a good person with a visible difference', says one of the young contributors. As a direct result of the campaign, the British Film Institute (BFI) no longer funds films through the National Lottery that include negative depictions of visible difference.

When *Dirty God* was released in early 2019, the BFI's Film Fund director Ben Roberts welcomed it as 'a fantastic example of [an] authentic, empathetic and positive portrayal'.[17] But what, exactly, does it mean to call Knight's performance 'utterly authentic' as Mark Kermode does in his review for the *Observer*[18] Authenticity is one of those concepts — like beauty and realism — that seems to operate on an intuitive level, but in fact rests on a host of assumptions and conventions that change over time. One of the challenges taken up here is thinking about authenticity more contextually, as a value that reflects particular historical coordinates. For Polak and her collaborators, these coordinates include a new

interest in imperfection as an aesthetic value, and a changing funding landscape in the UK in which questions of representation are explicitly linked to policies of diversity and inclusion.

In *On Being Authentic* (2004), the philosopher Charles Guignon identifies two main components of the Romantic conception of authenticity.[19] The first is the assumption that there is an essential self, deep within each of us, which can be discovered through self-reflection, introspection or contemplation. The second assumption is that once we find this authentic self, it is possible to live in a way that gives it full expression. Asked in a BFI interview if she had any advice for other young people, Knight put it this way: 'You want to be like everyone else, and it doesn't work. Just be yourself. There's only one of you'.[20] These convictions rest, in turn, upon a modern, western understanding of the self as something *bounded* and *self-encapsulated* — very different from the more porous and fractured *inner* and *outer* selves that one finds in early Christian and medieval texts, for example.[21] Authenticity, then, is not a new ideal. What is new, as Guignon and others have observed, is the 'burgeoning industry' that has 'grown up in recent years with the aim of reforming and transforming people in order to make them authentic'.[22]

Most formulations of authenticity — from Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) to Phillip C. McGraw, or 'Dr Phil' as he is known to viewers of his television chat show — share an emphasis on the personal: self-knowledge, self-actualisation, self-expression.[23] In his concluding chapter Guignon asks, instead, what authenticity might look like as a 'social virtue'.[24] This article can be read as a response to his question. It is not about the film itself — as a cultural text to be interpreted – so much as the social, institutional and political spaces around it: the historical moment in which Jade's story coalesces and is embodied, and the factors that shape the film's reception. I map some of the discourses and tropes surrounding acid violence and disfigurement in the early decades of 21ˢᵗ century Britain and locate *Dirty God* in a cultural sphere that is shared with media representations and autobiographical 'survivor' narratives. Although I argue that authenticity is negotiated, constructed and performed in these spaces rather than given and innate, this is not meant to imply that that it can't also be a meaningful personal goal. In the final part of the article I trace Polak's interest in disfigurement through her previous film, the documentary *Nieuwe Tieten* (*New Boobs*, 2013), which chronicles her experience of risk-reducing surgery when genetic testing reveals that she is carrying the BRCA1 gene mutation. Both films touch on the medicalisation of disfigurement while illuminating the practical ways in which visible difference is negotiated on a daily basis.

Like all creative projects, *Dirty God* has several beginnings. Asked in interviews how she came up with the idea for Jade's story, Polak describes an incident that took place at Lowlands, a music festival held every summer near Amsterdam. She noticed a young woman with burns scars in the crowd: 'I looked at her and I flinched, and I saw everybody around her doing the same thing' she recalls.[25] Everyone was watching and it struck her that it must always be like that: 'I realised you're never allowed to forget having such an injury'.[26] Jade's story

started to take shape several years later, in 2014, while Polak was living and working in London.[27] With co-writer Susie Farrell she began interviewing young female burns survivors. Jaf Shah, the director of ASTI (Acid Survivors Trust International) put them in contact with Katie Gee, who in 2013 had battery acid thrown at her while working as a volunteer in Zanzibar. They talked to Gee and women who'd had similar experiences 'about how they felt about themselves, if they thought they would find a new partner in life, what the hurdles were.'[28]

Wanting to cast someone who could relate to the story, Polak and Farrell approached Lucy Pardee, the agent who found Katie Jarvis for Andrea Arnold's 2009 film *Fish Tank*. Pardee sent them a video that Knight had posted on social media when she was eighteen: made on her iPad, the five minutes film had gone viral, attracting the attention of producers at Betty, a small UK production company that had been acquired by the Discovery network. Knight had accepted their invitation to take part in a documentary, only finding out when the filming was over that the series would be called *Too Ugly for Love?* The experience was 'humiliating' and when it was broadcast in 2014, Knight ended up being targeted on the virulently antifeminist website Sluthate.[29]

It took Pardee a full year to persuade Knight to audition for *Dirty God*.[30] By then, people were starting to talk about the alarming rise in attacks involving corrosive substances in the UK. London Metropolitan Police data record an increase of more than 500% between 2012 and 2016, from 73 reports up to 469.[31] Although the victims (and perpetrators) were mostly male, it was the stories of young female victims that dominated the popular press.[32] As the public faces of the epidemic of acid violence, their scars became signifiers of a pathologized masculinity and its devastating effects. *Dirty God* shares the news media's focus on the disfigured female body, but unlike the tabloids — which detail exactly what happened, and what it felt like — Jade's story is told without flashbacks. Nor is the perpetrator, Jade's ex-boyfriend, fleshed out for us. He has a symbolic, hallucinatory presence in the film, appearing to her as a totemic birdman, plumed in raven's feathers, but Polak denies us the voyeuristic thrill of watching the attack or seeing its immediate aftermath.

Dirty God diverges in other significant ways from media representations of acid violence, providing an alternative to their narratives of pain and isolation. Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garrisi have shown that the tabloid newspapers, in particular, focused on the victim's experience and feelings rather than on the wider contexts of acid violence, or society's response to it.[33] There was little discussion of the mediating roles of social relationships and community, or the institutional contexts of healthcare and policing. The British tabloids are known for their sensationalism, but in these articles we see sensation itself becoming a kind of currency.[34] Their actual subject is not violence, but pain: indescribable, unprecedented pain.[35]

Dirty God is not about pain; it is a closely observed study of human relationships — between friends and lovers, mothers and daughters. The tabloid accounts, by contrast, 'create a scenario of loneliness'.[36] A typical article in *The Mirror* from June 2015 features an interview with Becky, whose partner paid another man

to carry out the attack that left her with burns to 40% of her body. 'I couldn't bear the way I looked', says Becky of her scars. 'I knew they would never fade. I thought, "Who will want me now?"'.[37] This tendency to subjectify emotional and physical pain — to see it as personal and private rather than social or structural — conforms to portrayals of domestic violence in popular culture, which either blame women for being victims (for making bad choices, for provoking abuse), or present male violence as 'natural'.[38] Jade, however, is neither an archetypal 'victim' nor a conventional 'survivor'.

In July 2017, the *Guardian* columnist Deborah Orr wrote an article responding to reports of five acid attacks in East London the previous night. The Home Office had convened a joint summit with the National Police Chiefs' Council earlier that month and a petition calling for greater regulation of corrosive substances was gathering signatures online. Orr's piece reflects on the collective anxiety provoked by attacks that felt both extreme and symbolic: 'In a culture of individuality and identity', she writes, 'this is a crime that attacks individuality and identity. It changes people — how they look, how they feel — for the rest of their lives'.[39] At that point, the lack of a consistent pattern was particularly bewildering, with statistics indicating that people over 75 made up a significant proportion of the victims. 'Who would throw acid at an elderly man or woman?' she asks. 'Or at anyone?' Throwing acid, Orr concludes, is a 'narcissistic crime [...]. The perpetrator gets to feel powerful [and] at the same time they irreparably devalue the victim'.[40]

Understanding these crimes as symbolic acts — as a symptom of cultural narcissism or pathologized masculinity — helps to contain the generalized fear they provoke. The attention to young, attractive, female victims in the news media has also meant that healing is likely to be seen in terms of the restoration or reclamation of female beauty. Survivor narratives have played a significant role in voicing these themes. There have been several widely publicised accounts,[41] but Katie Piper's memoirs and television documentaries have had the widest reach in the UK: Channel 4's four-part documentary series Katie: *My Beautiful Face* was watched by 3.3 million people in October 2009, and 2011's follow-up series *Katie: My Beautiful Friends* attracted 1.7 million viewers.[42] In her 2011 autobiography *Beautiful* (*A beautiful girl. An evil man. One inspiring true story of courage*) and the sequel *Beautiful Ever After* (2014), beauty and the unbeautiful are dichotomous but unstable concepts, tethered to physical appearance as well as the state of the soul.[43]

Beautiful opens with a description of a mirror. Piper hasn't seen her face since the surgery for her burn injuries and her psychologist hands her a small plastic mirror with the advice to take her time. 'That normal little mirror became a window into hell', she writes. Instead of seeing a scarred but recognizable version of herself, she is confronted with something that doesn't cohere into a whole. Her skin is 'like meat hanging in a butcher's window', or 'like candle wax'; her eyes 'like two cartoonish globes'; her lips 'like sausages'. 'Where's my face?' she screams inside her head, 'my beautiful, stolen face'.[44]

Before her modelling and television career Piper trained as a hair and beauty

therapist and her vocational investment in physical beauty is a sustaining source of optimism. 'Helping other women feel good about themselves' was something she took to instinctively.[45] But she was also aware that self-improvement was a fool's game: 'surrounded by beautiful people' she became 'more and more obsessed' with how she looked.[46] Piper's writing is shot through with ambivalence: beauty is a source of power, solidarity, self-care and affirmation, and at the same time an unobtainable, oppressive ideal. Founded in 2009, the Katie Piper Foundation has provided make-up support as well as advice on hair replacement for people whose injuries have caused permanent hair loss. This is not just about camouflage or 'passing' as non-disfigured; it is about learning 'how to look and feel great with hair styling, manicures and false eyelashes'.[47] The (re)construction of beauty, in this context, is a therapeutic process rather than a fixed ideal. Sometimes it is simply about feeling 'a little bit less ugly'.[48] Familiar rituals of beautification — depilating her legs, painting her toenails — allow Piper to reclaim her body. She starts a photo diary and calls it 'My Pictorial Journal to Recovery'.[49]

Sacha Polak visited Piper's charity when she was developing the screenplay for *Dirty God* and there are points of overlap between Jade's story and Katie's. Young, blond and attractive, both women are the victims of pathologically jealous and controlling partners. And for both, acquired disfigurement prompts filmic comparisons. Piper likens her appearance to the *Phantom of the Opera* and Hannibal Lecter.[50] One night, while she is painting her nails, she catches sight of 'something' in the little mirror on her manicure box. With its 'puckered skin and dead eyes' it looks back at her like 'the face of a character from a Hammer Horror movie'.[51] Polak addresses the legacy of cinematic monstrosity more indirectly, by evoking the innocent gaze of Jade's daughter. 'Monster', says Rae when she visits her mum in the burns unit for the first time. Wiping away a tear as she tells her friend, Jade remembers her mother's attempt to reassure the frightened child: 'She's a nice monster Rae. Like *In the Night Garden*'.[52] You can look like Quasimodo, says Jade's Polish friend later, 'but what a kid sees is a knockout. That's what a mum is to a kid',[53] Beauty, she implies, is simply unconditional love.

There are other, more significant, differences between the two accounts. Piper's surgeon is her guardian angel, presiding over her morphine dreams and guiding her towards hope and 'new beginnings'.[54] For Jade there are no guardian angels, no surgical fixes. 'So I'm left with this fucking dog's dinner' is Jade's angry retort when her female surgeon says she is healing well and they don't need to consider further surgery.[55] Later, at home, she finds an ad on Google for 'cheap plastic surgery in Morocco'.[56] Phoning the number on the website, she sets in train an inevitable sequence of betrayals and disappointments. Morocco is a turning point, not just because there is (of course) no surgeon, but because it brings Jade and Naz (Bluey Robinson) together. Their mutual attraction has a history that is left mostly unspoken, and as they stand together on the balcony of the hotel room they are sharing with Jade's best friend (and Naz's girlfriend) Shami (Rebecca Stone), the conversation turns existential. 'My god's different

Fig. 2
Leaving hospital: Vicky Knight as Jade in *Dirty God*. Screenshot

to your god', Jade confides quietly. 'My god's a dirty god'.[57] It's hot. Shami is sunbathing by the hotel pool way below, they kiss, and he strokes her scarred breast and arm.

Healing, for Jade (and arguably for Knight and Polak) means learning to see beauty in imperfection and fragility. This is different from Piper's rituals of beautification, which have more in common with psychoanalytic accounts of femininity as a masquerade.[58] Recent attempts to promote a more diverse image of beauty — Rick Guidotti's 'Positive Exposure' project in the US, for example, and Rankin's 'Portrait Positive' campaign for Changing Faces in the UK — have shown that glamour and attractiveness are remarkably versatile and pliable commodities, particularly in the hands of professional stylists and fashion photographers.[59] While these campaigns are empowering and valuable, one of the critiques of body positivity has been that it makes individuals responsible for 'self-care,' rather than society. It is, in other words, a typical neoliberal solution to a systemic problem. Self-esteem is not just a personal quality, insists Sarah Banet-Weiser, it is a 'cultural and economic currency' inflected by class, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, and also of course an extremely lucrative market.[60] Like beauty, it is something you are expected to work at, invest in and perform.

But for Knight — who is gay and from a working-class background — beauty is not about conforming to a middle-class, heteronormative ideal.[61] Knight herself rarely wears makeup and in extreme close-up the haptic sense of seeing/touching bare skin creates an intimacy that would be difficult to achieve with cosmetics. It is hard to think of another film that treats real scars as so aesthetically interesting. In his review on the Changing Faces website, Ryan Foal describes the title sequence as 'beautifully lit and shot like an intricate landscape', inviting the audience to look closely at Jade's scars and to 'recognize [their] beauty'.[62] And because we see her body at such close range, there is no moment of shock when we encounter Jade sitting on the edge of her hospital bed in a leopard print sweatshirt and TFO, her hair tied back neatly in a ponytail,

waiting to go home [Fig. 2]. The absence of a delayed reveal sets *Dirty God* apart from virtually every other filmic portrayal of facial disfigurement. As Kermode remarks in his review, Belgian cinematographer Ruben Impens' slow close-ups of Knight offer an 'arrestingly tactile' alternative to the conventions of cinematic disfiguration.[63]

Jade's appearance is also partly the creation of award-winning Danish make-up effects designer Morten Jacobsen (who was nominated for a British Independent Film Award for his work on *Dirty God*). Jacobsen extended Knight's scars, which come up to her right cheekbone, so that they would cover the right side of her face [Fig. 3]. The result is an amplification of reality, a prosthetic augmentation that blurs the line between fact and fabrication. This has not discouraged critics and industry professionals from welcoming the film's honesty. In her review for *Sight & Sound*, Nikki Baughan called it 'bitingly authentic'.[64] Foal, who has written eloquently about his own experiences of prejudice, shame and the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' observes:

> In an industry where disfigurement marginalisation is commonplace, casting an actor with burns to play a character with burns feels oddly radical. [...] As someone with a facial disfigurement, there is often a sense that our stories don't belong to us, and that our faces and bodies only exist as tropes in movies to elicit fear or pity.[65]

Fig. 3
Dirty God quad poster, 40 inches x 30 inches (UK)

Like beauty, authenticity is a term that has become politically inflected in recent decades, ritually invoked in discussions of literature, film, theatre, visual art, political populism, and social media (where being outed as 'fake' can end a career). In *Authentic™* (2012) Banet-Weiser links the rise of authenticity as a dominant cultural value to the expansion of brand culture in 21st century America (although many of the trends she identifies are global). 'In a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding', she writes, 'in a culture characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even more weight'.[66] Her account is useful for the attention it gives to the myriad ways in which contemporary authenticity is materialised and embodied.

Ogilvy & Mather's campaign for Dove soap exemplifies the ambivalence that Banet-Weiser identifies as part of brand culture. 'Evolution', the first in a series of viral videos, was released in October 2006 and shows a young, conventionally attractive but unremarkable white woman being transformed by make-up artists and stylists, then photographed and her image digitally enhanced to create an image of airbrushed perfection. 'No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted', runs the tagline. 'A catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty' according to the Dove website, the 95 second video got millions of hits on YouTube and won awards in the Viral and Film categories at Cannes Lions 2007.[67] Banet-Weiser uses Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty as a case study of 'commodity activism', a form of activism that promises empowerment through personal transformation rather than through civic participation or collective struggle. She is not saying that authenticity™ is inauthentic — just a myth pedalled by the advertising industry, a product of economic determinism. Rather, she sees consumer capitalism in more complex terms, as a 'nuanced, multilayered context for identity formation' and 'an explicitly *cultural space*'.[68] Brand managers, designers, and creative producers are part of this culture, and so too are consumers.

Like Banet-Weiser, I want to question the traditional idea of authenticity as something given — a quality that some people (or some images or performances) possess, and others lack. Performative, stylistic, and rhetorical, authenticity is negotiated at every stage of the creative process, from script development and funding applications to lighting and makeup. Even the prosthetic scars on Jade's upper cheek confound the usual binary opposition of the authentic vs. the inauthentic. 'I felt like for the film you need to exaggerate a bit', Polak says, explaining that Jacobsen used prints of Knight's lower face, so the fabricated scars are real too, in a way. She adds that the makeup truck — where Knight spent an hour, sometimes longer, at the beginning and end of each day of shooting — was a 'sort of her little world', where she could listen to music, relax, joke around.[69]

Authenticity is also not without risk or cost. Knight has talked about how hard it was being the centre of attention on set after so many years of trying to hide her scars. She has described her distress at the camera 'being so close'.[70] The vulnerability that comes through in her performance is genuine,

but this emotional labour is also a form of capital. It adds value by converting 'experience' into a commodity. The authenticity of Knight's performance also made it necessary for everyone else on set to navigate the risk of exploitation. When they were filming in Morocco some of the crew members asked Polak what she planned on doing with Vicky afterwards, whether she was going to pay for her therapy. If you work with someone who is vulnerable, who has been hurt in the past, Polak told me, 'you make a promise to take care of them afterwards. It's not only for the shoot, it's really a lifetime promise'.[71]

Dirty God, which received export and distribution funding through the BFI Film Fund in 2018 and 2019, reflects a new strategic focus on diversity and inclusion in British film and television production. Launched in June 2016, the BFI's Diversity Standards address issues of underrepresentation both on screen and behind the camera, primarily (though not exclusively) in relation to the protected characteristics named in the UK Equality Act 2010, which makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the grounds of race, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief, age, pregnancy or maternity, marriage/civil partnership or sex/gender. Film funding applications now need to meet at least two out of four criteria: one relating to on-screen representation, another addressing diversity in the context of recruitment and creative leadership, the third focusing on training opportunities, and the fourth concerned with audience development. Envisaged as a flexible framework that could be used for feature films, television and online content, film festivals and other audience-facing activities, the Standards are a contractual requirement for all BFI funding. At the time of writing they have been adopted by Film4, BBC Films, BAFTA, BIFA and Paramount Studios, and all producers working in the UK are being encouraged to voluntarily adopt the Standards by the end of 2022.[72]

Jennifer Smith, the BFI's Head of Diversity since 2017, insists that the Diversity Standards are not a tick-box exercise or a rulebook. She sees them as a catalyst, an 'agent of change', with the potential 'to make behaviours different, to make people think about portrayal and representation'.[73] She also acknowledges that 'there is a nuance around portrayal that often gets lost' in public discourse. This is where stakeholder consultation — in forums like the BFI's Disability Screen Advisory Group — can play a valuable role in initiating a discussion about what a 'good' portrayal looks like. I asked Smith if consensus was likely. She immediately said no, 'there won't be consensus. There will be huge debate, but the point about visible difference is that it's [currently] a hidden debate' rather than a public conversation.[74] While the practice of 'cripping up' — where nondisabled actors play disabled characters — has been spotlighted in the media, the Diversity Standards articulate a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. Applicants for funding have to reflect on their casting choices, storylines, locations, themes and narratives, and are invited to 'describe where there are complex and non-stereotypical representations of characters, talent or contributors who are normally relegated to two-dimensional roles'.[75]

Authenticity, then, is the result of countless creative, pragmatic and ethical

decisions. It is also, I have suggested, a form of capital, requiring investment and entailing risk. If we want to know how a film like *Dirty God* challenges disfigurement tropes, authenticity in casting is certainly part of the answer, but so is the way the film aligns with changing cultural values and funding priorities, and with Polak's own trajectory as a filmmaker. When I asked her if *Dirty God* was a personal project, she told me that in the Netherlands, journalists would often bring up the film that preceded it, *Nieuwe Tieten* (2013). Documenting her experience of testing positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation associated with hereditary breast and ovarian cancer, there are obvious parallels with *Dirty God*. Talking to her, one senses that Polak grasps the existential weight of Jade's situation: her refusal to accept the surgeon's decision that this is a 'good result', her compulsive search for another opinion. Both are intimate portraits of scarred female bodies, and in both films mothers and daughters are a central axis. Polak's mother died of breast cancer when she was eleven months old, but she comes to life on screen in family photos and videos, and in the journal entries she wrote after her diagnosis. Yet when I ask Polak about the connection between the two films, she replies briefly, 'it's not like 1 + 1 is 2. It's more complicated'.[76] Jade is not Sacha, but arguably Polak's own experiences make *Dirty God* a more nuanced, more direct, and also less grim film than it might otherwise have been.

Nieuwe Tieten shows us that weighing abstract calculations about life and death against the physical immediacy of mutilation (the term is used several times) is not straightforward. Polak's fear of disfigurement is as visceral as her fear of dying. Filmed partly by her stepmother, who is also a confidante and interlocutor, Polak involves us in the agonizing process of reaching a decision. In one consultation with a surgeon, she and her boyfriend are shown a ring-binder of post-operative images. The first patient has had a mastectomy without reconstruction ('we want to avoid this' says the consultant, briskly turning the page); the next image is 'not the prettiest', but a reasonable outcome using prosthetic implants. Another photograph shows fabricated nipples: buds of skin and scar tissue colored by a tattoo artist. Still undecided, she goes to meet other women who have had breast surgery; one lets her feel the firm dome of silicone implant beneath her skin.

In the end, Polak opts for a procedure that uses tissue from her abdomen to form new breasts. After the first six-hour operation, she films herself in the bathroom mirror. Incision lines run across her newly constructed nipples. The horizontal wound that bisects the skin of her abdomen is surprisingly large. 'I look as if I floated in the canal for a few months', she says dryly. Loss runs through both films like a current, but so does humor, and an instinctive avoidance of sentimentality. Making films, Polak says at the start of *Nieuwe Tieten*, is simply something she can do. It is a way of figuring things out, a way of coping. The experience is similar for Knight: acting — and seeing herself on screen — is a process of clarification, of working through. Pointing out that her family was never offered counselling after the fire (in which her two cousins died), Knight says making *Dirty God* was a necessarily difficult but healing experience. 'It's

given me another window to look out. I see myself as human now, and not as a monster. I love my scars. […] I think they tell a story'.[77]

There is an awkward moment at the end of a *Dirty God* Q&A where Polak interrupts the host as she is winding up the event. 'Can I say something?' she asks, leaning into the microphone. Indicating that she is speaking for Knight and her co-star Bluey Robinson, who sit next to her on the platform, she says 'we've all worked really hard on this film, and it took us a long time. This film is very fragile and vulnerable'.[78] Her comment does more than signal authenticity: it claims fragility and vulnerability as ethical and aesthetic values. This is not just a harrowing or inspirational or realistic portrayal of an acid attack survivor; it is a film that makes demands on us because, like *Nieuwe Tieten*, it documents an unpredictable, risky process in a way that is unusually honest. In complicated ways, it reflects Polak's experience of mortality and mutilation as well as Knight's, while creating a compelling fictional world in which the membrane between fantasy and reality is always porous. It is a film that challenges the available cultural representations of disfigurement and tells a new story about what it is like to live with visible scars. But it also reflects very particular anxieties about acid violence and — like the British tabloids and Katie Piper's memoirs — uses a woman's body to explore them.

Notes

¹ *Dirty God* (Sacha Polak, 2019).

² Ellie Harrison, 'Vicky Knight: "My First Film Saved My Life — I Don't Want to Die Anymore, I Want to Outlive My Bullies"', *Independent*, 23 November 2019 <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/vicky-knight-dirty-god-interview-fire-burns-survivor-a9213661.html> [accessed 27 July 2021].

³ *New Boobs* (*Nieuwe Tieten*, Sacha Polak, 2013); Tom Seymour, 'Interview', *Guardian*, 17 May 2019 <www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/17/i-hid-my-scars-for-years-i-thought-i-was-only-good-for-horror-movies> [accessed 27 July 2021].

⁴ Suzannah Biernoff, 'Beauty, Ugliness and Ideas of Difference: The Politics of the Personal', in *A Cultural History of Beauty in the Modern Age*, ed. by Paul Deslandes (forthcoming, New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

⁵ Fionnuala Halligan, '"Dirty God": Rotterdam Review', *Screen Daily*, 24 January 2019 <http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/dirty-god-rotterdam-review/5135749.article> [accessed 27 July 2021].

⁶ Ryan Foal, 'Campaigner Ryan reviews Dirty God', *Changing Faces*, 1 December 2020 <www.changingfaces.org.uk/story/campaigner-ryan-reviews-dirty-god/> [accessed 27 July 2021].

⁷ The American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog lists 16 movies with plastic surgery themes between 1922 and 1930. Unlike the disfigured villains of classic horror cinema, films like *Skin Deep* (Lambert Hillyer, 1922), *Back to Life* (Whitman Bennett, 1925) and *Face Value* (Robert Florey, 1927) use plastic surgery as a vehicle for social restitution, often following the return to domestic and civilian life of facially wounded First World War veterans. Joe Kember, 'Face Value: The Rhetoric of Facial Disfigurement in American Film and Popular Culture, 1917-1927', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 10.1 (2017), 43-65.

⁸ The notable exceptions are Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), which includes a discussion of disfigurement in classic horror cinema; Fran Pheasant-Kelly, 'Facial disfigurement on screen: James Bond and the politics of portraying the post-9/11 terrorist', in *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher (London: Routledge, 2022); Karen Randell, 'Masking the Horror of Trauma: The Hysterical Body of Lon Chaney', *Screen*, 44.2 (2003), 216-221, and 'Mad Love: The Anxiety of Difference in the Films of Lon Chaney Sr.,' in *Screening the Dark Side of Love*, ed. by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Karen Randell (London: Palgrave, 2012), 69-81; Joe Kember, 'Face Value'; Philip Kirby, 'Battle scars: Wonder Woman, aesthetic geopolitics and disfigurement in Hollywood film', *Geopolitics* (2018), 1-22, and Suzannah Biernoff, 'Theatres of surgery: The cultural pre-history of the face transplant', *Wellcome Open Research*, 3.54 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.14558.1>.

⁹ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 76.

¹¹ Suzannah Biernoff, 'Loving the monster: The Elephant Man as modern fable,' in *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher (London: Routledge, 2022), 133-150. See also Biernoff, 'Theatres of surgery'.

¹² Jacob K. Dey, et al., 'The social penalty of facial lesions: new evidence supporting high-quality reconstruction', *JAMA facial plastic surgery*, 17.2 (2015), 90-96; Frances Cooke Macgregor, 'Facial disfigurement: problems and management of social interaction and implications for mental health', *Aesthetic plastic surgery*, 14.1 (1990), 249-257; Nichola Rumsey, Ray Bull, and Denis Gahagan, 'The Effect of Facial Disfigurement on the Proxemic Behavior of the General Public', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 12.2 (1982), 137-150; Clifford I. Workman, et al., 'Morality is in the eye of the beholder: the neurocognitive basis of the "anomalous-is-bad" stereotype', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1494.1 (2021), 3-17.

¹³ Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (Rutgers University Press, 1994); *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, ed. by Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns (University Press of America, 2001); Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić, *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* by (Ohio State University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ *Disabled Britain* on Film, BFI Player <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/disabled-britain-on-film> [accessed 20 July 2022]; 'Films: Portrayal of People with Disabilities,' Iris Centre, Vanderbilt University <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/films/> [accessed 20 July 2022].

¹⁵ Norden, xi.

¹⁶ 'I Am Not Your Villain', *Changing Faces*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/get-

involved/campaign-with-us/i-am-not-your-villian/> [accessed 20 July 2022]. Co-developed with members of the Changing Faces community, the video was runner-up in the 'amplifying unheard voices' category in the 2019 National Campaigner Awards, <https://smk.org.uk/what-we-do/awards> [accessed 20 July 2022].

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[19] Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 146.

[20] Dirty God star Vicky Knight and director Sacha Polak,' BFI Interview, 5 June 2019, *YouTube* <youtu.be/_KlemlQBHQU> [accessed 27 July 2021].

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[22] Ibidem, 5. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 10.

[23] Guignon, 151.

[24] Ibidem, 151.

[25] Harrison.

[26] Seymour.

[27] Sacha Polak, BFI interview, 'Dirty God'.

[28] Harrison.

[29] Stefan Pape, 'Vicky Knight on Her Acting Debut in Dirty God', *HotCorn*, 7 June 2019 <https://hotcorn.com/en/movies/news/dirty-god-interview-vicky-knight-sacha-polak/> [accessed 27 July 2021]. Debbie Ging, 'Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere', *Men and Masculinities*, 22.4 (2019), 638-57.

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[31] The MPS data obtained by the BBC provides a breakdown of recorded acid attacks in the capital over a 15 year period by age, gender, ethnicity, borough, hate crime and outcome. 74% of the suspects and 67% of the victims were male. 'Everything You Know about Acid Attacks Is Wrong', BBC Three, 17 November 2017 <www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/5d38c003-c54a-4513-a369-f9eae0d52f91> [accessed 27 July 2021].

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[33] Johanssen and Garrisi.

[34] Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community through Language* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

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[44] Piper, *Beautiful*, 1-2.

[45] Ibidem, 9.

[46] Ibidem, 22.

[47] Ibidem, 313.

[48] Ibidem, 145.

49 Ibidem, 144-45.

50 Ibidem, 129, 243.

51 Ibidem, 145.

52 00:47:22-00:47:56. Created by Andrew Davenport and narrated by Derek Jacobi, *In the Night Garden* was first broadcast on the BBC children's channel CBeebies in 2007. Combining live action, puppetry and animation, the daily episodes introduced a generation of British pre-schoolers to Iggle Piggle, Upsy Daisy, Makka Pakka and their friends in the magic forest.

53 01:29:08-01:29:25.

54 Piper, *Beautiful*, 87, 281.

55 00:22:50

56 00:27:27

57 01:09:29

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63 Kermode, 32.

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66 Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*, 10.

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68 Ibidem, 215.

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75 BFI Diversity Standards, July 2019 <www.bfi.org.uk/inclusion-film-industry/bfi-diversity-standards> [accessed 27 July 2021].

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Symptomatic Images/ Contagious Images:
The Ambivalence of Visual Narratives of Eating Disorders

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The connection between images and anorexia, orthorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and other forms of food consumption deemed 'disordered' is controversial and often over-simplified. Frequently it is reduced to the idea that glamorous images, particularly the *heroin chic* style of the 1990s, create a dangerous imaginary that young women - statistically the main target of eating disorders - emulate. This article wants to challenge this issue by exploring three aspects of the intricate relationship between eating disorders and images: 1) the fear of contagion that haunts images exposing bodies that suffer by eating disorders; 2) As a time-based medium, film offers a privileged set of perceptive tools to account for the ways eating disorders interfere with time – as perceived, lived, shared; 3) One more aspect that is relevant to observe since it predominately occupies the current debate is the question of the *right* way to represent certain medical conditions and their experience. The reasons at the core of this debate are extremely vital and prove how photos and moving images have tragically contributed to building and constructing gender and racial bias as well as the stigmatization of certain diseases. Though when speaking of *misrepresentation* there is the risk of embracing a deceptive idea of *good mimesis* at the cost of the ambivalence that the experience of certain conditions inherently carry and which should not disappear in the fictional dimension.

For others, who look from without, my ideas, my feelings have a nose. My nose. And they have a pair of eyes, my eyes, which I do not see but which they see. What relation is there between my ideas and my nose? For me, none whatever. I do not think with my nose, nor am I conscious of my nose when I think. But others? Others, who cannot see my ideas within me, but who see my nose without? For others, there is so intimate a relation between my ideas and my nose.

(Luigi Pirandello, One, None, and a Hundred Thousand*)*

INTRO

In this article I want to reflect on the intricate link between images and eating disorders. In recent years the question of the visual representations of medical issues — a subject that has been inaugurated by authors such as Sander Gilman and Stuart Hall — has been gaining more and more attention within cultural

studies, gender studies, and medical humanities. If the two-way relationship between medical conditions and their visual narratives is generally crucial for all medical categories, I believe that eating disorders constitute a peculiar case study as their constellation of symptoms, their definition, and their epidemic nature appear to be strictly related to both the construction/rejection of the image of the self as well as to the circulation of *glamourous* photos and beauty ideals that are supposed to trigger the disorders. Furthermore, a careful analysis of bodily dysmorphia, which features both anorexia and bulimia, allows to expand the investigation of images from the visual aspects only to 'the embodied perceptual experience that also involves the other senses' — as Fiona Johnstone proposes in her *Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities*.[1] In this respect, I find compelling to engage with the filmic narratives of eating disorders at least for three reasons that I will start to unpack in this contribution: 1) Films need to confront the fear of contagion that haunts images exposing bodies that suffer by eating disorders (this hesitation is confirmed by the little filmography that exists on this subject despite the sadly increasing proliferation of these disorders); 2) Temporality is a dimension that I consider particularly significant in the analysis of cinematic narratives of eating disorders. As a time-based medium, film offers a privileged set of perceptive tools to account for the ways eating disorders interfere with time — as perceived, lived, shared. For instance, how they sabotage the conventional subdivision of the day into mealtimes and their ritualistic and social value. Moreover, time of food obsession confronts that of intersubjectivity, which often functions as a hindrance in the context of days devoted to food: avoiding it, buying it, consuming it, weighing it, thinking about it. What is sacrificed therefore is the time of shared routine, which in this case coincides with the physiological time of nutrition; 3) One more aspect, which does not only concern narratives of eating disorders, but that I believe is important to discuss since it predominately occupies the current debate (both academic and mainstream) is the question of the *right* way to represent certain medical conditions and their direct experience. The reasons at the core of this debate are extremely vital and valid, and prove how photos and moving images have tragically contributed to building and constructing gender and racial bias as well as the stigmatization of people diagnosed with diseases such as hysteria[2] and, more recently, HIV. Though when speaking of *misrepresentation* there is the risk of oversimplifying the discourse and embracing a deceptive idea of 'good mimesis' at the cost of the ambivalence that the experience of certain conditions inherently carry and which should not, therefore, disappear in the fictional dimension.[3]

A SCENE OFF-TOPIC

A thin young woman moves nervously in a room with large horizontal windows. She stares at the landscape outside — house roofs and electricity pylons — after having checked her phone, scrolling up and down with her index finger. The

long silence of this scene is only broken by the heels of her shoes when she walks down the staircase to exit the flat and sit for a moment on a bench in the sun. The camera lingers inside, on the first floor, and zooms in from above, through the door glass, on her hesitant body. She rests only few seconds, then she goes back inside, climbing the stair towards the camera. She stops on the top step, and not even the close-up can help disclosing her thoughts. She turns her head, gives the boney back to the camera, and obsessively starts to walk up and down the stairs: first slowly, with a calm serious expression on her face, then quicker, lending rhythm to the automatic movement. A slight, enigmatic, bodily joy pushes her lips. Is she smiling?

This woman is one of the characters who participate in the choral story, *Grass* (2018), created by Korean director Hong Sangsoo. The black and white film revolves around the guests of a café and her owner, Areum, who sits all day long at her laptop observing and writing down the conversations, the actions — fights, frictions, and love encounters — of the persons eating and drinking in the room. We are not sure whether Areum is the screenwriter or a witness of this net of daily experiences that the guests bring with them at the table. An undecipherable role in line with the absence of clear temporal references that features the entire movie. The repetitive gesture of the woman walking the stairs with no purpose other than going up and down bespeaks Hong Sangsoo's attempt to move so close to actions, reactions, and words, that the temporal borders lose their framing function. The short, apparently irrelevant, sequence contains a similar kind of marginal yet symptomatic gestures that filmmaker and theorist Domietta Torlasco so accurately and poignantly describes in her film essay *Philosophy of the Kitchen* (2014).[4] By retracing the presence of (paid and unpaid) domestic work in the history of European film, Torlasco picks up Cesare Casarino's thesis in Images for *Housework*[5] to prove how cinema of duration—long takes, repetitive gestures, protracted silences — was born in the kitchen. The exhaustion of the (house)working women on the screen contrasts with a cinematic dead time where 'nothing happens'.[6] In the Italian neorealist film *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952) — one of the films Torlasco includes in her video essay — a young pregnant maid sits on a chair while grinding coffee: she is exhausted from cleaning, preparing food, tidying up. But suddenly, something *extraordinary* happens, she extends her leg, stretches her foot, and closes the kitchen door with the tip of her toe only because she can do it.[7] *Philosophy of the Kitchen* reflects on female reproductive labour foregrounding its power in affecting forms and technics of time-based cinematic medium — almost a revenge against its marginalization as an activity worth neither to be paid nor to be shown [Fig. 1]. Insisting on the marginal minor gestures is here, then, not a romantic celebration of the mundane and its little details but a way to point out the significance of these interruptions, which do not immediately correspond to a signified, yet they ask to be listened to, despite the possible risks of misinterpretation. We can deem these images *symptomatic*[8] by keeping in mind Freud's definition of symptoms as 'acts detrimental or at least useless to the subjects'.[9] The fact that symptoms would neither speak

for themselves nor display their meaning, presented a compelling challenge where alternative forms of understanding could only be found in an in-between zone, by exposing both the patient and the therapist to the rich and impervious space of transference. As George Didi-Huberman pointed out,[10] Aby Warburg's unfinished project for his Mnemosyne Atlas[11] is built on the idea that certain images are symptoms of the intricacy of human multi-layered temporality, made of interruptions, resumptions, inversions, regressions, stops, and accelerations. Warburg recognized in the artistic crystallization of expressive gestures and forms the physical embodiment of this ungraspable and discontinuous fluctuation of time, which he named *Dynamogram*. These were for Warburg new parameters to rethink and rewrite art history and to thus reject a conception of art history that aestheticized art works. He was rather concerned with art as trace of human gestures and expression (what he calls *Pathosformeln*): a history of moving bodies and affects. Images are not only generated by the clash between feelings and reflective thought, they also embody the symptoms of this conflict. They do not provide a solution, they interrogate time condensed in bodily gestures.

Fig. 1
Still from *Grass* (Hong Sang Soo, 2018)

Fig. 2
Still from *Philosophy in The Kitchen* (Domietta Torlasco, 2014)

Nicastro, *Symptomatic Images/Contagious Images*

What makes, in this sense, the sequence from *Grass* so special? The scene of the woman in the staircase exceeds the seeming banality of *empty* motion precisely because it goes off-topic- to quote Lea Melandri's provocative definition of those topics that historically were not considered theoretically relevant despite being at the core of women's life, desires, and struggles [Fig. 2].[12] If *Grass* is not at all film about eating disorders, something in this repetitive action — off-topic and out of time — offers a (moving) *Pathosformel* to elaborate on the imaginary that films (especially fiction films, tv series, and web series) on anorexia, bulimia, binge, and orthorexia create, support, or dismiss. Hong Sangsoo manages to capture a powerful moment without going after its *meaning*. The thin hectic body of the protagonist climbing the stairs alone in her flat visually resonates with the obsession for the control on the body, which is at stake in eating disorders where one's body seems to constitute the only possible battlefield to project the external world onto. Different forms of eating disorders reveal a common anxiety for the porosity of the body as if the skin could not contain the interior: if anorexia is marked by agoraphobic anxieties, bulimia is linked to claustrophobia.[13] These two seemingly opposite reactions arise from the same difficulty to deal with the intense demands of the body and from the conviction that there are only two options to cope with it, namely to create a 'no-entry system of defenses'[14] or to let everything in (and then expel it). Bodies pervaded by what Julia Kristeva describes as 'abjection',[15] those 'violent, dark revolt of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside and inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable'.[16]

In 2016, the writer and artist Jessie Kahnweiler directed the webseries *The Skinny*[17] to sensitize people to those eating disorders like bulimia that tend to be less commonly represented than anorexia, because, despite their exponential rise, they are less conspicuous, that is, they cannot be recognized as easily on the patient's body. Kahnweiler, who herself has been suffering for many years from bulimia, points out how films about eating disorders are not at all realistic since they don't reveal the disgusting and shameful aspects of binging, purging, and throwing up. Her attempt to move the issue out of the clinical space and into daily life by showing eating disorders in their ordinary, mundane environment, where they become invisible — yet very present in the daily schedule of the protagonist — is a remarkable alternative to plots with compulsively happy endings. An aspect that she stresses by calling *Relapse* the first episode of *The Skinny*. Nonetheless, visibility and eating disorders are much more entangled than Kahnweiler brings to light in her intentionally grotesque depiction of bulimia. If Kahnweiler's provocation draws attention to shame and secrecy by overexposing bulimia symptoms, she does so by relying on 'authenticity' as the key solution to reach her audience, and uncovers only some of the numerous elements at stake in analysing eating disorders through both an individual and socio-political lens [Fig. 3].

Fig. 3
Still from *The Skynny*
(Jessie Kahnweiler, 2016)

CONTAGIOUS IMAGES?

The connection between images and anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and other forms of food consumption deemed *disordered* is controversial and not yet deeply explored in all its manyfold levels. Mostly because it is reduced to the idea that glamorous images, particularly the *heroin chic* style of the 1990s,[18] create a dangerous imaginary that young women, who statistically are the main target of eating disorders,[19] admire and imitate. On its own, such a perspective fuels the risk of considering women tendentially narcissistic subjects, passive victims of the ideals of beauty promoted by the media.[20] Since the 1980s at least, feminist theorists and activists have been fighting against the idea of women as subjects with narcissistic tendencies and tried instead to retrace the production process behind certain beauty ideals.[21] Their approaches often lead to a conception of eating disorders as forms of active resistance, refusing 'a culturally defined role' by attempting to regain control over the body when faced with a 'confusing social reality' of oppressive and multiple expectations.[22] Other feminists have historically taken a more critical stance towards women's obsession with the body as a form of submission to patriarchy and its ideals of beauty. In recent years, academics from the social sciences,[23] cultural and gender studies,[24] and media studies[25] have significantly contributed to zooming out from the sole individual psychological components of eating disorders and have shed light upon their socio-political context. Specifically, it is crucial to look at the role aesthetics might play in the encounter between visual mass media and eating disorders, especially when that aesthetics communicates a sense of purported neutrality, both medical and political. Visual media not only, indeed, record reality but they contribute to its symbolic transformation and comprehension. Precisely because eating disorders are shaped to such an

extreme degree by their socio-cultural context, and due to their increasingly pervasive nature, they are an emblematic case study for the analysis of affects that are both representative of and most problematic in contemporary society. Eating disorders as a medical category were born and established roots in the industrialized West. In 1873 in Great Britain, Sir William Withney Gull defined the phenomenon of self-starvation among young women as 'anorexia nervosa'. In the same year in France, Ernest-Charles Lasègue named the same kind of food behaviour as 'anorexia hystérique'. In the nineties of the 19th Century, having established themselves as a viral phenomenon that directly correlates with wellbeing, industrial, and economic development in the West, eating disorders traverse geographical borders and expand, especially into Japan, China, South Korea, South Africa, Nigeria, Argentina, Chile and India. Coinciding with the birth of the moving image and public health in the late 19th Century, eating disorders expand symbiotically with visual media, as the latter circulate ever-more globally with the rise of the internet at the beginning of the 21th Century. Despite visual culture having been acknowledged as being partly responsible for promoting dangerous ideals of beauty that trigger eating disorders, the nature of the *contagious* nature of images in the proliferation of eating disorders is characterized by many elements. This supposed contagious power concerns not only the emulation of beauty ideals embodied by fashion images but also the symptoms themselves, as suspected by the doctor who first defined bulimia nervosa. After 1979, when psychiatrist Gerald Russel diagnosed 'Bulimia Nervosa' for the first time, he worried that his description of the symptoms had contributed to the dramatic spread of the pathology itself.[26] This is of course an impossible but frequent enigma regarding all new medical categories: if it is the symptoms that proliferate or the diagnosis. In his reflections on the contagious nature of desire, René Girard explains the proliferation of eating disorders and the obsession for thinness as an extreme drive to competition — mostly among women.[27]

The idea of being exposed to the dangerous emulative power of images seems to contradict the curious experiments of Hugh Welch Diamond, one of the pioneers of psychiatric photography, who was convinced that showing his patients a picture of their own face during an acute crisis could have a beneficial influence, healing them by its shock therapy effect.[28] Further experiments had then called into question that it was not the subject of the photograph that generated the shock, but rather the very nature of the new technological medium: the camera, which was born at the time when Diamond was training as a psychiatrist. The portrait of a landscape was in this sense as effective and healing as that of a portrait. After all, the birth of photography is, as is well known, what made possible the controversial diagnosis of hysteria perfected by Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière, the medical category that by definition was based on staging the symptom, on making the symptoms of the patients of the Parisian hospital — all women — a spectacle for the eyes of an audience of doctors — almost exclusively men — and for the lens of a passionate photographer like Charcot.

The current discourse about eating disorders and emulation does not, however, only find its roots in the fashion style of the early 1990s but it has been also strongly affected by the advent of the digital space. Around the beginning of the 2000s, a new eating-disorders community showed up on the internet. It was not, as one might expect, meant to support and share a healing process from these increasingly widespread issues, but rather to glorify anorexia as a lifestyle. Under the hashtag *#Thinspiration*, members of the *pro-ana* (*pro-anorexia) community posted photos that depicted skinny women and close-ups of slender bodies (such as hip bones, thigh gaps, shoulders) as well as aspects of their anorexic experience. Consistently appearing on *pro-ana* bulletin boards, websites, blogs, social network sites, email and WhatsApp groups, these images were and continue to function as a motivating tool to become a true and pure anorexic. *Pro-ana* is a community whose attempt to create a *free* space to confront raw feelings and thoughts about eating disorders is intertwined with a quasi-religious sectarian approach: Anorexia is identified with 'Ana the Goddess' and hierarchy among members is defined by degrees of 'purity' (with anorexics placed at the top, while bulimics are at the bottom). To be included in the groups one must be either an 'authentic' anorexic or an 'authentic' bulimic. Authenticity is what produces identity by excluding, for instance, *wannarexics*, the ultimate insult to describe people that fail at their weight-loss goals[29] or that join *pro-ana* communities merely to find dieting tips.

In this context, a set of ten commandments encouraging thinness and perfection constitutes the core of a long list of strategies and advice that (mostly) young women give to each other in order to fast, to kill hunger, to purge, and to finally lose weight: one must believe in control through starvation as 'the only force mighty enough to bring order in the chaos that is my world' (*Anastart* website). The predominately female religious/sectarian self-organization, congregating around an almighty goddess interestingly resonates with the rejection of food in female mystics, which has been divergently investigated by Rudolph Bell[30] and by Caroline Walker Bynum.[31] As soon as it received general public attention, the *pro-ana* phenomenon caused astonishment and fear among teenagers' parents, health professionals, teachers, and institutions; eventually, all online platforms that instigate suicide by exalting both anorexia and bulimia (*pro-mia*) were shut down. Pro-eating-disorders communities have, however, migrated from these websites, which tended to be static, strictly moderated, and password-protected to social media such as Facebook or Instagram, to platforms, in other words, which are more visual, less hierarchical, and more difficult to moderate due to the large number of posted images. On new social media like Instagram and tiktok the phenomenon has mostly lost its communitarian aspect and its recognizability and took instead the shape of an obsession for sharing one's daily meal — either to show the small intake of food or to be proud of a fast metabolism. In both cases, the aspect of exposing oneself to the images of a desirable body is here replaced by a more voyeuristic gratification as well as by a more or less subtle pleasure for generating envy. An emblematic example is tiktok's 'What I eat in a day', which is in principle only meant to document eating

habit presenting what users eat in a given day. The videos usually begin with the person showing her body, followed by clips of the snacks, drinks and meals they consume.

How can cinematic narratives respond at the same time to the proliferation of both disordered eating and images that mirror or 'reproduce' these behaviours?

DYSMORPHIC TEMPORALITIES: MOARA PASSONI'S *ECSTASY*

If every type of eating disorder appears to give life to different temporal forms and dynamics, it is nonetheless possible, despite these divergences or affective polarities, to recognise a common denominator in the effort to control and contain time. Time here is defined not only as lived time, but also the physiological time of cellular ageing, or of those activities that conventionally punctuate the everyday. Eating — or abstaining from it — is a form of time travel[32] and food is the instrument with which to move as one wishes amongst the dimensions of past, present and future. It is simultaneously an emergency brake and an accelerator, allowing access to passions and desires before time crumbles them or after it has indefinitely archived them.

The privation of anorexia nervosa, the compulsive overeating of binge eating, or that of bulimia, followed by compensatory behaviour, can therefore adopt the semblance of a protective armour against collision with emotions, affects, discomforts. By building a wall, just in time, it disallows the interior world from crashing into, interacting with or simply dispersing into external reality, that 'not-I' whose most immediately recognisable limit is marked by the body. The relationship to food can constitute one of these barricades, through modalities that are heterogeneous and often invisible, either because they don't leave their marks on the body, or because they accord with societal norms — such as diets and obsessive healthy eating. The anxiety/control affective polarity in anorexia: a form of resistance to time through abstinence from nutrition in order to freeze any process of growing and transformation. The anesthetisation of emotions during binge eating and the bulimic ritual of filling up and emptying out. Here, time is suspended in a loop that consists of the ethereal time of unexpressed desire and organic time, heavy and corporeal, articulated through chewing, rumination, compensatory vomit and purging. During this dietary ritual, one is consumed by the illusion of being able to dominate time and fantasies of unlimited coexisting possibilities that trigger a short-circuit between past, present and future, whose continuity is inevitably fragmented by sudden mood swings.

The common aspect of the perception of time which features in eating disorders seems to be the sensation of being condemned to a *not yet*, uprooted from narrative temporality and disallowed from recognising one's self as part of a story in the name of a phantasmal true self to reach.[33]

Anorexia is a lived experience, a process, an episode, a way of being, not a tool. I gradually pieced together a routine. My day was divided up into the time to eat, time to exercise, time to study, time to sleep, all very precisely delineated. In between these slices of day, I couldn't relax, and if anyone tried to interrupt this routine I would bawl them right out of the room. The repetition of this regime, and the stemming of the body's vital fluxes — I didn't eat, didn't menstruate... — ended up creating a sense of eternal time, to the point that I lost all track of what happened when between the ages of 12 and 18. It was as if those six years were a static blur.[34]

This is how Brazilian filmmaker Moara Passoni describes her personal experience of anorexia she depicted in the experimental feature film *Ecstasy*, which was premiered in the CPH:DOX main competition in 2020.[35] When Passoni began writing the film the main challenge for her was to unhinge visual language which that media and culture conventionally use to represent eating disorders and that often spectacularize them, oscillating between the stigmatisation and victimisation of those affected by the disorder. Passoni is not interested in restoring a more faithful, more stable, more recognisable account of anorexia, as this would be a vain challenge. It is not a question of restoring an alleged identity of the disease betrayed by filmic narratives but to rather try to recompose a story that is as fragmented as the protagonist's perception of her body [Fig. 4].

Fig. 4
Still from *Ecstasy*
(Moara Passoni, 2020)

By following the story of the development of Clara's anorexia, from her childhood to her late teens, *Ecstasy* shows the political changes in Brazil during the 1990s, a time when the country had its first democratically elected president since 1964 [Fig. 5]. Clara's character is partly autobiographical, partly the result

Nicastro, *Symptomatic Images/Contagious Images*

of interviews Passoni conducted with women affected by eating disorders, a way to step out from the solitary obsession with self-observation and find relief in the communality of the symptoms. *Ecstasy* is a biography inscribed on a body that refuses and questions its shape and its identity. Biology and history meet from the very beginning of the film where Passoni uses archival photos of the protests that took place in Brazil in 1970s and ih the 1980s. We see a portrait of Passoni's mother, the leader of one of the movements participating in these protests. She is pregnant and the voice over speaks about the foetus absorbing the adrenaline released by the mother. The story of Clara's relationship with food is depicted as immersed in and indistinguishable from her own environment. In exploring anorexia, Passoni considers not only the individual psychological components of her main character, but also the socio-political contest as well as the religious one the girl grew up with in Brazil. None of these elements alone constitutes an explanation for Clara's food behaviour, but they rather provide a complex net through which to look at eating disorders. An approach that mirrors the difficulty of understanding the nature of these issues: as Susan Bordo has pointed out, the medical attempt to find subcategories to define new forms of eating disorders and to try to capture their features satisfies fantasies of precision and unification of phenomena that in fact have become less and less amenable to scientific clarity and distinctness.[36]

When she started writing *Ecstasy*, Passoni's main concern was to find a language that didn't fulfill the expectations of the audience according to the conventional visual stereotypes about eating disorders. How to use images to account for issues that are thought to be affected by the circulation of *contagious* images that generate emulation? To what extent would it be possible to follow Clara in her ecstatic process, so strongly marked by the death drive?

Fig. 5
Still from *Ecstasy*
(Moara Passoni, 2020)

Passoni was firstly tempted by an iconoclastic solution: to leave bodies out of the frame, to avoid the spectacularization of anorexia (often criticized in films about eating disorders — I am thinking for example of *To the Bone* (2017) by Marti Noxon).[37] In doing so, Passoni tried to make an 'anorectic' film by re-ducing the presence of visual (living) elements and delegating the story of a bodily struggle mainly to the voice over. But something was missing from this first cut and in the final version the risk of overexposing the frailty of Clara's body is avoided by a careful account of Clara's dysmorphic perception of herself and the external world. Instead of omitting her body, Moara paradoxically presents Clara's subjective experience, her (self)objectification, by making visible her phantasies and desires, her idiosyncrasies and her fears. Clara's alienation from her body and its fragmentation, her struggle against a living body affected by time and space, is rendered through the use of close up and extreme close up, which convey the obsessive love for detail that is defined as 'the geometry of hunger'. Eating disorders are linked to the obsession with control and often this control is linked to perfectionism, and automatically to beauty, good behavior, and ambition. In *Ecstasy* the need for control carries different nuances, revealing a complex relationship with pleasure: there is, for instance, an immense pleasure for details and for images, as Passoni poignantly shows, by presenting ecstasy as a contemplation of organs, flesh, bones, their beauty and their repulsiveness. Film editing mirrors Clara's morbid need to re-edit reality by cutting it in little pieces — as she does with the food. Clara seems to be either too close or too far from *the other*. In the struggle to find an *in between* space, the camera reminds us that the body is the primary seat for the development of the sense of self as well as the primary site for meeting the other.

The overused and often obscure word 'dysmorphia' in relation to eating disorders takes in *Ecstasy* multiple forms and speaks for both the concern to see oneself and being seen at the same time. In Passoni's film, dysmorphia affects Clara's body as well as the world around her: it also takes the shape of two imaginary friends/enemies of Clara: Mr. Egg, whom Clara meets for the first time when they move to Brasilia where her mother got a job as a representative of the Federal District. The second friend (a sort of alter ego of the Egg) is a Blue dot, which appears on Clara's plate to hide the forbidden object of desire: food. Mr Egg teaches Clara the 'magical game' of self-control or rather, self tyranny. This character together with the Blue Dot introduce another important aspect of eating disorders: magical thinking as a tool to transform the world into a safe, predictable space.

As a medical category, dysmorphia defines an excessive preoccupation with the body, the entire body or one single part; the struggle to accept one's body, the need to modify it, the feeling that it doesn't (yet) coincide with one's identity.[38] 'Subjects with dysmorphic disorders often show problematic narratives about their life and display a general deprecation not only towards their body but also with respect to themselves as individuals'.[39] It is proved that the experience of one's own body affects the representation of the body and shapes a different narrative about the self. Bodily experiences and body image are reciprocally

linked to the narratives employed by an individual in depicting herself.[40] In *Ecstasy* anorexia is a way of moving in and looking at the world, not only at oneself, and it is only when the camera turns towards the fear for a reality, which is transformed by time and motion, that dysmorphia ceases to be just an image reflected in the mirror, it not only affects Clara's body but also everything she touches, (not) tastes, observes and listens to.

Films do not heal like medicaments, they disclose unforeseen scenarios, they move us, push us forward or backward where we had not been before. The case of eating disorders is particularly ambivalent and challenging to confront, because images are at the core of these issues, which are structured by imitation and concealment. The possibility to make something visible (or invisible), which inherently constitutes the cinematic medium, is challenged by the ambiguous relationship with (self)visibility that eating disorders manifest through dysmorphia: every form is not yet the good one, every shot has not yet the right distance. Oftentimes, people who are affected by eating disorders are in search of an imaginary that can help understanding their obscure and exhausting constellation of symptoms and that can bring to light what they most of the time live hide and live in secret. In this respect, one asks images to show, to exhibit what one does not have the courage to say and what one is not yet able to see. Images are therefore not asked to be faithful, but rather to both exhibit and escape the repetition, the *reproduction* of certain gestures and behaviors one is trapped in.

Notes

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[1] Fiona Johnstone, 'Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities' in The *Medical Humanities* blog, July 2018, https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2018/07/31/manifesto-for-a-visual-medical-humanities/ [accessed 25 August 2022]

[2] See George Didi-Huberman and Alisa Trans Hartz, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Sander Gilman and others, *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[3] In the recent conference 'Violence, Care, Cure: (Self)perceptions within the Medical Encounter' I co-organized at ICI Berlin together with Marta-Laura Cenedese, we explored visual and literary narratives that deal with the ambiguities of the concepts 'care', 'cure', and 'violence' within medical settings.

[4] Domietta Torlasco, 'Philosophy in the Kitchen', *World Picture*, 11 (Summer 2016), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_11/Torlasco_11.html [Accessed 25 August 2022]

[5] Cesare Casarino, 'Images for Housework: On the Time of Domestic Labor in Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of the Cinema', *differences*, 28.3 (2017), 67-92.

[6] I here borrow the title of Ivone Margulies's seminal book on Chantal Akerman's *Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke University Press , 1996).

[7] Cf. voice over commenting this scene in Domietta Torlasco, 'Philosophy in the Kitchen'.

[8] In his book *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Time* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), George Didi-Huberman dedicates a session to the image as symptom.

[9] Sigmund Freud, *The Paths to the Formations of Symptoms. Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (SE), 16 vols (London: Vintage Press, 2017), 358.

[10] George Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.

[11] Aby M. Warburg and Martin Warnke, *Der bilderatlas mnemosyne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).

[12] Cf. Lea Melandri, *Alfabeto d'origine* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2017).

[13] Cf. Marilyn Charles, 'Meaning, metaphor, and metabolization: the case of eating disorders', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis,* 81.4 (2021), 448..

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror* (Columbia, Princeton: University Press of California, 1982).

[16] Ibidem, 1.

[17] https://jessiekahnweiler.com/category/the-skinny/

[18] 'Heroin chic' defines the style of 1990s top model such as Gia Garangi and Kate Moss (especially from the famous Calvin Klein underwear campaign in 1991) and which features extremely thin physique, pale skin, dark undereye circles, and disheveled hair and clothing.

[19] Heike Bartel has conducted precious research on eating disorders in men, the outcome of which has recently been published in her monograph *Men Writing Eating Disorders Autobiographical Writing and Illness Experience in English and German Narratives* (Bingley: Emerald, 2020).

[20] Cf. Abigail Bray, 'The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders', *Cultural Studies*, 10.3 (1996), 413-429.

[21] See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Arrow, 1978).

[22] See Ibidem; Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexie* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 2021).

[23] See *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition*, ed. by. Mervat Nasser and others (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

[24] See Gitte Marianne, *Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan. Navigating contradiction in narrative and visual culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016); Helen Malson, Maree Burns, *Critical Femist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009).

[25] See Karin Eli, Stanley Ulijaszek, *Obesity, Eating Disorders and the Media* (Farnham: Asghate, 2014).

[26] See the interview to Gerald Russel conducted by Lee Daniel Kravetz in his book *Strange contagion: Inside the surprising science of infectious behaviors and viral emotions and what they tell us about ourselves* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2017).

[27] Cf. Girard, René, *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire* (East Lancing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

[28] Sander L. Gilman, *The face of madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the origin of psychiatric photography* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1976).

[29] Boero Natalie and Cheri Jo Pascoe, 'Pro-anorexia communities and online interaction: Bringing the pro-ana body online', *Body & Society*, 18.2 (2012), 27-57.

[30] Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy anorexia* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[31] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: The religious significance of food to medieval women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[32] Marco Casonato, *Immaginazione e metafora. Psicodinamica, psicopatologia, psicoterapia* (Bari: Laterza, 2003).

[33] On the question of authenticity in anorexia see Tony Hope and others, 'Anorexia nervosa and the language of authenticity', *Hastings Center Report*, 41.6 (2011), 19-29; In their research on proana online communities Boero and Pascoe also provide a compelling analysis of the role of authenticity for the pro-ana communities, see Boero Natalie, and Cheri Jo Pascoe, 'Pro-anorexia communities and online interaction', cit.

[34] P. Gomes, 'Êxtase The Film. "She didn't feel time nor people, what she felt was ecstasy' in *Wall Street International*, 2020, https://wsimag.com/entertainment/61892-extase-the-film.

[35] On *Ecstasy* I wrote the article 'Biografia di un sintomo: Ecstasy di Moara Passoni', *Fata Morgana. Quadrimestrale di Cinema e Visioni*, 46 (2022).

[36] Susan Bordo, 'Eating disorders: The feminist challenge to the concept of pathology', in *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, ed. by Drew Leder (Dordrecht: Springer, 1992), 197-213.

[37] See Clio Nicastro, 'Recovery', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzey, Arnd Wedemeyer (Berlin: Ici Berlin, 2019), 49-56.

[38] See Alessandra Lemma, *Under the skin: A psychoanalytic study of body modification* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

[39] Antonella Tramacere, Angelica Kaufmann, 'Bodily self-narratives and the experience of disliking ourselves', submitted to *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. I want to thank Antonella Tramacere for having shared her research with me.

[40] Ibidem.

Audiovisual Means to Therapeutic Ends.
The Cinematic Dispositif within Medical Humanities

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Dominant narratives across Medical Humanities have been focused on the cultural construction of the notion of medicine as epistemic discourse and social practice, on the role of humanities in medical design of the disease as well as on the humanization of the clinical encounter in order to facilitate the anamnesis, the therapy and the care. Among the main declinations, a more complex point of view arises, suggesting the critical integration and exploitation of a variety of methodologies, previously used by art and humanities research, into a peculiar human-centered dispositive, both narrative and therapeutic, in which audiovisual practices and languages acquire new healing potential and activate bias for unprecedented processes of subjectivization for particular target of suffering human beings.

Based on the aforementioned premises, the essay aims at investigating the *therapeutic set* as performative and methodological model, consistent with art-therapy and narrative-based medical approaches, applicable in specific pathological conditions and health-care contexts. Within such reflexive and operational framework including documentary studies and visual anthropology, self-representational and amateur theories, the therapeutic set becomes a media environment where the formative encounter, both technical and pragmatic, finally ethical, between the self and the world, the action and the awareness takes place.

My purpose is to explore the theoretical pillars of the therapeutic set as transformative interplay between profaned cinematic dispositive and psychotherapy setting, dwelling on bodily involvement, audiovisual gestures and amateur self-representation to which active participants, storytellers of their own illness and treatment, are called in the making of therapy and narrative.

The paper finally intends to illustrate selected interdisciplinary case studies in order to discuss the healing potential of creative participatory processes and self-representations, occurring thanks to the relocation and amateurization of the contemporary cinematic experience.

INTRODUCTION

With the aim of dispelling terminological and definitional ambiguities, in 2014 the Consensus Conference organized by the Italian *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (ISS) established the guidelines for the application of Narrative Medicine (henceforth NM), understood as 'a clinical-assistance intervention methodology based on a specific communicative competence', which aims to 'acquire,

understand and integrate the different points of view of those involved in the disease and in the treatment process'.[1]

Exploring the different lines of actions outlined in the Consensus Conference,[2] the Medical-Narrative approach is characterized, on the one hand, by the adoption of narration as a medical anamnesis and a research tool that contributes to the collection of clinical and biographical data of the patients and, on the other — to an extremely limited extent — by a narrative therapeutic approach designed to improve the patient's quality of life.

The leading theory in this area is dedicated to the integration of narrative skills into clinical practice, in particular as a tool for implementing doctor-patient communication, hence facilitating diagnosis as well as the therapy itself.[3] In fact, this concept of Narrative-Based Medicine (NBM), in opposition to a physiological, symptom-driven Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM), aims to construct a shared path of personalized care, which is methodologically grounded on the conversation between patient and doctor regarding the experience of an illness, but also on the social, cultural, and personal history of the individual. Here I do not refer, however, to psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches,[4] which, although differentiated according to specific methodologies, can be broadly defined as specific forms of narration, within clinical definition of Narrative Therapy.

In the following pages, I present performativity and agency as the key concepts of Narrative-Based Therapies, with the aim of framing Medical Narrative techniques and methods within a humanistic lens, and suggesting a fertile, interdisciplinary convergence. From this perspective, the purpose of the article is not only to map out the relationship between Medical Narratives and audiovisual tools, but also to investigate and propose the theoretical, methodological, and then applicative framework of *Therapeutic Set* as a peculiar double *dispositif*. Accordingly, in the following discussion I explore self-narrative forms that are agentive, in a way, and a therapeutic approach that uses narrative as the therapy itself.

HOW VISUAL MEDICAL NARRATIVES (COULD) WORK

In an attempt to take the stock of the theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic state of art,[5] the contribution of NM to clinical practice would seem limited to the ability to acknowledge, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others, under a label of a medicine practiced with narrative competence.[6] A large portion of NM, therefore, deals with meta-clinical elements and paratherapeutic aspects, such as the compilation of medical records, medical training programs and improvements in the effectiveness of the healthcare team.[7]

Within the Medical Narrative approach, the relevance of biographies reported by the patients themselves is also a valuable contribution to the disease's clinical delineation. A narrative interaction conceived in this way enables a

therapeutic dialogue where intersubjectivity arises from the fertile encounter between the patient-narrator and the doctor-listener; the latter is facilitated in investigating the multiple interweavings between physiological symptoms and the patient's verbal and non-verbal narration.[8]

Unlike NM, Narrative Therapy (NT) can be erroneously considered as an equivalent to the macro-category of psychotherapy. While the 'narrative' attribute can be confusing, since 'all therapies are narrative therapies',[9] White and Epston identify the therapy as the narrative process through which patients shape their identities.[10]

More specifically, while psychotherapy requires psychological treatment involving 'either removing, reducing, or modifying specific emotional, cognitive, or behavioral problems, and/or promoting social adaptation, personality development and/or personal growth',[11] NT is a peculiar psychotherapeutic approach focusing on the exploration, examination and editing of the stories people tell themselves about their life, in order to trigger ermeneutical and self-storytelling shifts that therapeutically intervene on specific targeted issues.[12]

While the aforementioned approaches elect the patient's words as the privileged narrative tool, Medical Humanities seems to have taken a visual turn in 2018, when two key events take place: the roundtable *Interdisciplinary Entanglements: Towards a Visual Medical Humanities* convened by Fiona Johnstone and Natasha Ruiz-Gómez during the Association for Art History's 2018 Annual Conference, and the drafting of a Visual Medical Humanities manifesto, which proposed to focus on relevant issues and topics that had previously been neglected:

> *the value of the visual is not limited to the illustrative (for example, as a way of making existing academic research more 'accessible'); nor to the purely instrumental (for example, as a way of producing more 'empathetic' doctors) [...] A Visual Medical Humanities asks questions about our expectations of what certain types of visual artefact can do for us (recognizing that this 'us' is not a unified singular entity, but plural and diverse); it also notes that these expectations are contingent on context. [...] for example, an artwork might commonly be asked to act as a marker for subjectivity, or as a way of articulating the 'patient experience'.*[13]

Despite the theoretical and methodological efforts to establish a disciplinary orientation that relies on visual and narrative-based strategies, these attempts appear promising but remain partial. Indeed, a crucial reflection on the linguistic specificity of one visual field or another appears to be lacking; a reflection that has to be provided by scholars, professionals and experts in the field, and not only by clinicians and psychologists. Nevertheless, the importance of reflecting on 'what certain types of visual artefact can do for us'[14] — and, I would add, *to* us — should certainly be acknowledged.

In short, there would seem to be a lack of specific toolsets for visual-based clinical interventions; this is particularly true of the audiovisual medium, since numerous different approaches are often incorporated within the definition of

Cinematherapy.

Within Film Studies, the methodological and epistemological matrices of the therapeutic models that use cinematic language can be traced back to early cinema theories, which described the cinematic vision as a captivating and enthralling experience, that is potentially pathogenic and pedagogical in equal measures.[15] The attraction exerted by the cinematic apparatus is justified by the technology's specific ability on the one hand to capture attention and stimulate the viewer's perceptual activity,[16] and on the other to address, through technique and sensorial apparatus,[17] therapeutic — prophylactic and curative — potential to the social body it invokes.[18]

In identifying used and usable therapeutic narrative tools, one priority goal is not only 'to frame the narrative approach in the context of empowerment and the transition from paternalistic medicine to the relationship model in which the patient is a partner and not just an object of care',[19] but also to cultivate its true innovative potential through the co-construction of 'therapeutic emplotments',[20] which pursue a continuous renegotiation of meanings between caregivers and patients.

This raises an important question that merits our attention, regarding the possibility of building up a methodology which could include both therapeutic and narrative interventions.[21] Within a setting that involves the adoption of a double rhetorical and linguistic register, visual narratives and psychotherapy in its narrative dimension can expand their effects in reciprocal agentivities. In this context, a *double dispositif* arises from the encounter between therapeutic interviews and audiovisual images, creating a symbolic, relational-pragmatic and narrative space which creates fertile opportunities for subjectivation processes.

However, this double narrative — both therapeutic and cinematic — *dispositif*, in which both the spectator (or the 'maker', as we will see below) and the patient participate, might appear doubly binding, determining even more restrictive positions and roles for the patient involved. Far from Baudry's apparatus theory[22] and Foucault's early, prescriptive conception of the *dispositif*, characterized by a dominant strategic function,[23] I would imagine such double *dispositif* as a rhizomatic machine that forges links between heterogeneous entities.[24] If, according to Deleuze, the *dispositif* already acts by creating a dynamic equilibrium that is analogous to a skein — a multilinear set composed of lines of a different nature[25] — and therefore activates an *autopoiesis* — a process of subjectivity formation that is never given and always in the making — this is even more true within a bifid device such as a therapeutic visual medium, in which components interact by mutual interference through lines of subjectivation, becoming fluid and open enough to escaping attempts of totalising control. Consequently, the position and role of the user of this double *dispositif* changes according to different therapeutic approaches, following a dynamic configuration that oscillates between subjection and subjectivation.

Within the outlined bifid and hybrid structure, but also the current debate on visual narrative therapies, a definitional framework appears increasingly

necessary, regarding not only the therapeutic aim, but also the rhetoric, language, and account that may characterize the specific narrative-based approach.

THE THERAPEUTIC SET:
FROM CINEMATHERAPY
TO THERAPEUTIC FILMMAKING

In reconstructing a brief history of psychotherapeutic approaches that have made use of the cinematic language, as well as of audiovisual tools and techniques, it is evident that the cinematic *dispositif* cannot be totally reproduced and reconstructed in its original form within the peculiar setting that the application of therapeutic functioning requires. Within clinical studies and theoretical contributions on Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy,[26] we can find a common tendency to assimilate one another as a therapist-assisted film visions, followed by comments and discussions of therapy-targeted contents.[27] In a scenario where psychotherapy seems not to operate any theoretical, procedural and methodological distinctions between techniques and their therapeutic uses, great attention must be paid to the differences, that can be substantial and relative to the position and role of the patient, between Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy. Referring to 'relocated cinema',[28] I propose to distinguish between Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy in the light of their *setting and delivery operations*.[29] While the setting process coincides with the reproduction of the viewing modes of the cinematic environment outside the movie theatre, thereby provoking in the viewer a feeling of being *almost like* in a cinema auditorium, the delivery process refers to the object of vision, to the movie in itself, its content as the binding evidence of its specific visual language.

From this point of view, Cinematherapy may be defined as a *setting process*, through which the therapist recreates in the therapeutic setting the environmental characteristics that make the patients feel as though they are in a movie theatre, also possibly involved in a collective vision together with other patient-spectators, and eventually using a movie theatre itself as a therapeutic setting.

In Cinematherapy, both the therapeutic setting and the movie theatre maintain reciprocal relationships, being configured as enlargements of the patient-spectator's living space through an illusion of continuity: experiencing fictional reality at a safe distance, within a 'liberated embodied simulation'[30] framework, the patient-spectator faces the viewed fictional reality in which alternative events are possible, and consequently achieves a different perception and manages her/his own agency in relation to illness and treatment.

Filmtherapy, on the other hand, is configured as a *delivery process*, in which the therapist, using filmic content, tackles particular issues that are told and treated in the movie. The movies, selected on the basis of the targeted

therapy goals, are therefore seen, alone or together with other subjects, during psychotherapeutic sessions.

In both Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy, the patient-spectator is the privileged recipient of the effects produced by the double *dispositif* I previously mentioned: the cinematic apparatus capable of affecting relationships between a seeing subject and the object of the vision, and the therapeutic setting — the latter constituted, in the case of Cinematherapy, by the modes and location of viewing, and in the case of Filmtherapy, by the choice of the film to see and then comment on.

While Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy can be defined as circumscribed manifestations of the cinematic *dispositif* within the therapeutic setting, where the act of vision is limited to a series of exclusively spectatorial practices, Therapeutic Video Recording, frequently generically called Videotherapy, requires the patient not only to pay attention and listen actively, but also to participate through a creative presence.[31]

Used in selected settings or supervision sessions, Therapeutic Video Recording offers an opportunity for cognitive and emotional distancing between one's own mental image and the *picture*[32] of oneself acting on the screen, in order to activate a process of Self Video Confrontation.[33] As the main character, and no longer just a spectator of someone else's movie, but also participating in some creative choices — like, for instance, the camera movements during the session — the patient starts to resemble a spectator-performer, not only for the active attitude of creating her/his own experience of vision, but also for creatively engaging in amateur and performative grassroots practices. In the light of the used footage technique, I define this videotherapeutic approach as Documentary Videotherapy.[34]

In this way, the therapeutic setting begins to include the movie set: it disciplines both the liminal and heterotopic experience to which they provide access, hybridising each other thanks to the relocation of procedures, dynamics and roles that shape a spectatorial experience, without stating a hierarchical and binary distinction between bodies and images, or between material reality and its representations.[35]

On the Therapeutic Set the patient can be involved in an increasingly narrative-performative process through Therapeutic Filmmaking.[36] In the Therapeutic Filmmaking methodology, the participatory mode and the bodily involvement that it carries with itself is crucial.[37] The participatory documentary model has been therapeutically theorized by Jackie Shaw and Clive Robertson, who conceive Participatory Videotherapy as characterized by a strong focus on the production process, as well as on customized interventions based on the social and emotional needs of the participants. According to this kind of relational therapeutic model, self-representation reveals itself as the starting point of a transformative intervention to overcome trauma and treat ailments, as well as of the cultivation and realization of the potential of each individual.[38]

Even before Shaw and Robertson's therapeutic methodology, in the 1950s Fernand Deligny's artistic and pedagogical project of, in the context of *La*

Grande Cordée, used cinematic language as an educational tool for taking care of children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder outside traditional structures. In this way, he contributed significantly to the implementation of therapeutic practices based on the participatory and interactive production and fruition processes, as well as on subjectivation dynamics through an iconic register.[39]

In therapeutic viewing techniques, the presence of a multimodal spectatorship was already evident, with cinema vision impacting not only the disembodied psyche, but, also, on a kinesthetic subject that touches and is touched by the representation taking place both on and off the screen.[40] Recalling a therapeutic participatory (and performative,[41] as I am going to further explain later) model, Therapeutic Filmmaking involves the patient's creative and self-narrative agency, not only as a social actor but also as the material maker of her/his own stories of illness and therapy. In the framework of a substantial theoretical modification of the spectatorship paradigm, the everyday media user is no longer just prosumer, but also a *serious amateur*,[42] who is increasingly audiovisually literate and frequently aware and engaged in self-narrative processes, which occurs first and foremost through a bodily act and an artisanal-technological creation.

In fact, as Maya Deren has argued, the advantage that the amateur can enjoy over the professional consists in a freedom that is both artistic and physical: 'the most important part of your equipment is you: your mobile body, your imaginative mind and your freedom to use both'.[43] Identically to the amateur audiovisual producer, then, the *patient-author* is inextricably body-grounded during the whole Therapeutic Filmmaking process, under clinical supervision and creative facilitation, s/he is materially entangled in filmmaking process, from screenwriting to the editing phase, that allows her/him to translate her/his pathological history into audiovisual narratives, gaining technical and creative, but, mostly, cognitive and emotional abilities to reinvent the trauma or disorder and reshape it into a re-narrativized version of the Self.

Within a medical-narrative treatment, enrolled in a holistic dynamic that is not only psychic but also bodily and pragmatic, the patient can finally evolve from a simple beneficiary to an active and co-creative participant within an exquisitely narrative psychotherapy, which the cinematic approach helps to facilitate and implement.

SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL THERAPY: A VIRTUOUS CIRCULAR AGENCY

Within such an increasingly participatory and performative framework, the Therapeutic Set that hosts the whole therapeutic process is a singular audiovisual fieldwork: a ritualized set in which 'social and ritual dynamics intersect with scenic ones due to the presence of the movie camera'.[44]

The procedural and material creation through which patients produce an audiovisual narrative on the Therapeutic Set confers a specific agency on their audiovisual artefacts, that is both therapeutic and iconic. *As imagines agentes* assuming a decisive role in shaping our experiences with relevant impact on life and experience,[45] visual artefacts can exert agency through an embodied cognitive process that Alfred Gell has called the 'abduction of agency' by the means of Peircean material indexes.[46] In this context, the productive and receptive events would be intentionally made by acting and producing entities, both of which are connected to the creators and to the recipients of these iconic products. If the model developed by Gell partially overcomes the cultural dichotomies between the subject and the object as social agents, the performative nature of selected iconic representations, their potentiality to act as 'performing images',[47] inevitably requires a continuous de-constructive and reconstructive process that has to take into account the social, intersubjective, as well as evenemential dimensions,[48] and this essentially happens through an experiential and participatory creation.[49]

In my opinion, this theoretical and methodological premise constitutes a starting point for the reconsideration of an iconic, possibly therapeutic, agency, not to be found in the power of pictures in themselves, but in the experiential power of the process. In this perspective, I propose an interpretation of self-representations as paradigmatic intersections emerging from the constitutive relationship between the living medium (the body) of perception, projection, image acquisition, and technological medium. Material agency, which is conveyed by *picture* and *image* as essential to the emergence of an iconic power,[50] can potentially shape a transformative process and a singular experiential effectiveness, both relying on bodily involvement and interactional living in its environment.

The amateur patients-filmmakers[51] in fact transfer their agency to amateur videos through their bodily and creative intervention, making them *secondary agents*, capable of bearing agency themselves. This kind of symbolic exchange does not work from agent to patient in their immutable roles,[52] but indeed, 'in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a *patient* who or which is another *potential* agent, capable of acting as an agent or being a locus of agency'.[53] Operating bidirectionally, agency can be therefore theoretically traced back to Merleau-Ponty's chiasm and the reversibility of the living subjective body in the world of beings and things, as a mutual *passion of the material*.[54] The therapeutic efficacy would also seem to be enhanced by a *performative surplus*[55] which involves the participants as they tell their stories in front of a camera. If, still, patients are pigeonholed in a double *dispositif*, the opportunities for subjectification are very many, in particular due to the narrative and therapeutic *parallax effect*[56], that determines a repositioning of the participants' point of view — since, previously, patients-subjects were exclusively 'observed' and passively treated.

In this regard, the linguistic form of the selfie, as self-representational, democratized audiovisual form, is emblematic.[57] Crystallizing the authorial

trait in the material representation of the gestural production,[58] the practice of the selfie 'constitutes a deictic movement of the body that draws attention to the immediate context in which the observed image is inserted and towards the observer's activity'.[59] The technical gesture of shooting, zooming and selecting the frame contains a connective performance, which is not exclusively characterized by its reference to the represented subject, but related to the production of a trace of reality which concerns its own operator or agent. In amateur and self-narrative audiovisual representations, such indexical and productive circles materially bind the self-portrait to its creator, as well as the subject to its objectual representation. The amateur video as gestural act therefore constitutes an autographic artefact, whose identity can only depend on the technical and experiential conditions of its production and on the material immanence of its object, the bearer of an indexical trace of its creator and agent as singular human being.

By experiencing the triple role of main character, creator and spectator, the amateur filmmaker-as-patient of a medical-narrative treatment is uniquely entangled in a material, perceptual, emotional and self-reflexive relationship between her/his own audiovisual self-representation, between the images on the screen and their agency on the targeted pathological condition off the screen. Conceived in a post-phenomenological perspective, within a procedural art nexus, this technical and material processuality determines a complex abduction of agency and a possibly beneficial reversibility between the subject and its self-representation.

In my theoretical and methodological proposal so far, the potentially therapeutic agency of amateur audiovisual self-narratives is determined by the activation of a suspension of the threshold[60] and the consequent permeability between the story on the screen and the reality off the screen, within an agential, deictic, and representational circularity between subject and object, as is particularly evident in amateur audiovisual self-narratives.

ICONIC *PHARMAKON*

In 2007 the Cineteca and the ASP Giovanni XXIII in Bologna launched an experimental clinical trial which aimed to use audiovisual language for the treatment of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. A team consisting of a doctor, a licensed psychologist and a director created a customized, audiovisual short movie, specifically edited for the patient, using a collage of clinical data, filmed testimonies on the patient's everyday life, and photographic material provided by family and friends.

The research group hypothesized that the periodical administration of Memofilm — that is the name of the project — would positively impact the patient's memory, modifying not only the recovery of the past, but also the self-perception of her/his agency in the present. And in fact, within a timeframe of five years, seventeen Memofilms have proved to be effective in treating specific

symptoms and pathological behaviours related to the targeted disorders.[61] Not only did the Memofilm designate the patient as the main character, object and subject of the person-centered narrative treatment, but it was also plot-based on the unique life story specifically designed for that one patient as its single spectator.

If, therefore, the Memofilm, as exemplification of Documentary Videotherapy, can activate a symbolic exchange between a pathological condition and its narratively reconstituted real life,[62] the therapeutic art nexus that involves the patient — who is also the patient in the secondary agency enhanced by the Memofilm — has significant beneficial effects on the condition that the patient passively undergoes. Through an embodied vision and a cross-modal sensory viewing, the patient-spectator therefore experiences the Memofilm by placing him/herself simultaneously on the screen and outside it. Unlike fictional or documentary movies, where the action and interaction of characters act out a plot, in the Memofilm the viewing experience is about real life: this is the content of vision and the action of its singular and unique spectator. Indeed, the Memofilm is conceived to give the patient access to the screen in order to access her/his life's story on which the plot — and the corresponding therapeutic strategy — is based. Furthermore, the clinical and creative intervention of the team, together with the participation of the patient as spectator and main character, are decisive for the configuration of Memofilmic Therapeutic Set which symbolically, pragmatically, and operationally intervenes on the targeted pathology.

In the second research-intervention project I am going to describe, the Therapeutic Set requires an even more consistent attendance and participation by the spectator. The Video-Pharmakon project is designed to treat children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through a complex corpus of videotherapy techniques and methodologies.[63] Like Memofilm, this methodology consists in the administration of customized audiovisual products edited by the videotherapeutic team, made up of a filmmaker, a child neuropsychiatrist, and a trained and licensed psychologist. Though the patient's position and role as spectator is maintained during the initial therapeutic phase, the Video-Pharmakon protocol differs with regard to a set of crucial elements that serve the therapeutic goals. In fact, the role of the patient as spectator and main character of the final product constitutes only a marginal phase; rather the patient's creative intervention as author and director, as filmmaker of her/his own self-portrayal and autobiographical narrative, prevails [Fig. 1].

To be more efficient with regard to the behavioural difficulties typical of ASD, mainly related to the socio-communicative sphere,[64] the protocol is designed with a methodological focus on the Therapeutic Filmmaking technique — at the expense of Cinematherapy and Documentary Videotherapy, which are used to a less substantial extent. During Therapeutic Filmmaking, young patients use cameras to tell their own fictional or autobiographical stories, transforming themselves from patients to agents, in an audiovisual field that is configured as a transitional, materially moldable, and narrative therapeutic context. Within

Fig. 1
On the Therapeutic Set ©
Video-Pharmakon project

their role as facilitator on the Therapeutic Set, the professional filmmaker only assists the participants in creating their audiovisual story, oscillating between self-representational and inevitably participatory narratives. Simultaneously, the psychologist works on targeted issues during every creative phase on the Therapeutic Set, according the narrative therapy principles and framework.

This processual mode leads to the realization of a Video-Pharmakon, which can be understood as the material outcomes of a horizontal collaboration and as a dynamic audiovisual object of which patients, clinicians and filmmakers are simultaneously the authors, main characters and spectators. [Fig. 2]

Created and then re-viewed by the participants themselves, the Video-Pharmakon produces its therapeutic effect not only during the patient-spectator's re-vision, but also within the productive and creative process itself: the relationship between authors and their audiovisual narratives, as well as the intersection between the authorial and the same spectatorial self, make

Fig. 2
Directing patient © Video-Pharmakon project

the therapeutic process effective according to specific therapeutic behavioural goals.

As an intermedia montage[65] of the amateur patients' footage with the documentary video recordings collected by videotherapeutic team during each production phase, Video-Pharmakon is a complex linguistic assemblage of self-representational and documentary forms, able to help the participants to recognize their own proactive role not only in the creative process but also, transitively, in their own lives.

Fig. 3
At the movie theatre ©
Video-Pharmakon project

Thanks to the iconic and experiential agency derived from a deictic self-representational process, the therapy is finally enabled by the re-visioning of oneself in the act of reinventing the trauma or disease on the set of everyday life, but also in all the procedural phases of anamnesis, conception, shooting and editing, which are all delivered by the patients themselves.

The whole experience, embedded in the patients' bodily involvement in the material act of filmmaking, which therefore acquires the ability to affect a pathological reality thanks to the *spectauthorial* role finally gained by the participants.[66] Such *spectauthorship*, characterized by a circular processuality which involves the patient firstly as spectator, then as author, and finally as *spectauthor*, finds its methodological roots in the self-representation and body performativity of creative audiovisual acts, as discussed so far.

CONCLUSION

Within the current context of the Medical Humanities, therapeutic audiovisual approaches still require field-specific reflections on definitional and application possibilities. This discussion has provided attempt in this regard, in shaping a participatory-ascending path regarding the roles of patient and spectator. By

enabling participant access in a double *dispositif*, that is both therapeutic and narrative, and through their physical and gestural inscription within the self-portrait form, the amateur, self-representational process has the pragmatic potential to trigger, thanks to a material, perceptual, emotional and self-reflexive entanglement, a potential reversibility between the movie on the screen and its agency in everyday life. From a Medical-Narrative perspective, a specific, iconic agency arises in the embodied relationship between the amateur audiovisual creator and her/his own self-representation, in a deictic circle of subject and object representation.

In the methodological path outlined so far, within the context of visual Narrative Therapy, Cinematherapy and Filmtherapy, on the one hand, consist in a cinematic fruition with a high interpretation rate, that is nonetheless controlled by the workings and the rules of the therapeutic setting; on the other hand, Therapeutic Video Recording, Documentary Videotherapy, and Therapeutic Filmmaking offer an increasingly interactive and performative relationship with the filmic text.

From this perspective, the audiovisual product distinguishes itself for its counter-gifted nature, acting therapeutically as a self-reflexive, creative and iconic subjectivation process. This ecological progression — consisting in an amateur *spectauthorial* creation and a metanarrative Video-Pharmakon vision, based on a kind of agency which can only be bodily, material and *self-made* — contains the condition of possibility for beneficial effects of audiovisual therapy.

Notes

[1] ISS-CNMR,'Conferenza di Consenso. Linee di indirizzo per l'utilizzo della medicina narrativa in ambito clinico-assistenziale per le malattie rare e cronico-degenerative', *I Quaderni di Medicina de il Sole 24 Ore Sanità*, 7.24 (2015), 3-24 (13) (my translation).

[2] Ibidem. The ISS defines four different Narrative Medicine theoretical and methodological approaches, 13-15.

[3] I am refering to the seminal work of dr. Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, theory and research*, ed. by Lynne Angus and John McLeod (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

[5] In this regard, see at least Rita Charon and others, *The principles and practice of Narrative Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Maria Giulia Marini, *Languages of Care in Narrative Medicine: Words, Space and Time in the Healthcare Ecosystem* (New York: Springer, 2018).

[6] Not to be overlooked, in my opinion, is the related concept of subjunctive medicine. Cf. Doug Hardman and Giulio Ongaro, 'Subjunctive Medicine: A Manifesto', *Social Science & Medicine*, 256 (2020), 113039.

[7] See, at least, the seminal work of Trisha Greenhalgh, 'Narrative Based Medicine in an Evidence Based World', *BMJ*, 318.7179 (1999), 323-25; Megan M. Milota, Ghislaine J.M.W. van Thiel and Johannes JM van Delden, 'Narrative Medicine as a Medical Education Tool: A Systematic Review', *Medical Teacher*, 41.7 (2019), 802-810.

[8] On this matter, Ann King and Ruth B. Hoppe, 'Best Practice for Patient-centered Communication: A Narrative Review, *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 5.3 (2013), 385-93; *The Routledge International Handbook of Embodied Perspectives in Psychotherapy: Approaches from Dance Movement and Body Psychotherapies*, ed. by Helen Payne, Sabine Koch and Jennifer Tantia (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

[9] John McLeod, *Narrative and Therapy* (London: Sage, 1997), X.

[10] See Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy* (London: Sage, 2006).

[11] Philip Barker, 'The Healing of the Mind: Meaning and Method', in *Talking Cures: A Guide to the Psychotherapies for Health Care Professionals*, ed. by Philip Barker (London: Nursing Times Books, 1999), 8.

[12] See at least Michael White, Wijaya Made and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1990).

[13] Fiona Johnstone, 'Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities', *BMJ Medical Humanities Journal*, < https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2018/07/31/manifesto-for-a-visual-medical-humanities/?msclkid=9ce56c6cc4d911eca26a069a9b58d3f0>, [accessed 23 April 2022].

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Mireille Berton, *Le corps nerveux des spectateurs: Cinéma et sciences du psychisme autour de 1900* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2015); *Moralizing Cinema: Film, Catholicism, and Power*, ed. by Daniël Biltereyst and Daniela Treveri Gennari (London, New York: Routledge, 2014).

[16] Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, 'Embodying Movies: Embodied Simulation and Film Studies', *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 3, (2012), 183-210.

[17] Christian Metz, *The Imagery Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

[18] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin UK: London, 2008).

[19] 'Conferenza di Consenso', 19, my translation.

[20] Cheryl Mattingly, 'The Concept of Therapeutic Emplotment', *Social Science & Medicine*, 38.6 (1994), 811-822.

[21] This mixed therapeutic methodology is not new to the field of Art-Therapy, on which I am, however, not going to dwell in this discussion: in this regard, see Cathy Malchiodi, *Art Therapy and Health Care* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013).

[22] Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Film Quarterly*, 28.2 (1974), 39-47.

[23] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-195.

[24] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizome. Introduction* (Paris: Eds. de Minuit, 1976), 18-19.

[25] Gilles Deleuze, 'What is a *dispositif*?', in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. by Timothy Armstrong (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992),159-166.

[26] See, among others, Linda Berg-Cross, Pamela Jennings and Rhoda Baruch, 'Cinematherapy: Theory and Application', *Psychotherapy in Private Practice*, 8.1 (1990), 135-56; Danny Wedding and Ryan M. Niemiec, 'The Clinical Use of Films in Psychotherapy', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 59.2 (2003), 207-215. Also see the more recent Christie Eppler and Jen Hutchings, 'The Use of Cinematherapy to Illustrate Systemic Resilience', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 76.8 (2020), 1463-1471, Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi, *Film Therapy: Practical Applications in a Psychotherapeutic Context* (New York, Routledge, 2022).

[27] Cinematherapy/Filmtherapy has frequently been considered a form of Art-Therapy, cf. *Materials and Media in Art Therapy*, ed. by Catherine Hyland Moon (New York, Routledge, 2010). In this discussion, I instead try to frame it within Film and Media Studies.

[28] Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 60-71.

[29] Ibidem, 96-102.

[30] Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen. Cinema and Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019 [2015]).

[31] This therapeutic concept may be defined as a set of video recording techniques used during the psychotherapeutic session, cf. *Videotherapy in Mental Health*, ed. by Jerry Fryrear and Bob Fleshman (Springfield: Charles C. Tomas, 1981); Ira Heilveil, *Video in Mental Health Practice: An Activities Handbook* (New York: Springer, 1983); Lou Furman, 'Video Therapy: An Alternative for the Treatment of Adolescents', *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 17.2 (1990), 165-169.

[32] I am referring to the image/picture distinction proposed by John W. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[33] In this regard, see at least the seminal study of Gérard Bléandonu, *La vidéo en thérapie. Le choc de l'image de soi dans les soins psychologiques* (Paris: ESF, 1986).

[34] I have described this approach to a higher level of detail in Anna Chiara Sabatino, Valeria Saladino, Valeria Verrastro, *Cinema terapeutico. Linguaggi audiovisivi e percorsi clinici* (Rome: Carocci, 2021), 57-62.

[35] In fact, 'it is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images', cf. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 256.

[36] Cf. *Video and Filmmaking as Psychotherapy*, ed. by Joshua L. Cohen, Lauren Johnson and Penelope P. Orr (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015); Małgorzata Jakubowska and Monika Michałowska, 'Filmmaking as Therapy: between Art Therapy and Resilience Theory', *Panoptikum*, 18 (2017), 227-236; Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, Benjamin Patton, and Charles Drebing, '"When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold it": Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9.1954 (2018), 1-11; Anna Chiara Sabatino and others, 'Therapeutic Filmmaking, Strategic Psychotherapy and Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Integrated Approach', *Journal of Psychological & Educational Research*, 29.2 (2021), 56-89.

[37] Participatory video manifests itself in multiple forms: from collaborative video, developed in the 1960s within the Fogo Process movement, in which the camera remains in the hands of the facilitators (see Donald Snowden, 'Eyes See; Ears Hear: Supplement to a Film Under the Same Title', *Memorial University*, 1984, n.p.), to projects in which the participation is more consistent (for instance, the *Video in the Villages* by Vincent Carelli in 1987 and Terence Turner's *Kayapo Video Project* in 1990 *Navajo Project*); see Terence Turner, 'Representation, Politics, and Cultural Imagination in Indigenous Video: General Points and Kayapo Examples', in *Media Words*, ed. by Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), 75-89 and also Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

[38] Jackie Shaw and Clive Robertson, *Participatory Video: A Practical Approach to Using Video Creatively in Group Development Work* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008 [1997]).

[39] Fernand Deligny, 'La caméra outil pédagogique', *Vers l'éducation nouvelle*, 97 (1955).

[40] This matter is extensively discussed by Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[41] I am here refering to performative documentary as defined by Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London,

New York, Routledge, 2006), 185-217.

[42] David Buckingham, Maria Pini and Rebekah Willett, '"Take Back the Tube!": The Discursive Construction of Amateur Film-and Video-Making', in *Video Cultures*, ed. by David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 51-70.

[43] Maya Deren, 'Amateur versus Professional', *Film Culture*, 39.1 (1965), 45-46 (45).

[44] Simone Moraldi, *Questioni di campo. La relazione osservatore/osservato nella forma documentaria* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2015), 87, my translation.

[45] In this regard, see, at least Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

[46] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 13.

[47] Chiara Cappelletto, 'Performing Image, or how the Visual Dimension is Enacted by Pictures', in *TransVisuality. Dimensioning the Visual in a Visual Culture*, ed. by Handers D. Christensen, Tore Kristensen and Anders Michelsen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 59-74.

[48] I am refering to a performance concept as defined by Judith Butler, 'Performative Agency', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3.2 (2010), 147-161.

[49] I previously argued this elsewhere. Cf. Anna Chiara Sabatino, 'Performance', *International Lexicon of Aesthetics* (Milan: Mimesis, 2021), 3.

[50] In this regard, see at least David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013 [1991]).

[51] See, with respect to amateur filmmaking forms, *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, ed. by Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young and Barry Monahan (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

[52] This is how Gell defines the users of the agency: as 'patients', see *Art and Agency*, 21-23.

[53] Ibidem, 22

[54] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 294.

[55] Gauthier Guy, *Le documentaire: un autre cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007).

[56] Faye Ginsburg, 'The Parallax Effect: The Impact of Aboriginal Media on Ethnographic Film', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 11.2 (1995), 64-76.

[57] André Gunthert, 'Viralité du selfie, déplacements du portrait', *L'Atelier des icônes*, (2013)<http://histoirevisuelle.fr/cv/icones/2895>, [accessed 20 April 2022].

[58] Regarding the artistic trait, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait* (Paris: Galilée, 2000 [1995]).

[59] Paul Frosh, 'The Gestural Image: The Selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), 1607-1628 (1615).

[60] What was discussed lies within an aesthetic of the performative context that redefines the very concept of boundary, strongly emphasizing the experiential moment of trespassing and passage and configuring a threshold as a space in which anything can happen: see Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008).

[61] *Memofilm. Creatività contro l'Alzheimer*, ed. by Luisa Grosso (Milan: Mimesis, 2013).

[62] Memofilm does not propose a fictional, restorative version of the pathology, rather it attempts, through documentary language, to positively convert the events in order to intervene on patient's perception and dysfunctional behaviours.

[63] The Video-Pharmakon research-intervention project was born out of my doctoral research, and it has involved me as on field as lead researcher and filmmaker in therapeutic team. The therapeutic protocol was approved by by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (Italy) and by the Ethics Committee of the University of Salerno (Italy). This is described with a higher level of detail in Valeria Saladino and others, 'Filmmaking and Video as Therapeutic Tools: Case Studies on Autism Spectrum Disorder', *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 71 (2020), 101714.

[64] Cf., among others, Konstantin Yenkoyan et al., 'Advances in Understanding the Pathophysiology of Autism Spectrum Disorders', *Behavioural Brain Research* 331 (2017), 92-101.

[65] In this regard, cf. Pietro Montani, *L'immaginazione intermediale: perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile* (Milan: Meltemi, 2022 [2010]).

[66] This is extensively explained and described in *Cinema terapeutico*.

Intra-Active Sense-Making
Towards a Performative Understanding of Biomedical Imaging

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Our paper is situated within the broader exploration of the epistemic and aesthetic potential of biomedical imaging technologies on the human lived experience. *Intra-Active Sense-Making* is guided by the grounding thesis that imaging technology ought to be understood as a set of material, rhetorical and performative processes, and as a way to challenge the ocularcentric presuppositions. By drawing on the new materialistic theses that phenomena are not pre-existent to intra-action, and that agency should be understood as distributed on human, animal, objectual, and 'physical' levels, we offer a *performative* understanding of biomedical imaging operations complementary to the *reflective* paradigm. Biomedical imaging may be understood through our idea of *intra-active sense-making*, while much literature states that medical imaging establishes a view of the self as quantified, atomized, and governable, we argue that the co-configuration of human senses and digital sensors is a source of new sense-making capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore biomedical imaging as a process that involves human beings, bodies, images, data, and technological devices, as well as their relative positions of power. Our goal in presenting this theoretical discussion is to enrich the ongoing debates on biomedical imaging by offering a philosophical understanding of this practice in terms of *performativity*, *intra-action*, and *sense-making*. This analysis is organized into four sections.[1]

In the first two sections, we situate our position within contemporary debates on biomedical imaging, by focusing specifically on the relationship between visualization, biometrification, and images. Biomedical imaging is thus discussed as a specific example of a broader biometrification trend, since it aims to collect data, separate bodies, and classify subjects. This debate discusses the transparency of the body, the objectivity of data, and the scientificity of images. By reviewing key themes within the literature, we then present a preliminary outline of our own research. In particular, we highlight that imaging can seem to transparently reveal molecular dynamics, at the cost of carefully concealing the initial act of interpretation that shapes mathematical data into visually recognizable and satisfactory images. The fact that data must be processed in

order to generate a visualizable form makes it impossible to assert any direct identification of code and image. Nevertheless, transformative processes — from phenomenon to data and then back to visualisation — are rarely documented or annotated. Biomedical imaging produces visual outputs that are *prima facie* distant from the original phenomenon from which they are extracted. Taking up this insight, we thus interrogate the very nature of biomedical images.

In sections three and four, we explore new materialistic notions of agency, subject, and technology with the aim to reframe some key parameters of the analysis and focus on the very process of visualization. From there, we argue that biomedical imaging may be understood through our idea of *intra-active sense-making*: while Barad's concept of 'intra-action' redefines what the individuals are and what does agency mean, the idea of sense-making is understood as the 'process by which individual and collective experiences become meaningful'.[2] When applied to biomedical imaging, *intra-active sense-making* helps us to rethink the intertwined relationships between technological production of images and lived experiences.

All in all, the paper concludes that medical visual culture is grounded on specific theoretical choices of which the 'ocularcentrism' is a symptom of a wider understanding of the self as a subject who inter-acts with other subjects and objects; the primacy of the sight on the other senses is not teleological determined by the technological construction of biomedical imaging, but it is rather the result of philosophical conceptions of the subject and the data both in the scientific fields and in popular culture.

BIOMEDICAL IMAGING AS A FORM OF BIOMETRIFICATION

Our contemporary media environment is becoming increasingly enhanced by sensory devices and computer vision systems with the ability to process huge data sets for the recognition, identification, and monitoring of bodies. This has become more pervasive *a fortiori* with the upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which machine vision systems have become central to a broad spectrum of applications, from social surveillance to diagnostics.[3] In the context of a health crisis that requires bodies to be distanced, machine vision systems facilitated the collection and analysis of remote data. It is not a specific feature of biomedical imaging devices that they are remote sensing technologies; in fact, various degrees of proximity between the body and the device pertain to its possible applications. From the distanced functioning of thermal imaging measurements to the tactile dimension of ultrasound, these technologies establish specific proximal relations in relation to lived bodies. Despite their respective differences, biomedical imaging devices work based on the same epistemic principle — namely that the concreteness and complexity of the living phenomenon can be more effectively and objectively understood through two-

dimensional image-data excerpted from the phenomenon than directly from the phenomenon itself. This assumption involves two theoretical moves that we will outline here. First, the human body is conceived as a source of information that can be transmitted through an image or a digital code. The practice of producing maps of codes that refer to our bodies as bounded and autonomous entities is expressed through the primacy of biometrics, here understood as the set of practices, from small-scale wearable trackers and Fitbits to large-scale medical devices, such as MRI, with different levels of engagement and tension between the subject and the apparatus. Here we focus on how biomedical imaging exploits and converts the intricate materiality of the body into modular systems by representing it as averages and discrete moments of a linear journey.[4] This tendency — which Haraway defines as 'corporeal fetishism'[5] — for digital technologies to engage with human bodies in these ways reduces their embodied lived experience to data.

Second, the fact that information from our body is conveyed by an image indicates a primacy of sight over other senses. By naïvely proposing an evidential correspondence between the image and the psychophysiological processes, biomedical imaging thus promotes a conception of the body subsumed under the auspices of the visual, which Lupton calls 'ocularcentric tendencies of biomedicine'.[6] These sets of practices transform the lived dynamics of the body into something that can be seen and measured. As Lupton poignantly illustrates, '[m]edical visualizing technologies can work to draw attention away from the fleshly body of the patient "in the rush to find visual proof", thus dehumanising the individual'.[7]

Technologies that make visible parts and qualities of the body which are not otherwise directly apparent to the naked eye have traditionally been understood as a key practice in biomedicine. We follow Cartwright's idea that, '[t]he dispersal of embodied sight triggered in science some often peculiar attempts to maintain authority over subjects by maintaining authority over the optical field'.[8] Contemporary diagnostic imaging makes visible bodily activities that have nothing to do with the visual realm, nor are they detected by lenses or prostheses that intercept signals from the visible electromagnetic spectrum. The epistemic primacy of the data made visible over accounts of lived experience is symptomatic of the need to re-establish sight in the medical domain.

Within these debates, biomedical technologies are conceived as means to overcome first-person lived experiences and the limits of human perception with *mechanical objectivity* and the machinic gaze.[9] Along these lines, our conception of what visualization can do is framed within our general understanding of the human self's relationship with the objectual world. Ultimately, visualization processes are heuristically fruitful, in that they show what are considered to be 'subject', 'body', 'truth'. More specifically, visualization is often assumed as part of our interactions with objects and data; despite contemporary efforts to creatively rethink the activity/passivity divide in ways that do not naïvely align with the subject/object dualism (i.e., in new materialism), the understanding of biomedical imaging as a form of biometrification is still broadly popular and

grounded on the philosophical subject/object dualism.

As Lupton notes, this also applies to digital data arising from visualization processes: 'Because of their association with nonhuman entities such as digital devices and software, and because they are often viewed as non-material entities, digital data are often de-humanised and de-materialised in discourses'.[10] In dealing with these data, we tend to treat them as passive matter which ought to be decrypted, understood, and explained by the active cognitive gaze of the doctor, neglecting to acknowledge that what we visualize depends on our own vital processes. A further aspect of the issue relates to the design of images produced in visualization processes; any form of biomedical visualization is productive of images in which subjective bodily activity is obtained *in contrast to* the environment, not *together with it*. The iconic artifact obscures environmental considerations by focusing on a discrete part of what is, in fact, a co-constitutive process. Biomedical imaging shows a certain predilection for separating the phenomenon under study from a homogeneous and neutral background, e.g., highlighting a single molecular dynamic among many complicated brain circuits in brain imaging, or contrasting human body temperature from environmental influences. The object of interest is separated to enable more manageable processing, perpetuating the idea that its occurrence is disengaged from other processes. Isolated as a discrete specimen, enlarged or flattened, pierced by non-light radiation, and perceived by a *machinic gaze*, bodily activity is quantified, extracted from a body, and abstracted from its materiality. By presenting image-data as functional mediation between a molecular phenomenon and human perception, diagnostic practice thus provides a specific epistemic key for accessing our bodies.[11] The visual and biometric output of imaging procedures has certain design conditions and carries with it specific affordances, thus conditioning the kind of knowledge the human subject might gain from the phenomenon.

WHAT KINDS OF IMAGES?

Biomedical imaging arises through the need to produce an image that can be interrogated both by the practitioners and patients. The status of images issued from biomedical imaging is at the center of vivid debates within the literature, specifically when these images are surreptitiously conceived as testimonies of given realities. Within this context, current debates focus on the domain wherein biomedical imaging is nowadays situated by proposing a review of the presuppositions underlying ocularcentrism.[12]

While the well-known concept of *neuro-realistic fallacy* [13] — namely the photo-like persuasive effect of the iconic output of non-visual bodily image-data — applies to the case of neuroimaging, it is our interest to explore how this *fallacy* may concern biomedical imaging *per se*. Given the photo-like effect of biomedical imaging and its inclusion in the phenomenon of biometrification, the dominant paradigm for analysing the image produced for diagnostic purposes is Farocki's

Miglio, Galimberti, *Intra-Active Sense-Making*

concept of the *operational image*,[14] which encompasses photogrammetry (i.e., the use of photography as a tool for scale measurement) as the archaeologically founding technique of its *scopic regime*. With the shift from the *representational* paradigm to the *digital biometric* one, the information carried by the photographic image is quantified. The image thus becomes 'operational', i.e., it can be read by a machine that extracts the information needed in order to perform or cause an action to be performed. Operational images trigger decisions and do things in the world rather than replacing or augmenting human vision. In the words of Elsaesser,

> *The operational image must be understood as an amassment of visual information that is meant to generate knowledge that has little to do with human perception or seeing, in the sense of 'I see' meaning 'I know,' and more to do with controlling territory, occupying space, monitoring a situation and mining it for useful information or active intervention.*[15]

Understanding biomedical imaging through the operational image paradigm allows us to see that resulting images are in no sense forms of *reflection* (or *representation*), even if viewed as distorted, manipulated, or implemented by the medium; rather, they are more like diagrams that retain the relational qualities of the material imprint.[16] Within the operational paradigm, we thus argue that biomedical images are not mirror-images, nor do they open direct windows onto the invisible and non-visible world. This paradigm, however, tends to pay little attention to the *demonstrative* — or, even better, *persuasive* — goal of biomedical imaging. In fact, each image functions as a rhetorical device that implements a more or less deliberate selection of parameters according to which it reduces and models data that are not mere facts to be reported.[17] The biomedical image is not a one-to-one translation of a given reality, but instead concerns a negotiation between the human operation and the phenomenon under scrutiny.[18] Insofar as biomedical imaging is not merely reflective, but also constructive, it is crucial to investigate digital composition procedures as parts of a whole process interrelated with images, bodies, and people.

The objectivity sought from images produced by imaging devices perpetuates the idea that data collection is pure, immaterial, and non-invasive recording, and at the same time overlooks the complicated materiality of digital technology. The myth of the objectivity and transparency of scientific images is bound up with the cultural authority of the data; their presumptive scientificity is upheld by virtue of the fact that the rawness and messiness of the matter is carefully deleted from the picture.

The materiality and functioning of technical operations therefore remains *black-boxed*,[19] and knowledge is produced concerning demonstrable effects without understanding the process. The interpretive work of shaping data (sample size choices, and other aspects of statistical and quantitative manipulations) disappears in the final result. As Casini correctly points out,

Looking at how scientific knowledge is produced, rather than innocently discovered, is akin to looking under data visualization to consider its assumptions and conventions. What does 'looking under' data visualization mean? There is nothing natural or predetermined when it comes to data visualization.[20]

While the cultural expectations regarding scientific visualization among non-expert audiences is such that the work of interpreting the image seems to be minimal, due to its transparent objectivity, deciphering work by experts is a crucial step. Images for medical use are perhaps especially subject to interpretive flexibility. Images resulting from visualization processes need thus to make explicit the epistemological frame of reference (e.g., captions and experimental conditions), since data do not *speak for themselves*; they must be instead accompanied by medical training and expertise in order to become vehicles for a communicable statement. The medical image has always been serving as an intermediary in the doctor-patient relationship: the body under analysis offers itself to the doctor's gaze inter-mediated by the biomedical image. Nowadays, it might seem that the triangulation should be subverted: the patient's body offers *itself* to the machinic perception, which is inter-mediated by the doctor's analysis.[21] What is being 'observed' is not the phenomenon itself but an encoded inscription of an activity that takes place beyond sensory thresholds. Data collected by the technical apparatuses of biomedical imaging come from electromagnetic or sound radiation outside our sensory capacities and are then translated into images of our bodies that are as familiar as possible to our eyes.[22] This *prosthetic* feature of biomedical imaging defines specific power relationships between practitioners and patients, by radically modifying what counts as *images* to us, and how we conceive our own sensorial limits and potentials. As detection and imaging practices change, so does our access to what Hansen describes as the 'expanded domain of sensibility' — namely those aspects of the sensible that are detected by a variety of digital devices and to which the human sensorium cannot access.[23]

We learn to think together with these images, not only through the logic of visual thinking but also by considering the retroactive-effects of using these sensorial prostheses. By interacting with these visualizations — since 'they tune us into other registers of experience, and they attach us to perceptive practices that remake our sensory worlds'[24] — we open up new ways of thinking about our lived bodies.

INTRA-ACTIVE PRACTICES AND ENCOUNTERS

Understanding biomedical imaging as a form of biometrification allows us to grasp the relationship between the subject and visualizing technologies in quantitative terms. It therefore helps to see how imaging serves to the aim of

detection. Nonetheless, biomedical imaging also has a qualitative dimension, that concerns the *sense-making* undertaken by the subject during medical scrutiny and in the encounter with resulting images.[25]

Human experiences become meaningful to the self through complex negotiation processes of one's singular history, common and individual beliefs, and shared norms. The significance of particular experiences arises from the nonlinear intertwining of individual, social, and cultural values. Let's consider the case of biomedical imaging. The subject under scrutiny — for diagnostic or experimental purposes — is a person who has a first-hand experience of a part of the visualization process in non-neutral ways. They may have various degrees of emotional investment during the procedure (e.g., the scan was prescribed by the oncologist after surgery, or it is a routine test; a healthy person is a part of a clinical trial). Again, they may be able to know exactly what is 'going on' during the procedure or may be completely naïve to the point of ignoring why the practitioner is moving their body in a given manner or making *that* facial expression. All these qualitative variations fall under the *sense-making* emerging through the visualization processes, in that the participants bring into play singular and collective ways of making sense of the experience they are having, either by being surprised, worried, or unconcerned during the examination or by understanding or not understanding the visual outcomes.

The theoretical core of our paper is precisely to show the intertwined relationship between the technological side of biomedical imaging — including its biometrification-driven purposes — and the lived experience that these processes may entail for the self. Exploring this latter side thus involves recognizing the performative dimension of biomedical imaging.[26] According to our theoretical proposal, the lack of reflection around the performative aspect of biomedical imaging may lead to a misunderstanding of its lived relation with the self, and epistemically risks remaining 'locked into mechanistic models of thought in which an image/text is "out there" and an eye brings it "into" the mind'.[27] By hiding the relational process underlying visualization, we are forced to interact with these technologies as if they are straightforwardly factual and objective statements. Gardner and Jenkins warn us against this, by remembering that 'there are few technological experiences with more potential for creating a sense of disembodied alienation than seeing one's physical self portrayed two-dimensionally as data via algorithmic code'.[28]

While it has been widely argued that we struggle to regain ownership of these data because they erase the co-dependency between our body and the device, it is part of our strategy to argue for a reappraisal of the lived experience of diagnostic phenomenon. We are delving into the very nature of the self and its complex relationship with technologies — specifically those ones that make it possible to see the invisible and the non-visible; this is what is at stake in the debate. The intertwined co-constitution of data, images, and lived experiences necessitates a theoretical argument that sees the relationships between human beings and technology not in terms of activity/passivity, but that may instead grasp the mutual co-constitution of the phenomenon of visualization.

In other words, what is needed is a theoretical framework that can express the *performative* dimension of biomedical imaging. While much literature has focused on the results of imaging, our proposal is instead to take into account the very process of biomedical diagnostics by focusing on lived experience. This theoretical choice is motivated by the idea that considering only the result is a problematic move, since it overlooks the *technical* (and not only technological) processes that have led to the outputs. It is also grounded in a genuine misunderstanding of the interactive relationship between technologies and users — how technologies may affect the human being and how human beings impact the technologies themselves — and thus cannot grasp the *retroactive* dynamics of (imaging) technologies on the self.

Our proposal is then to frame biomedical imaging within the theory of *agential realism*; the technology of biomedical imaging, the process itself, the involved subjects, and the final *result* ought not to be understood as individuals but as *relata* of a process of intra-action. Barad explains that understanding the relations between relata allows us to recognize 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies'.[29] By refusing the notion of *interaction* — which is said to assume an encounter between individual agencies that occur *after* their own constitution —, Barad proposes that we might think of subjects in terms of intra-action, acknowledging that distinct agencies 'do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action'.[30] This ontological framework insists on the relationality as the place of constitution of individual agencies, whose separation is possible in virtue of their mutual entanglement. As Barad puts it, 'each "individual" always already includes all possible intra-actions with "itself" through all the virtual Others, including those that are non-contemporaneous with "itself"'.[31]

According to her *agential realist* account, phenomena do not sign 'the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the results of measurements', marking instead the ontologically inseparable relata of intra-active processes.[32] This shift of paradigm impacts the epistemic understanding of several notions underlying Western philosophy — among others the ones of subject, object, process, agency, and causality — by having at the same time a radical effect 'in understanding the nature of science and ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues more generally'.[33] Instead of seeing relata *qua* individuals, *agential realism* acknowledges that every entity emerges through intra-active practices. That does not mean that it is impossible to grasp the specific individual moments of the whole process, but rather than the process should be primarily recognized in its wholeness; on this matter, Athanasiadou notes that,

> When the agential cut in the continuum of reality is enacted, that is the moment of a measurement could be described as clear but not distinct. This moment is clear insofar as relations can be drawn, space–time–matter is made specific, and an epistemological distinction between the object and the agency of the observation is established. However, the moment of the agential cut is not distinct insofar as it is ontologically inseparable from the continuity of the world.[34]

This approach is performative, in the sense that 'subject and object do not preexist as such but emerge through intra-actions'.[35] By drawing on a *performative* framework, some efforts have been made in recognizing the specific agential dynamics underlying biotechnological processes and measurements; for instance, de la Bellacasa takes into account touching technologies, which she defines as 'material and meaning-producing embodied practices entangled with the very matter of relating-being'.[36]

If we follow the idea that technologies of visualization are not exclusively related to an ocularcentric paradigm, then we must recognize that they are not straightforward neutral mirrors of reality, but rather they are fluid processes of intra-action. As de la Bellacasa sums up, '[touching technologies] cannot be about touch and get, or about immediate access to more reality. Reality is a process of intra-active touch.'[37] What we called *ocularcentrism* — following Lupton — is philosophically dependent on a *reflective* framework which conceives the subject and object as separate entities that pre-exist their mutual relationship.[38] The idea that sight has a primacy over other human senses is acceptable only in a framework that sees the entities has separated and pre-existent one to the other.

VISUALIZATION AS A PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Whereas from a *reflective* perspective biomedical visualization is forced to distance the object of study from subjective experience, when considering the *performative* aspect of imaging the agency of the apparatuses indistinctly incorporates bodies and technologies. As Gabrys notes, '[i]nstruments, observation, observer, and phenomena are entangled such that world-making is a distributed and multiagential affair'.[39]

We therefore argue that, in a theoretical exploration of biomedical imaging processes, one should keep together the multiple and overlapping agencies of the devices, the images produced, and the bodies involved at all stages, from scanning to reading the results. By reframing imaging processes within the agential realistic account, we argue that the focus shifts from an understanding of the visual output as neutral, passive, objective, and reflective to the 'vital and relational character of data (that they are produced by and produce effects in the real world)'.[40] Our arguments then support Casini's thesis that visualization 'it is not only a practice to make visible that which is not in sight, but a vital process capable of producing cognitive and affective relationships between concepts, spaces, and people[41]', and that, as Lupton suggests, 'the person engaging with their data is a performative agent in an event with the data materialisations, just as they earlier were agential in co-creating the data with the device they used to do this'.[42]

The output of imaging technologies exerts a rather distinctive mode of sense-making: people can recognize their molecular or imperceptible processes not at

the level of proprioceptive sensations, but thanks to the externalization facilitated by the device. Bypassing the subject's actual sensory perception, this output — which very often consists of an image, as we have seen — raises questions about abstraction and arbitrariness with respect to the material phenomenon. Although it can in no way be validated on an intuitive or phenomenological level, it has a great capacity to impact our sense-making and our own sense of self.[43]

The starting assumption is that digital and algorithmic mediation are increasingly important to our ability to define and understand ourselves.[44] What we have called *biometric* forms of *body fetishism* are productive, since they influence how we conceive of the human 'self' and their relations to the world. Codes impact and shape our bodily awareness. Biomedical imaging makes it possible to be informed about our bodies in ways that would otherwise be impossible to perceive. This awareness, far from leading to forms of self-alienation, may instead enhance self-reflective processes of recognition. By looking at images, people may apprehend information on their own bodily phenomena, which eventually can lead to creative ways of making sense of their lived experiences. If biomedical images are framed within this understanding of what these technologies offer to subjects, we see that they have the potential to provide forms of profound connections with subjective experiences. Lupton reports on cases where the use of self-tracking devices has enabled people to focus information on their own bodily processes. The activity of one's body is transformed into digital data whose metrics and visualizations can enhance awareness of what one's body is doing;[45] Pantzar and Ruckenstein's concept of *situated objectivity* goes in this direction, in that it grasps that people may positively enhance processes of sense-making of their digital data, which are not passively accepted as disembodied re-presentations of themselves.[46] Along these lines, this *situated objectivity* is said to be hardly attainable in the field of biomedical imaging. On the one hand, there are imaging processes, such as MRI, that explicitly require patients to see their scans at a time after diagnosis. On the other hand, even when patients can observe their bodily images, they do not always have the 'visual expertise' (result of medical training) to fully understand what they are looking at. While it has been broadly recognized that data referring to our bodies may have agential capacities to influence the actions and behaviours of people to whom they are shown or described, there has been little attention on how people also have agential capacities to actively shape and rewrite these data instead of viewing them as inevitable and objective. Gardner and Jenkins grasp this crucial point by stating that,

> *Although we found considerable evidence in support of the alienating impact of digitized bodily representations, we also discovered that, when allowed to play and 'tarry' with these technologies, users created dynamic, reflective relationships with the machines that can be characterized as productive, affective, and intra-active.*[47]

As discussed at length by other scholars like Lupton, data are not inscribed in passive bodies from which they are actively extracted by the device. Data

are rather agential entities because they relate to our life processes. We are certainly not extrinsic spectators of these psychophysiological processes, even if they may remain below the threshold of our awareness, as the pseudo-representational mode of imaging might encourage us to think. Conceiving imaging in terms of extraction of data to be detected does not open space for the sense-making processes of the people whose visualized bodies are under examination. Instead, data are not 'extracted' from the subject: on the contrary, the visualized body and the visualizing image constantly shape each other, being part of a process of mutual co-constitution that also includes the patient. The boundary between the user's subjective experience and the 'objective' representation of the data becomes porous by revealing thus their mutual co-constitution.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS OR TOWARDS INTRA-ACTIVE SENSE-MAKING OF BIOMEDICAL IMAGING

In this paper, we put forth an understanding of biomedical imaging as a complex phenomenon which is inextricably related to our philosophical conceptions of self, body, device, image, and (scientific) knowledge. The core aim of our theoretical proposal has been to explore what happens when we take seriously the subject/object paradigm offered by new materialisms when applied to biomedical imaging. By recasting the processes of visualization within the framework of *performativity*, we then discussed how the images produced through biomedical imaging ought to be understood in processual terms. Conceiving of visualization processes as performative practices poses a challenge to the allegedly oppositional dualism between the practitioner as the entitled 'reader' of images and the patient as the 'receiver' of diagnosis, by instead investigating the intra-action of *relata* as constitutive parts of an extended process. Visualizations could thus gain the ability to transform data sensed by our bodily processes into visual prostheses that extend our sense-making processes. What we have argued is that images in themselves are not sufficient for this explanatory process, but instead technical environment, methodological choices, and agential cuts within each encounter between patient, device, and practitioner must be taken into account. The theoretical proposal we have sketched in this paper is intended to offer an alternative to the understanding of biomedical imaging as pertaining to the *representational* paradigm; by unveiling the intrinsic relationship between production of images, technological devices, and human interactions, we let emerge the performative dimension of biomedical imaging. The *intra-active sense-making* of biomedical imaging defies the supposed 'objectivity' and 'transparency' of the data, when understood as re-presentation of a given 'external' reality. Along these lines, as Bleeker poignantly points out,

The design of data-based visualizations [...] exemplif[ies] such relational understanding in how, rather than (providing the illusion of) presenting a transparent window to aspects of the world previously inaccessible to humans, they are apparatuses that set the stage for intra-actions that engage in and effectuate ways of knowing.[48]

This process is intra-active because the relata do not pre-exist their own constitution, but are instead participating in mutual and continuous sense-making. This theoretical approach invites us to reconsider the intertwined and intermingled relationships between images, data, bodies, devices, and people as parts of a whole process of productive sense-making.

All in all, by calling for further investigations and applications to several case studies — from MRI to ultrasound, from thermal imaging to X-rays —, this preliminary research may help us to productively re-imagine and re-think our participation in medical images' production, and ultimately in the comprehension of what role we play in the making of ourselves.

Notes

[1] Giulio Galimberti wrote *§ Biomedical Imaging as a Form of Biometrification, and § What Kinds of Images?*, while Nicole Miglio wrote *§ Intra-Active Practices and Encounters, and § Visualization as a Performative Practice*. Both authors together wrote the Introduction, and the *§ Conclusive Remarks or Towards Intra-Active Sense-Making of Biomedical Imaging*. All the authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

[2] Nicole Miglio and Jessie Stanier, 'Beyond Pain Scales: A Critical Phenomenology of Imagination in the Expression of Pain', *Frontiers in Pain Research*, 3 (2022). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpain.2022.895443 [accessed 25 May 2022].

[3] Cf. *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, ed. by Philipp Dominik Keidl and others (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020).

[4] For some classical accounts, see e.g., *Handbook of Biometrics*, ed. by Anil K. Jain, Patrick Flynn, and Arun A. Ross (Boston: Springer, 2007); Joseph Pugliese, *Biometrics: Bodies, technologies, biopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Irma Van der Ploeg, *The Machine-readable Body: Essays of Biometrics and the Informatization of the Body* (Herzogenrath: Shaker, 2005).

[5] Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@ Second_Millenium. FemaleMan© _Meets_On coMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[6] Deborah Lupton, 'Towards sensory studies of digital health', *Digital health*, 3 (2017), 1-6 (3).

[7] Ibidem, 3.

[8] Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing medicine's visual culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995), 39.

[9] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, 'The image of objectivity', *Representations*, 40 (1992), 81-128 (98).

[10] Deborah Lupton, 'How do data come to matter? Living and becoming with personal data', *Big Data & Society*, 5.2 (2018), 1-11 (2).

[11] Cf. Maaike Bleeker, Nanna Verhoeff, Stefan Werning, 'Sensing data: Encountering data sonifications, materializations, and interactives as knowledge objects', *Convergence*, 26.5-6 (2020), 1088-1107.

[12] This applies specifically to brain and fetus visualizations, whose iconic status makes it very intricate to separate from the technological functioning that underlies their own productions.

[13] Cf. Silvia Casini, 'Beyond the neuro-realism fallacy: from John R. Mallard's hand-painted MRI image of a mouse to BioArt scenarios', *Nuncius*, 32.2 (2017), 440-471; Joseph Dumit, *Picturing Personhood: Brain Scans and Biomedical Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[14] Harun Farocki, 'Phantom Images', *Public*, 29 (2004), 12–22.

[15] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The "return" of 3-D: On some of the logics and genealogies of the image in the twenty-first century', *Critical Inquiry*, 39.2 (2013), 217-246 (242).

[16] Cf. Ksenia Fedorova, *Tactics of Interfacing. Encoding Affect in Art and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020).

[17] Cf. Tania Vladova, 'De la distinction entre images scientifiques et images artistiques', *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, 19 (2021), <http://journals.openedition.org/imagesrevues/9818> [accessed 10 February 2022], and Chiara Cappelletto, *Embodying Art. How We See, Think, Feel, and Create* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

[18] Giuseppe Di Liberti and Andrea Pinotti, 'Catégories caduques. Au-delà de la distinction entre images artistiques et images scientifiques', *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, 19 (2021), <http://journals.openedition.org/imagesrevues/11868> [accessed 10 February 2022].

[19] Bruno Latour, *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[20] Silvia Casini, *Giving Bodies Back to Data Image Makers, Bricolage, and Reinvention in Magnetic Resonance Technology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021), xx.

[21] Cf. Kirsten Ostherr, *Medical Visions. Producing the patient through film, television, and imaging technologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[22] Along these lines, Parks defines the *radiographic episteme* as the practice of transducing 'imperceptible radiation into data that can be made productive within an information economy'. Lisa Parks, 'Vertical Mediation', in *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan (Durham: Duke University

Press, 2017), 134–57, 143.

[23] Mark Henry Hansen, *Feed-forward. On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[24] Jennifer Gabrys, *How to Do Things with Sensors* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 54.

[25] We employ the notion of sense-making in a broader sense, that originates from enactivist discussion on that matter (see e.g., Evan Thompson, 'Living ways of sense making', *Philosophy Today*, 55. Supplement (2011), 114-123)

[26] What we are referring to by the term 'performative dimension' is a particular way of understanding scientific practice that considers how tools, subjects, matter and the knowledge obtained from them are intertwined and co-constitute each other. STS, feminist theories and ANT have addressed the issue of how transmitting information and deriving meaning from it is always the result of concomitant performances of human beings, technologies and design or linguistic choices

[27] Johanna Drucker, *Visualization and Interpretation. Humanistic Approaches to Display* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 67.

[28] Paula Gardner and Barbara Jenkins, 'Bodily intra-actions with biometric devices', *Body & Society*, 22.1 (2016), 3-30 (2).

[29] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press 2007), 33.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Karen Barad, 'On touching — The inhuman that therefore I am', *differences*, 23.3 (2012), 206-22 (214).

[32] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

[33] Ibidem. Later on, Barad explains that this shift may help us to rethink pillar concept within the history and the practice of philosophy, such as 'space, time, matter, dynamics, agency, structure, subjectivity, objectivity, knowing, intentionality, discursivity, performativity, entanglement, and ethical engagement.' Ibidem, 35.

[34] Lila Athanasiadou, 'Commutation Ontology', in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 86-88, 87.

[35] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 89.

[36] Maria Puig De La Bellacasa, 'Touching technologies, touching visions. The reclaiming of sensorial experience and the politics of speculative thinking', *Subjectivity*, 28.1 (2009), 297-315 (309).

[37] Ibidem, 309.

[38] We are aware that a critique of the hegemony of the visual in Western tradition has been made by a large corpus of studies – from sensory studies to feminist studies. In this contribution, we refer to Lupton's work insofar as her analysis relates specifically to the diagnostic relationship between patient and practitioner.

[39] Gabrys, *How to Do Things with Sensors*, 59.

[40] Casini, *Giving Bodies Back to Data*, 207.

[41] Ibidem, 31.

[42] Lupton, 'How do data come to matter?', 8.

[43] Cf. Ksenia Fedorova, 'Neurointerfaces, Mental Imagery and Sensory Translation in Art and Science in the Digital Age', in *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 91-109.

[44] In fact, not only is the image digital, i.e., it has a numeric matrix that quantifies the incoming information, but it is structured as a set of instructions entered during programming. The image thus contains an operating code, that determines its visible output. On the question of images becoming algorithmic, thus turning into software themselves, see Ingrid Hoelzl and Rémi Marie, *Softimage. Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image* (Chicago: Intellect, 2015).

[45] Cf. Lupton and Maslen, 'The more-than-human sensorium', 190-195.

[46] Minna Ruckenstein and Mika Pantzar, 'Beyond the quantified self: Thematic exploration of a dataistic paradigm', *New Media & Society*, 19.3 (2017), 401-418.

[47] Gardner and Jenkins, 'Bodily intra-actions with biometric devices', 2.

[48] Bleeker, *Sensing data*, 1090.

On the Trail of Some Human Heat.
Thermal Imaging, Visual Culture and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The paper is divided into two main aims. In the first part, it wants to investigate the presence of thermal imaging in the context of contemporary visual culture, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when thermal imaging widely demonstrated how currently optics models of vision are increasingly accompanied by thermal models of visualisation. The result of the latter is thermography: at the same time, a process that transforms our epistemic relationship with reality, extending the possibilities of visualising information beyond the limits of the visible spectrum; and an image that maintains the indexical bound with its referent, but that is conceived as the outcome of an elaborated and displayed dataset. In the second part, the paper focuses on the artistic field in which thermal vision gained further relevance in the context of the pandemic. On the one hand, the artists have criticised and deconstructed it; on the other hand, they have relaunched its use in a biopolitical horizon, such as in the case of the photographic project *Virus* (2020), in which Antoine d'Agata roamed the deserted streets of Paris and visited some intensive care units with a thermal camera, during the first national lockdown in 2020.

We are only a little stored, organized solar heat, a memory of Sun.
A little phosphorus that burns in the meninges of the world
(Paul Cézanne, quoted by Antoine d'Agata, La vie nue*)*

INTRODUCTION

37.5 is not merely a number. If combined with a unit of measurement (the degree Celsius), it becomes a temperature indicating an increase in body heat, generally called fever. During the peak phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, this temperature has long been considered a threshold, a watershed line. 37.5 °C was, at least in Italy, the limit set by the Government to establish an alert level: finding that temperature, or a higher one, meant being affected by the most common symptom of infection. A significant consequence of this bodily overheating was the obligation to stay at home, losing the right to frequent public places. Consequently, to ensure compliance with this decree, access to schools, hospitals, offices, supermarkets, and workplaces started to be

monitored by thermal cameras and thermal scanners. These devices, placed near the entrances of many buildings, acted as social guardians, allowing (or denying) entry to anyone based on the body temperature detected.

Therefore, the health emergency has created a shared system of norms, rules and behaviour determined by and depending on thermal conditions. In a word, it has created a *thermopower*. A concept that describes 'the ways that temperature management defines subjects, produces objects, and locates both in grids of social and political organisation. [... It] operates as a form of biopower, a means of administering and regulating life'.[2] Thermopower is a concept that can be relaunched in an ecological perspective, considering thermal conditions as something that shapes our presence in the complexity of our reality. However, it is also a concept that primarily deals with bodies, especially within the pandemic framework. Bodies indeed are the main protagonists of this pandemic as any other. They are the first vector of contagion, the medium of the virus;[3] they constitute an alarm heating up.[4]

Let us return to thermal cameras and thermal scanners. These devices signal a social danger concerning the human body by quantifying excessive heating, a phenomenon undetectable by human vision. Another example that suggests how, in the pandemic/temperature relationship, thermal media and technologies have played an important role precisely concerning body monitoring: from traditional instruments, such as the thermometer for domestic self-detection, to advanced visual technologies, such as the thermal imaging used to visualise the spread of micro-droplets in the air.[5] In the emergency context, thermal imaging has provided information about our bodies operating outside the visible spectrum. Allowing us to visualise the invisible effects of the virus — and reminding us, as Cézanne does, of what we are in our biological essence.

ON THERMAL CAMERA

It may be helpful to clarify the theoretical principle on which the thermal camera is based to understand how thermography works.

In the seventeenth century, Isaac Newton, experimenting with a dispersive prism, was the first to realise that sunlight is composed of coloured rays with different angles of refraction. Contrary to what was believed at the time, he demonstrated that white light could be divided into seven different colours. In the nineteenth century, James Clerk Maxwell added an important piece. He unified work on electricity and electromagnetism into four famous equations and established that visible light (VIS) corresponds to a small section of a large continuous spectrum of radiation: the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum. All radiation in this spectrum behaves as if it were travelling in the form of waves, governed by two inversely proportional measures: length (cm) and frequency (hertz). Therefore, the smaller the wavelength, the greater the wave's frequency.

A limited part of the EM spectrum — the VIS, whose spectral range is between 0.38 μm (violet) and 0.78 μm (red) — can be seen by the human eye; but going

immediately above and below these limits, we encounter portions of the spectrum that are no longer visible to humans. Beyond the upper end of the visible spectrum begins *ultraviolet* (UV) radiation, which extends from 0.38 μm to the X-ray portion of the spectrum (about 10 nm). On the other hand, below the lower end of the VIS range is the *infrared* (IR) radiation, which extends from 0.78 μm to the Microwaves edge (about 1 mm). However, assuming that only a small part of the IR range is used for imaging, IR radiation can be further divided into different regions, depending on their distance from the VIS limit [Fig. 1].[6]

Determining this distance is essential. For example, it clarifies how thermal

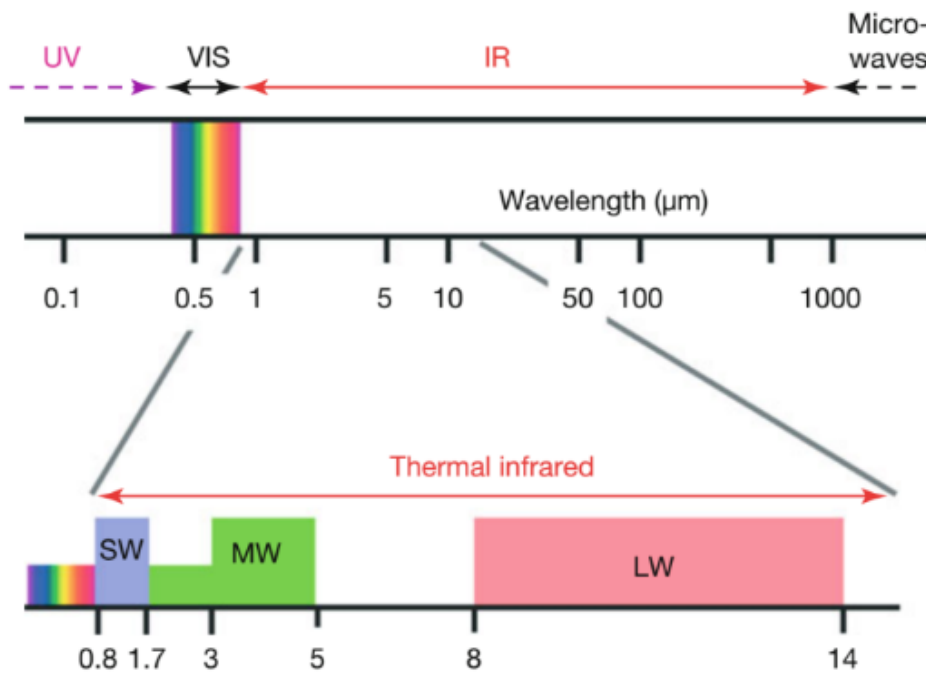

Fig. 1
A portion of the electromagnetic spectrum

imaging, although belonging to 'what could somewhat be defined as a real "infrared visual culture"',[7] is not conceivable as a night vision equivalent. NVDs (Night Vision Devices) operate on the borderline between the VIS and the Short-Wave (SW) IR region (approximately 0,8-1,7 μm), absorbing small amounts of natural or artificial light, amplifying it considerably, and displaying it on a screen. Like the human eye, they are not suitable for too much light, nor when it is entirely dark. In this sense, we can say that the human eye and NVDs operate on the same basic principle: light hits an object, and then a sensor receives it and converts it into an image. On the other hand, current thermal cameras can measure IR wavelengths until the Long-Wave (LW) IR region (8-14 μm), far from the VIS edge. It means that thermal cameras can operate both in the presence of ambient light or in its total absence: in other words, they work watching a blazing sunset or exploring a completely dark room. It happens because thermal cameras do not detect light but heat, the thermal energy generated by the IR radiation.[8]

Everything we encounter in our daily lives deals with thermal energy. Some

things absorb heat, such as the asphalt of a road on a hot sunny day, or a chair after someone has sat on it. Other things emit it, either mechanically (a running engine) or biologically (the human body). Considering that 'there are no thermal objects, there is only thermal action',[9] thermal cameras can measure this invisible action and display it in a visual form, revealing thermal variations between adjacent objects and between objects and environments. With some technical limitations (for example, a thermal camera cannot *see* through a window, because glass acts like a mirror for IR radiation); but also without restrictions due to weather conditions, even in the presence of smoke, fog and rain.[10]

The website of FLIR,[11] the global leader in thermal imaging, illustrates the extraordinary versatility of this instrument, which extends our possibilities to acquire information and visual knowledge about reality in various fields. First in military research, where experiments with analogue images and Mid-Way (MW) IR or LWIR have been conducted since the 1930s, up to the latest generation of thermal cameras, capable of collecting thermal data and visualising them digitally. Subsequently, thermal cameras also multiplied in the civil sector. And today, qualitative (displaying heat distribution) and quantitative (quantifying the *heat signatures* of the framed objects) thermal cameras are increasingly adopted in workplace safety, territorial surveillance, biological and ethological research, climate change studies, and medical diagnostics. Moreover, thermal cameras have become a popular accessory in the domestic market, following the development of more practical and less expensive models.[12]

Once the principles of a thermal camera's technical operation have been established, a fundamental question arises — what image status can we assign to thermography?

ON THERMOGRAPHY'S REFERENTIALITY

Since thermal cameras record thermal information, thermal imaging is a process no longer belongs to the domain of optics, the branch of electromagnetism that describes the behaviour and properties of light; according to Carolyn Kane, it belongs to a domain ruled by information systems and algorithms.[13] Moreover, it is not a process based on ocular vision, but on what Lev Manovich has described as a process of data visualisation.[14] Therefore, as Ruggero Eugeni suggests, we can consider thermography as a particular IR image that is no longer part of the modern economy of light, although it fully belongs to the contemporary economy of visuality: a computational image that updates the acquisitions matured on the EM fluxes of the early nineteenth century with the current digital datafication processes.[15]

A relevant consequence of this definition concerns the thermography's referentiality. Given the recurrence we have experienced in this pandemic, let us take the human body as an exemplar case to understand how thermography visually presents its referent [Fig. 2].

This *thermal selfie*[16] demonstrates that in thermography the body is configured

as an aggregation of pixels that takes the form of a halo with an irregular profile, chromatically returning the thermal radiation of its referent. The halo visually presents this radiation behaving as an index of the body that was necessarily in front of the camera at the moment of detection, maintaining thermography a connection of *physical continuity* with it.[17] It is precisely this continuity that allows us to capture bodily heat. Invisible energy whose effects we can only observe with the naked eye through some other natural indexical signs (like sweat or skin reddening); but which can also be quantified and visualised thanks to a technologically determined process. A process in which colours act for arbitrary reasons (cultural, symbolic, ideological) as 'a system of control used to manage and discipline perception and thus reality'.[18]

Although thermography's indexicality persists, its referentiality seems compromised regarding referent's recognisability and identifiability. In general,

NVDs make it possible to identify the framed object. Since what allows visibility is still natural or artificial light, an IR night image can show at least the main features of monitored bodies and faces, even if tinged with the spectral green typical of night vision. On the other hand, in thermography, the body is only recognisable as a silhouette that displays the outcome of converting thermal data into pixels, returning a shape vaguely compatible with the human one. Nevertheless, it is difficult, often impossible, to identify a body in its singularity — the case of the artistic project *Virus*, realised by the French photographer Antoine d'Agata in the spring of 2020 and analysed in the following parts of this essay, offers a decisive testimony to this referential anonymity.

Of course, an optical camera is often embedded in a thermal imager. Therefore, the thermography can result in an imbrication between optical and algorithmic logic: as with the FLIR MSX, a system that adds visible light details in real-time for better clarity by incorporating edge and contour details into the thermal visualisation.[19] In addition, there are ongoing experiments in the field of thermal facial recognition: not based on the similarity of exterior features, but on the recognition of the structure of blood vessels, vascular networks and facial tissue, which can be used as unique biometric features.[20] However, the point is that the framed subject can lose its outward recognisability with thermography.

This visual condition is perfectly recalled in *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987), the first mainstream film to integrate thermography into the diegetic dimension. Especially when the alien creature scans the landscape from the trees, detecting human bodies only as heat sources, and recognising *what*, not *who*, is in front of it. Alternatively, it is highlighted in the more recent *There Will Be No More Night* (*Il n'y aura plus de nuit*, Éléonore Weber, 2020). A military found footage film in which the author's voice-over, describing thermal imaging's adoption during some recent war operations, remarks how 'the thermal camera cannot distinguish between a farmer holding a rake or a soldier armed with a Kalashnikov'.

The same visual condition is even more surprising in processes of thermal self-visualisation. As in *Songbird* (Adam Mason, 2020), a movie set in a dystopian future in which the Covid-19 (now Covid-23) pandemic has taken over, and the US government asks citizens to monitor themselves daily for precautionary purposes. The device dedicated to this task is a smartphone that detects body heat and issues an immediate alert to the authorities if the recorded data is too high. The thermal camera integrated into this device does not show the features of the face but only the colour shade that displays the correspondent heat radiation [Fig. 3]. A reminder of how self-visualisation in thermal imaging means missing out on self-recognition, but also making everyone immediately distinguishable from the dominant thermopower.

Following this last example, we can conclude that the recent Covid-19 pandemic, constantly exposing us to the action of thermal imaging cameras, has consolidated a twofold awareness of the relationship between the human body and thermography. On the one hand, precisely because of the difficulty of identifying the referent to which it is nevertheless linked, thermography finally
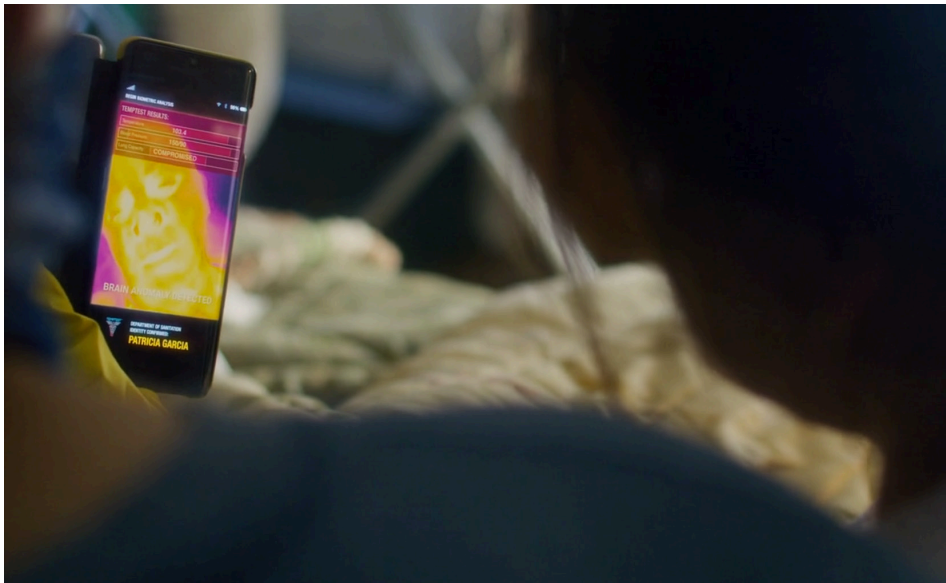
seems able to provide a neutral, impartial, unbiased human image: an image operating beyond appearance, gender, ethnicity and skin colour, displaying the warmth of a body regardless of its physical appearance. On the other hand, though the thermal image promises a more *objective* visualisation, 'it naturalizes a sense of certain bodies as mere heat and amplifies and sexualizes forms of power'.[21]

Consequently, also thermal imaging ends up renewing political and social struggles with new power dynamics, dividing those who can access resources and manage information from those who are subjugated, overwhelmed, or relegated to the mere position of a detected object. In the well-known transition from the *disciplinary society* described by Michel Foucault (based on the importance of vision and central monitoring) to the *society of control* profiled by Gilles Deleuze (where computer machines are entrusted rather with the task of tracking, capturing and scanning a target), it is decisive to grasp the 'fundamental alteration from the use of vision and optics to the use of information systems and algorithms to control and manage bodies and behaviour'.[22] Bodies that can be detected, quantified, controlled, related to normativity criteria established on a thermal basis, and then subjected to thermopower as a form of new biopolitical management.

THE WARMTH OF BASIC FORM-OF-LIFE

Although the field of applications of thermal images is wide and mainly pertains to the military and surveillance sector, thermal imaging has seen a rising interest in the contemporary artistic scene in the past few years. Increasingly, more photographers and video artists employ this new technology. On the one hand for criticizing and deconstructing it, on the other hand for relaunching its use in a biopolitical horizon. One above all: the French photographer Antoine d'Agata.

In particular, we will bring *Virus*[23] (2020) into focus, a project developed during the confinement following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Human bodies no longer just reflect light, but produce heat. As mentioned before, they emit EM waves: invisible radiation collected by thermal imager and converted into visible images. It is not the first time that the photographer utilizes a thermal camera for his work. Already in 2017, he chose this device for *Figures of Worship*,[24] a Magnum Live Lab project, in which people of different faith are portrayed practicing their respective religions. Catholic mass at Notre-Dame Cathedral; a group of Muslims who go to the mosque of Argenteuil; people praying in the Montparnasse cemetery. A documentation of rites and religious practices which coexist on French territory, three years after the terrorist attack on the Bataclan music venue in Paris by fanatics: images which display only bodies, stripped of any cultural and political specificity, solely captured as the essence of being living persons. Traces of IR thermal radiation — which would otherwise be impossible to identify without the help of captions — who gather in similar ways, regardless of their religious leanings. The photographer was fascinated by this process of visualising heat data, which reduces human subjects to essential figures, devoid of any other characteristics such as gender, skin colour or specific identities. As he remarked: 'The thermal image freezes forms, postures, figures, poses, zones imperceptible to the naked eye'.[25]

D'Agata deliberately chose again this sophisticated device for *Virus* to represent the resistance of human beings during the pandemic crisis: an emergency in which it was possible to introduce practices of surveillance and discipline over people's bodies, to recall the very origin of this technology. 'It is in this ambivalence between solidarity and contamination, this inevitability of social and physiological death, that I tried to apprehend, traversing a language of senses and of resistance that transfigures the body',[26] he declared.

The first national lockdown ordered by the Government on March 17, 2020 — and ended nearly two months later — has transformed the French capital into a ghostly city. A strong sense of responsibility guided him at that time, the same need to create a political and aware reaction to the situation, which convinced one of his friend Mathilde Girard, philosopher and writer, to keep a daily written record from the beginning of the confinement. She gets in touch with d'Agata early on — both findings themselves alone in Paris. The two started some correspondence: he of images, she of fragments from which a common vision emerged. Traces of the frenzy of speeches and health rules of those days: the physical separation, the forced isolation, the effects of limits in social interactions. Everything was documented in an exchange of texts and images.

Throughout this period d'Agata roamed the deserted streets of the city at night, holding a thermal camera to record various invisible IR rays emitted by the few isolated human beings he met, wandering among the walls of ghostly buildings. Reds, yellows and flashes of dark blue: a variety of cold and warm hues which, according to their thermal zones, reveal the outlines of public spaces, benches, trees and buildings. Among these architectures rare human figures, nothing more than hot coloured silhouettes, stand alone in the streets

of Paris, transformed by the confinement into a disturbing theatre of rambling bodies. With a huge amount of thermal images collected during this period (he believes he may have taken almost 13,000 in total), d'Agata wanted to capture the hallucinatory desolation in which the city, and its suburbs — like most of Europe — suddenly found itself during the lockdown.

After the first days of confinement spent tracking the heat stored both in human
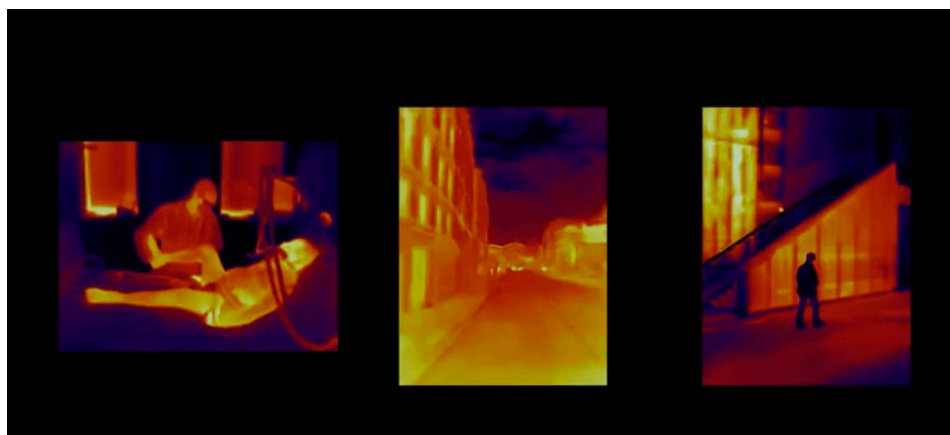
bodies and in buildings to make sense of the current crisis, d'Agata widened his research to the situation in the intensive care units of medical centres in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseille and Nancy [Fig. 4]. Nonetheless, the images of the hospital and those on the street are the opposite: there an empty city, here overcrowded hospitals; there the new rules of physical distancing, here the action of the caregivers who touch the bodies of the patients: care, comfort and gestures full of humanity. As many of us realized: 'People are doing much more than they are paid to do. In the hospital I saw people dying and nurses who were helping people do that with dignity, holding them in their arms'.[27] The thermal images here capture the deep empathetic and carnal dimension of bodies that touch and are touched: the human warmth linked to *caring* made up of gestures of closeness, of attention — while we are asked to avoid any kind of everyday interaction. In one of the few articles dedicated to his work,[28] Alice Leroy underlines how this traditional tracking system is used by d'Agata in a deliberately improper way. Here, in fact, by detecting heat waves emitted by bodies, he did not try to locate and identify people, but, on the contrary, he wanted to protect their identity, without forgoing to document such a tragic moment. Continuing the suggestion of Judith Butler to exhibit 'images that convey the full horror and reality of the suffering' — remind Leroy — the French photographer took images of vulnerable patients along with the 'gentle sensuality of a gesture of attention to others'[29] performed by the healthcare staff.

But exactly what does it mean to touch? Mark Paterson recalls that in *De Anima*: Aristotle in his theory of sensation relegates it to the last place in the hierarchy of sense faculties due to its different nature. For each sense there is a distinct organ and a physical medium which performs a specific function.

For tactility, instead, there is neither a single organ to which it corresponds, nor a medium: it is our own flesh that acts as a medium, and not something external — unlike air for hearing or diaphanous for vision. Touching therefore always means being touched. In physical contact, while we perceive an object which is external to us, we also touch our receptiveness at the same time. This may help explain why Aristotle defined tactility 'not only as indispensable, but as prior to the other sensory modalities'.[30] Being in contact with another body means to have, at the same time, an experience of ourselves: the consciousness of our physicality, of our being in the world. Through touch there is therefore an exchange of feeling among human bodies. In short, capturing body heat, these images catching the essence of another heat: that of affectivity, a fundamental dimension for human life.

Both situations were connected by a common thread. The political and health crisis linked to the pandemic gave d'Agata the opportunity 'to craft this idea of "bare life" both on the streets and in the hospitals into shape'.[31] That dimension of bare life debated by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*,[32] continuing the analysis which Michel Foucault interrupted, such as the practical modes with which power operates on the bodies of human beings transforming them into

Fig. 5
Antoine d'Agata,
Bagatelle Hospital during Covid-19 Outbreak, Bordeaux, France, 2020

Donghi, Pezzano, *On the Trail of Some Human Heat*

submissive bodies. Agamben asserts that on the threshold of the modern era something changed dramatically. The space of bare life — that is biological life with its needs — once situated on the margins, progressively becomes what is at stake in the modern age: the new political subject. That bare life, which can be killed and yet not sacrificed of the *homo sacer*, a paradox once distinctive of this figure of archaic Roman law, with modernity it has become operative in the status of every living being, so much so that the (biopolitical) power system exerts control over the bare life of all individuals. A risk with which d'Agata is very concerned, since he clearly stated: 'The consequences of this are probably worse than the virus itself: the way in which the war against the disease is being used to strengthen control, both political and economic'.[33] This reference to the Italian philosopher is so evident that d'Agata called his last short film, based on *Virus* project, *La vie nue* [Fig. 5]. In this three-screens projection of thermal images flow at different paces, following a mechanic rhythmic dimension which tries to echo 'the mechanism in which the society has been caught'[34] — as d'Agata explains in a video interview granted to the Paris Opera.[35]

HEATMAPS OF MIGRANTS

Deeply inspired by Giorgio Agamben, we can't here skip to mention the photo series of *Heat Maps* (2016) and the three-channel HD video, *Incoming*,[36] both part of a long-term project developed by the Irish photographer Richard Mosse. From 2014 to 2017 he depicted the experience of migrants in camps, and the urgent refugee crisis, recording only the contours of relative heat difference, with a thermal sensitive, military grade surveillance camera. For these projects he adopted a heavy, technologically advanced device, which mounts a lens made by germanium, a chemical element transparent to infrared radiation. This long-range thermal camera — designed to capture LWIR region and to visualise it in shade of greys — is connected to a cadmium telluride sensor refrigerated to minus 323 degrees centigrade and controlled by a computer. This type of thermal imager is commonly used by the army and navy for border surveillance and law enforcement since it can detect a human body at thirty kilometres. It is not surprising that exporting thermal imaging systems, and IR cameras, may be regulated by the United States Government's thermal camera export restrictions and may fall under International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR).[37] Mosse explained the reason why he used a surveillance technology striving to work it against itself, avoiding '[...] to rescue this apparatus from its sinister purpose. Rather, we were trying to enter into its logic — the logic of proprietary government authorities — to foreground this technology of discipline and regulation, and to create a work of art that reveals it'.[38]

Valeria Cammarata dealt with this work in an essay[39] dedicated to the comparison of this series of images with the work *Recits d'Ellis Island*, by Georges Perec and Robert Bober united by the same indirect way of reflecting on the Shoah, looking at the phenomenon of migration. When refugees

move away from their Nation, in fact, they break 'the intimate and necessary connection'[40] between man and citizen and consequently they lose every human rights. As Giorgio Agamben explains: 'In the system of the nation-state, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection and reality at the moment in which they can no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state'.[41] They therefore find themselves in the same condition as those deported to concentration camps: a bare life, that is, the life of sacred man, stripped of all civil and human rights and exposed to sovereign violence. Thermal cameras visualised images which represent bare life,[42] since they cancel any kind of difference between bodies, levelling all. Their phantasmatic and sinister presence, moreover, perfectly reflects Agamben's concerns about a tendency towards totalitarianism regarding the contemporary political space.[43]

VISUALISING IMMUNIZATION REACTIONS

Linda Alterwitz, a multi-media artist with wide-ranging interests in the fields of medical research and the natural environment, is the last case we would like to briefly mention here. She soon started using thermal images — as she states on her website — exactly in 2013, 'as a mean of envisioning the connections between science, technology, our environment and contemporary culture'. Employing a high-resolution thermal camera, she reconfigures its original meaning of this device by showing the otherwise not visible energy which vitalised animals and men alike: temperature is a universal feature that connects all matter, living and non-living beings. 'From having a fever in one's body to the effects of global warming, temperature pervades our lives'.[44] As it is particularly clear in *Signatures of Heat*, a sextet of thermal images in grey scale which reveals the unseen rhythms of the human body and its relation to the surrounding natural habitat of which it is part.

Injection Site: Making the Vaccine Visible,[45] one of her latest works started in 2021 and still on, is particularly suited to emphasizing the relationship between thermographies and the medical front. It consists of a collection of images which shows people's arm from fifteen minutes to four weeks after receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. What you see are several darker spots on the participants' skin around the injection area, a sign of a concentration of heat, an inflammation provoked by the immunological individual response [Fig. 6]. Each person's reaction is different: some images present vast black marks, while others reveal minimal visual heat: 'Through this series of work, I offer an opportunity to participate in conversation about an ongoing topic that continues to create human division' – the artist declares to explain the inner reason of this new work.[46] In fact, the vaccine can cause opposite reactions, not only physical, but also psychological: on the one hand fear or concern for possible side effects that are still little known, on the other a feeling of protection against any possible severe evolutions of the disease.

CONCLUSIONS

Fig. 6
Linda Alterwitz, panel of
*Injection Site: Making the
Vaccine Visible* (2021),
at the artist's studio,
Las Vegas, Nevada

The recent Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the significant role of thermal imaging in monitoring the body for diagnostic purposes. However, it also established new individual conducts and unprecedented social behaviours that bodies had to adhere to, in line with the thermopower in force during the emergency. In addition, the pandemic emphasised how thermography makes it possible to visualise information that the human eye could not perceive, but beyond its presumed objectivity, it shows the body just as an anonymous referent, hardly recognisable in its individuality. The anonymity that Antoine d'Agata interrogated with the project *Virus* — in which he set out on the trail of some human heat in the spring of 2020 — has been deliberately used against this advanced technology, which is mainly employed for control purposes. Here, in fact, by protecting people's identity thanks to lack of details of the thermographies, he was able to report the gravity of such a historical moment, catching just the shapes of human bodies reduced to the most basic form-of-life.

Notes

[1] Lorenzo Donghi is the author of the first three sections; Simona Pezzano is the author of the other three. The short conclusions were written jointly.

[2] Nicole Starosielski, *Media Hot & Cold* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2021), 7.

[3] Angela Maiello, 'Viralità post-mediale. Quando il medium (del virus) siamo noi', in *Virale. Il presente al tempo della pandemia*, ed. by Roberto De Gaetano and Angela Maiello (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2020), 149–153.

[4] *The Thermal Human Body*, ed. by Kurt Ammer and Francis Ring (New York: Jenny Stanford Publishing, 2019). The authors point out that, in our globalised and interconnected world, body overheating was a danger before the Covid-19 pandemic: 'In recent years following pandemic fever outbreaks, e.g. severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu, the need for fever screening in international travel led to the employment of thermal imaging. The International Organization for Standardization was required to address the issue of minimum standards needed to detect the presence of fever', 5.

[5] Ekaterina Koroteevaa and Anastasia Shagiyanova, 'Infrared-based visualization of exhalation flows while wearing protective face masks', *Physics of Fluids*, 34 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0076230> [accessed 2 May 2022]

[6] Image from Michael Vollmer and Klaus-Peter Möllmann, *Infrared Thermal Imaging: Fundamentals, Research and Applications* (Weinheim: Wiley-VCH, 2018), 2nd ed., 10.

[7] Federico Pierotti and Alessandra Ronetti, 'Beyond human vision: Towards an archaeology of infrared images', *NECSUS* (Spring 2018) <https://necsus-ejms.org/beyond-human-vision-towards-an-archaeology-of-infrared-images/> [accessed 2 May 2022].

[8] 'Heat […] and light are both parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, but a camera that can detect visible light won't see thermal energy, and vice versa', FLIR website, *What's The Difference between Thermal Imaging and Night Vision?* <https://www.flir.com/discover/ots/thermal-vs-night-vision/> [accessed 2 May 2022]. See also Vollmer and Möllmann, 1–10 and Richards A. Austin, *Alien Vision: Exploring the Electromagnetic Spectrum with Imaging Technology* (Bellingham: SPIE Press, 2nd ed., 2011), 41–65.

[9] Elena Beregow, 'Thermal Objects: Theorizing Temperatures and the Social', *Culture Machine*, 17 (2019), 2, <https://culturemachine.net/vol-17-thermal-objects/> [accessed 2 May 2022].

[10] *Can Thermal Imaging See Through Walls? And Other Common Questions*, FLIR website, 4 October 2019, <https://www.flir.com/discover/cores-components/can-thermal-imaging-see-through-walls/#:~:text=Can%20thermal%20imaging%20see%20through%20glass%3F,reflection%20of%20yourself%20in%20thermal> [accessed 2 May 2022].

[11] <https://www.flir.com/> [accessed 2 May 2022].

[12] See footnote 16.

[13] Carolyn Kane, 'Digital Infrared as Algorithmic Lifeworld', in *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 211–240..

[14] Lev Manovich, 'What Is Visualisation?', *Visual Studies*, 26 (2011), 36–49.

[15] Ruggero Eugeni, *Capitale algoritmico. Cinque dispositivi postmediali (più uno)* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2021). See also Sean Cubitt, *The Practice of Light. A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2014).

[16] We realized this selfie with an iPhone SE and a FLIR ONE PRO: it is not a thermal camera but a smartphone mobile accessory that can measure temperatures between -20 °C and +400 °C, with a spectral band of 8.000-14.000 nm. The device has a relatively low thermal resolution (160 × 120); however, it is provided with an optical camera with 1440 × 1080 resolution (parallax errors in the alignment of the two cameras are pretty inevitable). This thermal image was taken excluding the optical camera and using a colour palette named *lava*, which maintains the classic blue-cold and red-hot association.

[17] Barbara Grespi, 'L'evidenza dell'immagine. Postfotografia e idea documentaria', in *Dalla parte delle immagini. Temi di cultura visuale*, ed. by Barbara Grespi and Luca Malavasi (Milano: McGraw-Hill, 2022), 100.

[18] Kane, 201.

[19] Unlike image fusing, that is the merging of a visible light and thermal image, MSX (Multi-Spectral Dynamic Imaging) does not dilute the thermal image or decrease thermal transparency, <https://www.flir.it/discover/professional-tools/what-is-msx/ > [accessed 2 May 2022].

[20] Vincent A. Weidlich, 'Thermal Infrared Face Recognition', *Cureus*, 6.13 (2021), <https://www.cureus.com/articles/51064-thermal-infrared-face-recognition> [accessed 2 May 2022].

[21] Starosielski, 170

[22] Kane, 213.

[23] See the catalogue published after the project: Antoine d'Agata, *Virus*, photographies: Antoine d Agata; Texts: Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Mathilde Girard, Philippe Azoury, Léa Bismuth, Juan Branco, Yannick Haenel, Frédéric Neyrat, ([n.p.]: Studio Vortex, 2020).

[24] Antoine d'Agata, *Figures of Worship*, see: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/antoine-d-agata-worship/> [accessed 21 May 2022].

[25] From a statement written by Antoine d'Agata for presenting his work *Virus* see:<https://studio-vortex.com/product/virus/?lang=en> [accessed 1 May 2022].

[26] <https://studio-vortex.com/product/virus/?lang=en > [accessed 1 May 2022].

[27] *I'm starting to Feel the Pain*, a conversation between Sophie Wright — Former Global Cultural Director of Magnum Photos, now photographer and art consultant — and Antoine d'Agata about his project *Virus*, available on Magnum Photos website,<https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/im-starting-to-feel-the-pain-antoine-agata-covid-19-coronavirus/> [accessed 30 April 2022].

[28] It is quite surprising that d'Agata work — so dense and explicit in political, philosophical and theoretical themes — has hardly been taken into consideration by scholars who deal with visual studies.

[29] Alice Leroy, 'The Fever of Images: Thermography, Sensuality and Care in Pandemic Times' in *Pandemic Media*, ed. by Philipp Dominik Keidl and others (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020), 91–98 (96).

[30] Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 17.

[31] The Paris Opera, shut down by the governmental decision taken after the pandemic, decided to highlight the work of those artists who documented the ongoing crisis and how the pandemic impacted on the society. See the interview *La vie nue, Entretien avec Antoine d'Agata*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tWg7CN8Mmw> [accessed 27 April 2022].

[32] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

[33] *I'm starting to Feel the Pain*.

[34] Exhibition at Tiblisi Photography & Multimedia Museum on 11 March 2020, <https://tpmm.ge/en/exhibitions/bare-life-by-antoine-dagata-magnum-photos-> [accessed 28 April 2022]. It is also the title of a short movie by Antoine d'Agata *The bare life* (*La vie nue*, 2020) available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aexsJAeHlGM&t=19s> [accessed 30 April 2022].

[35] *Le vie nue, Entretien avec Antoine d'Agata*.

[36] Richard Mosse, *Incoming*, three screen HD video installation (52'10"), with 7.1 surround sound (2014–2017).

[37] FLIR System, known for being one of the leading companies in producing this technology, was accused of violations for selling overseas UFPA uncooled focal plane array 'while seeking and obtaining an official classification', as you can read in the first paragraph of *Order Relating to FLIR System, Inc.*, <https://efoia.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/export-violations/export-violations-2021/1303-e2656/file> [accessed 23 April 2022].

[38] Niall Martin, 'As "index and metaphor": Migration and the Thermal Imaginary in Richard Mosse's Incoming', *Culture Machine*, 17 (2019).

[39] Valeria Cammarata, 'Fantasmi e trasmigrazioni. Le memorie degli altri in Georges Perec e Richard Mosse', in *Tempo e Shoah. Politiche dell'oblio e forme testimoniali*, ed. by Matteo Di Figlia and Daniela Tononi, (Palermo: Palermo University Press, 2020), 113–130.

[40] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 75.

[41] Ibidem.

[42] See the book of stills from *Incoming* project (which contains an Agamben's essay), Richard Mosse and Giorgio Agamben, *Incoming* (London: Mack, 2017).

[43] 'The camp, which is now securely lodged within the city's interior, is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet'. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 99.

[44] This quote and the previous one are taken from the project page *Signature of Heat* (2012-) in Linda Alterwitz personal website, <https://lindaalterwitz.com/project/signatures-of-heat/> [accessed 24 April 2022].

[45] For this other project see: https://lindaalterwitz.com/project/injection-site-humanizing-the-vaccination-

process-2021/ [accessed 30 April 2022].

   46 Linda Alterwitz personal website, <https://lindaalterwitz.com/project/injection-site-humanizing-the-vaccination-process-2021/> [accessed 30 April 2022].

98

On the Frontier Between Medicine and State:

Traumatic States of Embodiment and Temporality in Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama* and Wang Nanfu's *In the Same Breath*

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Set in the zone of egregious war crimes against the civilian population of Aleppo and in the biohazard zones of the encroaching COVID-19 epidemic, Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama* and Wang Nanfu's *In the Same Breath* invent documentary approaches that create complex temporalities — modes of cinematic address that engage trauma as a field of experience that has been absorbed within institutional discourses of state power built through crises. Filmed in zones of crises in which hospitals exist in states of exception that generate and guarantee state sovereignty, the traumatic scene of crisis becomes both excess and fragment that documentary form contains and interprets. This analysis draws on Ruth Leys' 'genealogy' of trauma and Lisa Guenther's notion of the 'necro-biopolitical rituals' of state bureaucracy to show that both documentaries illuminate a fundamental split between discourses of medical knowledge and state power within which cinema asserts fluid and shifting temporalities as a mode of engaging events of crisis as history.

INTRODUCTION:
TRAUMA AND THE DOCUMENTARY
OF PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE

The video installation 'Serious Games' (2009) by Harun Farocki shows relationships between cinema and trauma in a way that has much in common with the two films considered in this essay. One video screen of Farocki's installation is set in a military base where video games are used to train soldiers. Another screen captures a military clinic where soldiers receive treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) through game-like virtual reality interfaces. Videos of training and therapy appear in two-channel displays of the subjective viewpoint of the soldier and the environment in which the games are being used.

The halving and doubling involved in the four-video installation creates split chronologies that suggest the simplistic preparation for war and its complex aftermath as an ongoing but incompatible prologue and epilogue. Farocki's

clinic footage reveals the violence of state power manifested retroactively in the bodies of soldiers. Meanwhile, media splits experience of events in a doubling and halving of time and image. Missing, however, are documents of the synchronic moment of the present — the kind of evidence often assumed to be at the heart of documentary filmmaking.

Through exhibiting the complex temporalities of PTSD, Farocki's video piece suggests that trauma is, quite paradoxically, articulated in a future-tense as the desire for return to a past *before* the crisis that caused the trauma. In the fourth of four videos in Farocki's installation, a clinician insists that a traumatised soldier must repeat the tragic event in a virtual reality program as treatment. In much the same way that the soldier resists repeating the event but is thereby made to endlessly re-experience it, Wang Nanfu's *In the Same Breath* (2021) and Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama* (2021, co-produced and co-directed by Edward Watts) both resist the repetition that is trauma and imagine a return to points before painful events had occurred.[1] In *For Sama*, Al-Kateab expresses through voiceover the wish that her child would not have been born so as not to become an innocent witness to war. For Wang, this desire is expressed through a reverse montage in which she imagines 'how this could have begun differently'. In their drive to create a moment-by-moment account of loss and suffering, the documentarians thus ultimately disavow attempts to interpret crisis through the logic of the present and resist the endless and melancholic return that this entails. While it is, of course, impossible to reverse the past, formal shifts in the film between cinematic temporalities and subjectivities contain crises past to resist the endless circulation spectacles of violence and loss on film. Further, by unsettling images of state power predicated on narratives established from these images, both filmmakers expose how trauma has become incorporated into an ensemble of discursive measures through which the state constructs authorised versions of history from crisis.

As recent documentary films notable for presenting trauma through scenes of hospitals, trauma appears quite differently in Wang and Al-Kateab's films than in the cinema of trauma that has been presented in major works on the subject — especially those that deal with memory of the Holocaust in the post-war era, the trauma of Hiroshima, the experiences of Vietnam veterans, or trauma around the events of September 11th in the United States.[2] In describing the proliferation of media around the events of 9/11, and the wars in Afghanistan, and Iraq, E. Ann Kaplan's exploration of the 'empty empathy' elicited by violent images anticipates the dialectics of immediacy and mediation in Wang and Al-Kateab's films.

Much like the media images that Kaplan discusses, which inhibit a relationship with the image that might foster healing, when a viewer attends to violence in images of crisis yet does not become deeply involved in what the images capture they are faced with the 'violence involved in the moment itself and the camera's capturing of it'.[3] By conducting images of crisis through temporal shifts marked by linguistic, visual, and acoustic techniques of prologue and epilogue deployed within cinema, Wang and Al-Kateab advance a documentary practice based in

what E. Ann Kaplan calls a 'context and continuity that […] bring events into our own lives' as part of the invention of 'other strategies for communicating and understanding trauma'.[4] Both films engage a media environment in which the pain of the traumatised cannot move beyond a moment that reasserts itself as an unintelligible past within the present — as an impenetrable violence that endlessly returns as trauma, or what Ruth Leys terms a 'wound,' in her analysis of trauma as an overdetermined cultural construct spanning the sciences, humanities, and media.[5] In resistance to cinema as a repetition of violence — and also as mothers seeking in filmmaking a form of intergenerational communication — the films situate a documentarian viewpoint in the future in order to reassert a time before crisis as a vantage on the present.

For Sama and *In the Same Breath* both expand outward from the intimacy of the mother-child relationship capture globally significant events. Both films also glimpse an occult logic of state power in tension with the everyday protocols of hospitals. In Al-Kateab's documentary, Syria's authoritarian regime launches air and ground offenses against civilians and hospitals in Aleppo in the wake of the civil uprisings in 2012. In Wang's film, medical personnel and patients try to interpret the experience of COVID-19-related deaths on a personal and collective scale as person-to-person transmission of the virus is gradually revealed. In both films, documentarians track the meaning of crises unfolding historically and ideologically through what Lisa Guenther identifies as 'necro-biopolitical rituals' in which the dysfunctional bureaucratic management of life and death is inseparable from the consolidation of state power.[6] In this context, Wang and Al-Kateab establish a cinematic form and structure in which the capturing of images becomes secondary to the way that images are contained within temporal logics of prologue and epilogue. Terms of evidence and witnessing are thereby superseded by a containment of images within a maternal logos that challenges the 'assimilation' of the filmic image of atrocity — a process most memorably described by the narrator of Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* — in which most powerful and disturbing filmic images are consigned to collective neglect as footage of atrocities proliferate in media worldwide.[7] Resisting an already mediated present that becomes incorporated, moment by moment, into narratives endlessly recirculated by the state — always coercively and, often, violently — the films neutralise the power of images of the present over the audience: temporal shifts and the mother's transubjective address to the child interrupt the viewer's fixation on the document.

SUBJECTIVITIES OF TRAUMA: DOCUMENTS OF LOSS AND SUFFERING THROUGH MOTHERHOOD AND THE CLINIC

Interweaving prologue-epilogue tracks create a shifting experience of the filmic document that keeps traumatizing events in suspension. Wang and Al-

Kateab's films thus affirm that cinema can speak power to manufactured truths promulgated by authoritarianism insofar as cinema always exists in plurality — involving filmmaker and audience in viewing and interpretation as an ongoing and recursive collective experience. The films engage in a continuous process of 're-perception' within which the film is always 'becoming,' exhibiting cinema as system of collective thought in much the same way described by Shohini Chaudhuri in her examination of the prismatic conditions of conception and reception of films of atrocity.[8]

At the end of twentieth century, well before the flux of digital and streaming media within which Wang and Al-Kateab have formed as filmmakers, Linda Williams had already described the formation of the 'New Documentary' of the 1990s in the wake of the Direct Cinema movement in which audiences were inundated by a 'deluge of images [that] seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers [but] the moving image [had] the power to move [...] to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth'.[9] A decade later, as documentarians engaged the trauma of war within an environment of nonstop media coverage of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, E. Ann Kaplan described an intensification of the media environment discussed by Williams as the 'daily barrage of images that are merely fragments of a large, complex situation in a foreign culture about which audiences may know very little and that reporters usually omit'.[10] Working in the hyperbolic density of the media landscape of the twenty-first century, Wang and Al-Kateab are embedded in the 'complex situation' of their own cultural backgrounds but acting as chroniclers interpreting events intergenerationally within and across cultures. In the process, they trouble boundaries between self and subject, as well as between past, present, and future.

As the structure of documentary is fused with the subjective states of the documentarian — in particular, in the intergenerational bond between mother and child — the films capture the process of crisis becoming part of the historical record while intervening in trauma as endless repetition. Produced in a context of up-to-the minute images of crisis on news media, social media, and streaming television, Wang and Al-Kateab resist what Leys describes as 'the immersion in the traumatic scene' the kind of indulgence in trauma that would preclude 'the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what happened'.[11] As chronicles of crises that intersect with their lives and prompt them to create the 'specular distance' that Leys describes, *For Sama* and *In the Same Breath* suspend personal images at the source of trauma within separate temporal tracks of the film.

The question of asserting multiple subjective modes in documentary to deal with catastrophe is, of course, not a new one. However, most discussions of the representation of difficult memories in film have reproduced the contradictions that Leys outlines in writing of the traumatic scene as an epistemic site constructed in both clinical and cultural theories as a 'wound' that eludes all forms of knowing.[12] In Leys's account of the episteme of trauma, both the clinician or the cultural theorist seek return to an event that initiates forms of traumatized

consciousness but that, by definition, remains out of reach of perception. In a prominent example of such a cultural theory of trauma, Joshua Hirsch describes Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* as a response to historical documentary form that could not fully represent the extreme traumas of the Holocaust. Establishing parallels with theories of PTSD, Hirsch contends that Resnais established a 'reflexive' documentary mode of 'posttraumatic cinema' defined by 'experiments with retrospective temporal structures' to struggle with 'memories that can neither be escaped nor possessed'.[13] For Hirsch, Resnais' work borrows from modernist precursors to make the past present by transcribing the 'temporal dimensions of history into 'spatial dimensions'.[14] Much like clinical theories of PTSD that redirect temporal ruptures of memory onto the body, Hirsch's notion of 'posttraumatic cinema' converts psychic phenomenon into physical phenomenon.[15] Interpreting such a projection of diachronic temporalities onto synchronic spatiality, Wang and Al-Kateab expand the field of spectatorship around the traumatic as both a discursive and historical formation.

Wang and Al-Kateab invent new filmic temporalities to contend with the ideological disruptions that shape the twenty-first century hospital. The hospital in both films appears as an unstable institution at the boundaries of the state in which the filmmakers document suffering and violence that arises from fusions of capitalism and authoritarianism. The films present contemporary ideological landscapes in which the ingredients of kleptocracy, nepotism, surveillance, and populist revisionism have combined to make the regimes in Syria, Russia, China, and the United States strikingly similar. Al-Kateab's film is a story of her family's survival of Russian military bombings of Syrian civilians under Bashar Al-Assad's dictatorship and at the fringes of Russia's neoimperialist encroachments. Wang's film compares China's ideological apparatus of control over people and information in the early coronavirus outbreaks to the United States during Donald Trump's tacit endorsement of conspiracy theories to undermine institutions of government and public health. Both documentaries turn to the hospital as a frontier no longer fully organised within state power. Hospitals are shown as exceptional zones of ideological autonomy where documents of crises — fragments of destroyed lives that still appear, at least momentarily, as individual, and collective, experiences — can escape the master narratives of power.

The idea that there is a 'deeply rooted convergence between the requirements of political ideology and those of medical technology' is most fully traced by Michel Foucault in his examination of medical science as an extension of state power in modernity. For Foucault, the hospital is built into the modern state as the site of the implementation of ideological programmes.[16] However, for Wang and Al-Kateab, the hospital is a kludged and overwhelmed space. Hospitals move towards a 'juridico-political' status that Giorgio Agamben ascribes to concentration camps.[17] The makeshift hospitals in the documentaries arise from the same 'state of exception and martial law' as the camp: a boundary space in which the distinctions between life and law underlying state power are in ongoing formation.[18] Accordingly, instead of being citizens, the people who exist

in the hospital are closer to the 'protective custody' that Agamben describes.[19] As such, the hospitals in these films expose vacillations between biopolitical and necropolitical measures through which the state perpetuates power.

By structuring the films around mother-child relationships, both films confront the biopolitical afterlives of crises in its intergenerational and epigenetic effects. For Wang, the narrative of the family's connection with both China and the United States during the early events of the pandemic forms a point of departure for understanding how, in both societies, bureaucratic mechanisms of power have stripped citizens of agency through negligence and deception. Al-Kateab's mournfully addresses her daughter in the future in voiceover over the chaotic bombing of an Aleppo hospital as doctors try to work in the rubble. In this scene of a government-sponsored bombing of the hospital — which includes an onscreen X-ray as another layer of film as visible evidence of the traumatised body while the viewer witnesses explosions that endanger the doctors — the filmmaker expresses the wish that all of these events would be undone to spare the children the trauma that will follow [Fig. 1]. The scene thus exemplifies the maternal logos seeking to contain trauma through the plural temporalities of cinema.

Now I wish I hadn't given birth to you

Fig. 1
For Sama (Waad Al-Kateab, 2021) - screeenshot

As clearly shown in Al-Kateab's footage of the hospital bombing, hospitals in the films upset assumptions of synonymy between discourses of medical authority and state authority. Capturing the hospital at the ideological limit of state authority, each of these films visualises a disruption of medical knowledge in modernity (or a break in what Foucault calls the 'empire' of the 'medical gaze').[20] The unsettling of hospital spaces connecting power and knowledge takes place within the larger consolidation of authoritarian power in which trauma becomes a central but overdetermined rhetoric for state projects. Within this rupture, the intersubjectivity of the mother's address to her child (and her future world) forms a response to the unilateral measures of patriarchal authoritarianism.

Sedzielarz, *On the Frontier Between Medicine and State*

FOR SAMA: VOICE AND IMAGE

Near the beginning of *For Sama*, Al-Kateab's expresses her pain in a voiceover while also explicating the ethical and rhetorical basis of the project: 'You are the most beautiful thing in our life but what a life I brought you into. You didn't choose this. Will you ever forgive me? [...] Sama I've made this film for you. I need to you understand why your father and I made the choices we did...what we were fighting for'. Al-Kateab's voice plays over a sequence that establishes the image track as a fragment of the present: a quotidian moment of Al-Kateab sitting at her desk interrupted booming airstrikes as Al-Kateab grimaces in fright. The voiceover ends on a slow fade of Sama asleep. Al-Kateab's voice gives structure to the chaotic images of her footage. Establishing voice as a deep and physical connection between mother and child, the sequence demonstrates Michel Chion's insight that the cinematic history of voiceover parallels the role of mother as the first 'image presenter'.[21]

Al-Kateab's melancholic and reflective tone makes clear that the onscreen images are now of a place and time that no longer exists. In borrowing the literary concept of 'tense' from Gerard Genette, Joshua Hirsch describes Alain Resnais' experimentation with what he terms 'diachronic present tense' to situate past trauma in relation to the present.[22] In contrast with this cinematic 'tense', Al-Kateab's narration punctuates the footage of the destruction of Aleppo but introduces complex modalities of prologue and epilogue — compound tenses of language that reroute the film's images to both past and future. Meanwhile, the film's image track captures a lost Aleppo that shifts between fragment and excess. Present-moment images of Aleppo's destruction are marked as filmic excess in which the image of atrocity appears as undigested shock, or at times, as absurd comedy. As Bashar Al-Assad's bombings around the hospital intensify at the midpoint of the film, Al-Kateab's shaky handheld camera captures an unexploded ordinance that has landed nearby. The camera captures this instrument of real violence but the scene is suffused with irony. Confronted with death, Al-Kateab's friends speak in apostrophe to the bomb and to death. They warm their hands on the bomb with a ludicrous word of thanks to Al-Assad stating that the bombs keep them warm in winter. [Fig. 2]

Fig. 2
For Sama (Waad Al-Kateab, 2021) - screeenshot

Throughout, Al-Kateab's handheld footage is disconnected and episodic, showing the student uprisings in Aleppo and the regime's violent reprisals and, subsequently, showing hospital triage scenes that document state violence. Intercalated throughout are the warm emotional moments of Al-Kateab's life — helping friends establish the hospital, marriage, pregnancy, and moving into a new house. These contrasts amplify the exceptional shock of images of crisis as the film uncannily resembles both home video and frontline war reporting. Around a flow of catastrophic and mundane images, Al-Kateab speaks to Sama from the future while the images remain in present tense. Prologue and epilogue thereby contain the excess of the documented events but not to merely repeat them: the maternal logos places their ultimate meaning in Sama's future in a filmic temporality physically embodied by mother and child.

The image track again and again tests the measures of the mother-documentarian to contain the document — to organise and make sense of violence through reference to past and future. In a central scene of the deep intergenerational connections that will emerge from the crisis, an emergency caesarean is performed on a woman who is nine months pregnant and has been severely injured in a bombing. What at first appears to be a routine procedure, with the steady sounds of the hospital monitoring equipment and instructions exchanged between surgeon and nurses, quickly becomes a confrontation with brutal sensory violence as a limp newborn is pulled from the cavity of the mother's body. The viewer faces death as a medium closeup shows the child's body, mottled pale blue and chalky white with a moist and twisted umbilical cord on its stomach. The still body is gripped by the large hands of a doctor in latex gloves attempting resuscitation. We hear the doctor confirm that the baby has no pulse. The small body is then peeled from the sheet covering the surgery table with the sound of tearing plastic. If the viewer has not yet physically felt horror in seeing the presumably dead child manipulated on the table, the sound of the body sticking to the hospital equipment — the inert materiality of the hospital now one with the body — provokes horror, outrage, and disgust.

Suddenly, just as the viewer feels the urge to withdraw from the film, the baby opens its eyes and emits a small cry — revived. Following this comes a moment of ecstasy as Al-Kateab explains in voiceover that mother and child will both survive. Her epilogue draws the relentless violence of the present back within the structure of the documentary. Affecting a kind of double return, the scene reframes the historical relationship between cinema and trauma. Most prominently, the scene shows that the film radically differs from the documentary encounters with trauma that emerged in the post-WII era. Hirsch describes the Lazarus figure that influenced Resnais as a 'a new literary practice from the posttraumatic space' who has 'physically returned from the land of the dead, while remaining psychologically bound to traumatic memory'.[23] In contrast, the Lazarean scene in Al-Kateab's film presents the child violently returning from what the audience presumes to be a tragic death but, because the viewer enters the scene *in media res*, the scene is not bound to any memory of a traumatizing event. As excess contained by prologue and epilogue, Al-Kateab's on-the-spot

capture of the image — as well as the fact that child and mother are unnamed patients in the hospital — decontextualize the violent image from documents of a specific family or community involved in the Syrian conflict. Much in the way that the earlier intercut footage of Al-Kateab's garden is shown flourishing and then leveled by an aerial bombing, the scene asserts life within the symbolic economy of wartime. As such, the newborn's resuscitation transforms an event in a record of war crimes into a primal scene of the vibrant yet precarious connection of life between mother and child. Removed from the exchange of documentary — or evidentiary — value, the charged image resists what Piotr Cieplak notes as a simultaneity of the 'evidential and reductive functions of […] images' in his reading Susan Sontag's work on photographic images of atrocity.[24] Al-Kateab's image of the child brought back to life instead takes on a sublime excess of pathos.

In this way, this central moment of omphalic unity between mother, child, and audience in the film's aleatory montage undercuts the necro-biopolitics of state bureaucracy. As an aesthetic formation that also offers political gestures, Al-Kateab's film presents the hospital in twenty-first century zones of crises as sites of autonomy that interrupt state power. Nonetheless, as Cieplak notes, the indexicality of film means that images 'reach into the past' — as the lives and events recorded on film are present visual but formed of traces of that which has existed. This 'superimposition' of reality and the past is overtly part of the cinematography of *For Sama* as the spontaneous quality of its images enhance the melancholy of Al-Kateab's meditations on the destruction of Aleppo.[25] The scene of the newborn suddenly brought back alive in *For Sama* is haunted by the quality of the pasts embedded in cinema but in a way that accentuates and deepens the experiences of a rebirth on film that happens before the viewer's very eyes. Thus contained within a maternal logos, the traumatizing event stands not as document to be witnessed but as an assertion of an exceptional mode of social and political rebirth.

IN THE SAME BREATH :
DISTANCE FROM THE DOCUMENT

Beyond basic similarities in the mother-child relationship and the prologic and epilogic modes of address that they share, *In the Same Breath* and *For Sama* have deeper features of form in common. As noted above, both films conclude with sequences that elaborate a melancholic wish to return to the moment before the crisis. In these sequences, filmic memory emerges phantasmically intensified by indexical return to time and space. Both films introduce short sequences of CCTV footage in segments that seem to place the viewer in an objective relationship with crisis. In Al-Kateab's film, the hospital security cameras capture a moment in which a hospital filled with doctors and patients explodes during an aerial strike. Wang's film contains security camera

footage from a site of the virus' initial spread showing patients complaining of cold and flu symptoms but unaware that person-to-person spread had already been detected by doctors. In both documentaries, these CCTV sequences are discolored and distorted — likely resulting from the compression of the stored video files. Each is abruptly intercut with point-of-view footage from the filmmaker so that they suggest another stratum of the present beneath the live footage of the crisis while the film's prologic-epilogic structure suspends the moment of crisis it documents.

In Wang's film, fragmentary documents of the initial spread of the virus are bound within this confounding documentary structure to lead viewers to question that the social crisis of the pandemic is actually reducible to the virus. The virus is the ostensible subject of the film — the crisis event that it sets out to document — but the pathogen ultimately serves to makes larger systemic fissures visible. The documentary gradually builds a case for understanding the pandemic as a biopolitical crisis that is bound to ongoing lapses in the social contract. This is articulated in Wang's voiceover comments near the conclusion of the film. Viewing the separate but commensurate crises over the pandemic in China and the United States, Wang states: 'We all think ourselves capable of separating truth from falsehood but how can we make that distinction when misinformation comes from the people we are supposed to trust'. She continues 'I have lived under authoritarianism…and in a society that have called themselves free…in both systems, ordinary people become casualties of their leaders' pursuit of power'. Although they come at the end of the film, these statements have the logic of prologue: drawing the viewer back to everyday life before the virus' spread was public knowledge. The film thereby shifts the focus from the pathogen to the anterior social and political conditions from which the pandemic emerged. The prologic effect is strengthened by the film's final visual coda — a reverse timelapse that is appears to unrecord events and transports the viewer back to a time before trauma.

After the images of New Years' celebrations in Wuhan that begin the film, Wang's voiceover narration is interspersed with Chinese news reports recounting the course of the virus as it began to spread. Wang states that she wants to track the moment-by-moment development of the early pandemic in Wuhan but she does not have access to hospital sites in the locked-down city. Wang tries to get closer to the story of the origin of the virus by hiring camerapersons with hospital access. Though devised as a practical measure in *In the Same Breath*, this creates a loosening of the presumed connection between the film and the subjectivity of the filmmaker that also appears through surrogate cameras in Wang's earlier films, *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016) and *One Child Nation* (2019). The effect is most intensely explored in the free substitution of filmmaker and subject Wang's documentary that follows a young American man on the streets in *I Am Another You* (2017).

Handheld footage taken at random from anonymous points of view in the hospital in *In the Same Breath* produces a slippery subject position: as the film has shifts from Wang's camera to one of the surrogates, the viewer becomes

aware of the fact that they are seeing the world through the viewpoint of an unnamed stranger. This not only brings into question documentary as a direct kind of representation but also exhibits cinema as what Shohini Chaudhuri describes as a 'transsubjective entity that has its own being and becoming'.[26] Rather than defined by the specificity of medium, cinema is revealed as a merging flow of subjectivities. Insofar as Wang's documentary explicitly marks film as produced — and consumed by — a plurality of subjects, any presumption of self-evident connections between the filmic image and a single historical past dissolves.

Rather than being gruesome or horrifying, the COVID wards of the hospital captured by Wang's camerapersons are quiet and boring. Wang comments with irony that one cameraperson took a shot of a foot that lasted for five minutes. The traumatic scene of each patient's infection has already occurred in hundreds of disparate private homes before they arrived, and these buildings are dedicated to the long, slow process of treatment. The camerapersons' free exploration of the hospital as a frontline in the crisis leads to chance encounters with patients who share their stories. After a series of shots of nondescript hospital rooms and corridors, the impersonal and dissociated point of view of one of Wang's camerapersons holds for a moment. The camera swings around to engage a person who appears onscreen. 'Then someone caught the camera person's attention', Wang describes in epilogic voiceover while the scenes that follow show a father awkwardly trying to communicate with his bed-ridden son while a doctor in a protective suit treats his son. The film becomes situated within two temporal tracks as we hear the story of the boy's months-long illness from the man. He tells of being transferred between hospitals and his son's case becoming serious. He begins to cry, wailing, 'my poor child', as the camera cuts to the son being intubated to receive oxygen through what appears to be a tube cut into his throat. The doctors tell the father that they are looking after him twenty-four hours a day. The man's story of his son's death will become one of the stories of intergenerational connection and loss in film to follow.

Against hospital scenes that are both exceptionally alien and utterly familiar, Wang's surrogate cameras capture state media filming the hospital in a search of what Wang calls 'positive' stories. Situated within the tedium of long-term care, the presence of government bureaucracy in the hospital creates a strong set of contradictions: propaganda reaffirms state power by putting discourses of the hospital on display while the footage of Wang's surrogates shows that state narratives have nothing to do with the day-to-day medical treatment of the virus. Wang's own cameraperson is interviewed during this section of the film and she states that 'positive' stories by the state will counter the influence of 'imperialist' reports from abroad — a lapse in logic that reveals political and medical discourse as separate and mutually unintelligible. The party and the nation will be presented as prepared and as strong as its medical institutions but working knowledge of the virus will not inform state propaganda. Further depicting state power as a closed circuit, a segment of interspliced state TV footage that follows shows statements by an official that the communist party

will prevail over the virus through propaganda accounts of journalists.

While keeping both connections to the past and authorized narratives of the crisis in suspension, the film also thwarts the viewer's desire for a voyeuristic witnessing of the hospital as frontline of the crisis. Through narrated prologue, which begins as the Wang's retrospective account of unsuspecting public entering a new year amid the suppressed news of early spread of the illness, the film anticipates the crisis by alternating between the repetitive messages of state media — Chinese and international — and disconnected sequences of accounts of the pain of the disappearances of loved ones. Interviews with family members of those lost to the virus throughout the film redouble the prologic effect on filmic document, as testimonies of bodies of loved ones stand in place of records destroyed in the nebulous institutional machine of government morgues and funeral homes. Transmitted through a multitude of subjectivities, Wang's recurring passages of prologue and epilogue capture the crisis — but not as a traumatising event — as a closed official record with an unpredictable and open-ended afterlife among the public.

An underlying thesis of the film emerges near the last section of the documentary through Wang's collage-like use of the images of Chinese state media: the hospital exists in tension *vis-à-vis* state power but this tension provides the state with an instrumentalised set of biopolitical markers to eliminate dissent by showcasing a unity of state and subject. Bolstering belief in the state through a spirit of competition with its rivals, the documentary replays clips of state media with the slogan, 'China's system is superior' (*Zhongguo de zhidu youshi*). Instead of being expressed through medical discourses on life and death, state power now primarily engages in necro-biopolitical rituals performed at a remove from the hospital. In the documentary, this will later be confirmed by the state crematorium being a locus for the expression of state power in the signing over of the bodies of the cremated by relatives. In writing on the conjoined nature of state and clinic in the establishment of modern state power, Foucault writes that 'as an isomorph of ideology, clinical experience offers [the state] an immediate domain of application'.[27] Showing the state's ineffective measures to absorb medical discourse, the propaganda imagery that Wang incorporates shows medical discourse as no longer isomorphic with ideology. The disordered management of crisis instead becomes the field within which the state tests and applies power.

Wang follows the personal story of a small clinic run by Chen Ruzhen in an interview that exemplifies the shifting address of prologue and epilogue as a mode of presenting a medical worker's first-hand experience of the crisis. Chen recounts unknowingly encountering the virus while caring for neighbors working at the Huanan Seafood Market. The CCTV camera footage appears here with an effect of high frame rate that is both otherworldly and intimate — seemingly taking the source footage out of the flow of history. Wang's epilogic voiceover then tells the viewer that this footage shows a cluster of cases that came mostly from the market while the apparition-like bodies and faces recall the dead of the virus' first wave. Chen then describes the period around January

Sedzielarz, *On the Frontier Between Medicine and State*

1ˢᵗ, 2020 in the weeks leading up to her husband's death. She describes him becoming seriously ill but being turned away from major hospitals in Wuhan. As epilogue, with both tears and determination, Chen describes that her husband's cremated remains stay state custody as her contribution to state propaganda that establishes the virus' low death toll.

The traumatic scene of the death of Chen's husband is missing from history and memory: she says that she did not get to speak to him before he died. In place of the missing documents of his final days, the film shows an insert of a small photo of Chen's husband. Onscreen, this simple photographic mediation stands in solemn contrast with the proliferation of filmic claims on the life and death of all those who experienced the same fate: no amount of documents, or other visible evidence, can effectively counter official narratives in which trauma is encoded as historical progress. As the documentary moves forward through other stories of those lost in Wuhan, the photograph stands as a stark reminder of missing documents. Meanwhile, the film moves radically away from gathering evidence of the crisis. After establishing a filmic structure that contains empty or reductive images of traumatizing loss, Wang turns towards visualising the power of bureaucracy over life. Wang's voiceover sequences in the second half of the film are both epilogue to the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and prologue to a future in which responses to the pandemic foreshadow the interconnected politics of China and the United States in decades to come. Turning to the way that the trauma of doctors and nurses in both countries mirrors political discourse, Wang's voiceover describes trauma that is synchronised with narratives that the state projects as history. She comments: 'people emerge from traumatizing events with even greater patriotic sentiments than before', as a montage of older Chinese state television productions shows celebrations after the 2003 SARS outbreak and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Although she is speaking of mainland China, Wang's statement is directed equally to narratives in the United States that have been deepened and affirmed alongside expressions of trauma — with September 11ᵗʰ as a prime example for both theories of trauma and political transformations of past two decades. As the film moves to the United States for its concluding section, Wang's voiceover meditations leave the viewer to wonder whether there is a great degree of difference in how those in power in authoritarian regimes and democratic societies seize power through trauma.

Moving from the document of the crisis to tracing the way that trauma is utilised for political power, the film observes the hospital as a site subsumed by discourses of trauma in such a way that it becomes reservoir of political affect tapped by the state. Wang shows footage from rallies for frontline workers in China in which trauma is absorbed into displays of nationalism. She follows this with rowdy demonstrations of Americans against measures that they perceive as taking away their freedom. By matching the sequences, Wang reveals trauma transformed into nationalistic romanticism in both countries. In segments set in China, the tears on the face of a young medical worker from Sichuan sent to Wuhan during the outbreak visualises this romanticism. The viewer cannot

tell if the woman is overwhelmed with pride for the collective effort to fight the virus or if she is experiencing a moment of catharsis, overwhelmed by what she saw in the hospital [Fig. 3]. In a later sequence, Wang will establish that it is primarily the latter, but the unfolding of state power in the rally suggests that it is in fact the combination of pride and catharsis that fuels the state's

assimilation of trauma into its discourses of power.

Near the end of Wang's film, over a montage of faces of medical professionals that first shows the face of an American nurse in an emotional breakdown and then cuts to grieving Chinese hospital workers, Wang's epilogic voiceover plays: 'it was then I realised how vast their trauma was'. The hospital workers are silent but Wang notes that they might 'crash' if they begin to talk about their pain. The scene contains the trauma of the events that the film sets out to document but, in doing so, it maintains a distance through which state power can be more fully comprehended. Wang shows that emerging discourses of state power rely on what Leys calls 'an immersion in the traumatic scene.' Wang's film thus reclaims and reframes images that would otherwise become part of a shadow discourse of invisible and unrepresentable trauma foundational to state power.

CONCLUSION

Wang and Al-Kateab's films are composed of violence and loss at the root of trauma but both bring into question how states consolidate power in a media environment that proliferates with painful images. Hospitals in both films become sites of knowledge and practice at the periphery — and frontier — of the state that are, variously, assimilated, suppressed, or destroyed. *For Sama* and *In the Same Breath* invoke a multitude of temporalities and subjectivities of cinema to offer a plurality of experience to resist the overdetermination and

assimilation of the document as evidence. Narration of the film around the mother-child relationship underlies the approach of both filmmakers because it presents an embodied perception that is oppositional to the authorized version of events manufactured by the patriarchal state. The logos of the mother engenders multiple temporalities that invoke times before the child was born, or can remember, and envision a future that is postscript to the traumatizing events of the filmic present. In the first instance, prologue and epilogue are ways of sharing the most important stories of the past with child and the world from within the myriad memories of the past and hopes for the future. However, the modes of documentary address that Wang and Al-Kateab invent also intervene in the establishment of narrative by the state around trauma. Reconstructing the traumatic scene from within the maternal logos, these documentaries push viewers to attend to the latent connections between crises and discourses of power.

Notes

[1] Waad Al-Kateab is a pseudonym to protect the filmmaker from retaliation by Al-Assad's regime.

[2] Studies of film and trauma referenced here include Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), and Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011).

[3] Kaplan, 100.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9.

[6] Lisa Guenther, 'On Pain of Death: The "Grotesque Sovereignty" of the US Death Penalty', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. by Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP), 395-411 (403-405).

[7] *The Missing Picture* (Rithy Panh, 2013).

[8] Shohini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 17-18.

[9] Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary', *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (1993), 9–21 (10-11).

[10] Kaplan, 93.

[11] Ibidem, 9.

[12] Ibidem, 248-253.

[13] Hirsch, 41-46.

[14] Ibidem, 47.

[15] Ibidem. For clinical theories of trauma and their uptake in cultural theory, see Leys, 83-84; 246.

[16] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, New York: Routledge, 1973), 38.

[17] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 166.

[18] Ibidem, 166-167.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] Foucault, 38.

[21] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 49-50.

[22] Hirsch, 46-47.

[23] Ibidem, 45.

[24] Piotr Cieplak, *Death, Image, Memory: The Genocide in Rwanda and its Aftermath in Photography and Documentary Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 42.

[25] Ibidem, 43-44.

[26] Chaudhuri, 17

[27] Foucault, 97.

Visualizing the Virus.
The Use of Data Visualizations in COVID-19 Documentaries

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This contribution will examine different communicative and narrative strategies adopted by some documentary productions in order to visualize something invisible, like the virus and its effects. Through the case studies I will take into account, my intent is to reflect upon the pandemic narration, which replaces or alternates the photographic realism of the images of pain and suffering, intended as scientific and incontrovertible proof of the virus manifestation, with a modernist narrative, mixing interviews with infographic material, maps, dashboards, photomicrographs, and computer graphics animations. Despite their profound mediation by software that makes pictures out of numbers, these informatic images, reported daily in news channels and broadcasts as well, besides shaping the relationships between scientific research, documentary, and its explanatory and pedagogical power to narrate, reconfigure the collective imagination of the pandemic in a bioinformation era.

DISASTER MEDIA AND THE VIRUS IMAGERY

Even if it cannot be considered as a unique and unrepeatable mass-mediated event, a single and circumscribed traumatic experience, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (COVID-19) has led to a reconfiguration of the relationship between the event itself and its mediated representation. The COVID-19 pandemic and the health crisis have deeply affected the visual world, conditioning cinematic narratives of trauma as well as its imagery radically.

This contribution will examine different communicative and narrative strategies adopted by some documentary productions in order to visualize something invisible, like the virus and its effects. Through the case studies I will take into account, my intent is to reflect upon the pandemic narration, which replaces or alternates the photographic realism of the images of pain and suffering, intended as scientific and incontrovertible proof of the virus manifestation, with a modernist narrative, mixing interviews with infographic material, maps, dashboards, photomicrographs, and computer graphics animations. Despite their profound mediation by software that makes pictures out of numbers, these informatic images, reported daily in news channels

and broadcasts as well, besides shaping the relationships between scientific research, documentary, and its explanatory and pedagogical power to narrate, reconfigure the collective imagination of the pandemic in a bioinformation era.

However, it is certainly true that it is possible to frame these modernist forms within 'the larger transformations of documentary objects and media that have occurred with the advance and proliferations of digital technologies in the 21st century',[1] as Jihoon Kim points out. The scholar proposes the concept of 'expanded documentary' to indicate non-fiction media practices which reconfigure a standardized aesthetic form as well as involve a different mode of spectatorship, 'incorporating new consciousness, behaviors, and cultural or political climate affected by the digital technologies for production and postproduction of images and the non-theatrical experiential platforms, such as VR interfaces, interactive websites, and social media'.[2]

As I have mentioned before, media content, practice, and aesthetic change radically during crisis, as the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, in informing and educating the audience about the scientific facts and government responses to the health crisis, how to stay safe, how to protect themselves, showing graphs and maps about infection rates, keeping viewers constantly updated about its spread.[3]

Scholars draw attention to the concept of disaster media, referring to how 'media are both complicit in the amplification of disastrous occurrence and helpful in the provision of reckoning and relief, support and succor'.[4] Cinema, as a media form, gives shape and meaning to disasters themselves, conditioning the ways in which they are imagined, experienced, and felt, promoting the construction of a cultural trauma.[5] Recently, several studies have focused on how cinema and media reflect upon and convey catastrophic events,[6] accidents,[7] ecological and environmental disasters[8] or migration as crisis.[9] Atrocities and disasters, testing the 'threshold of the visible',[10] could provoke a reconceptualization of the cinematic visualization practices and aesthetics.

Taking into account, through a media-archeological perspective, the relationship between historical moments and the emergence of a new audiovisual lexicon, Akira Lippit, in her text *Atomic Light*, for instance, focuses on how traumatic events have induced new film and media theories of optics, acoustics, and haptics which challenge the representability of the experience. The nuclear blast, and the atomic radiation, for instance, signaled a transformation of visual representation, as well as the conditions of visuality as such, like the X-rays, which disclosed the inside of the body. Lippit retraces the formation of a mode of avisuality, a secret visuality, 'not as a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or negated visibility: not as the antithesis of the visible but as a specific mode of impossible, unimaginable visuality'.[11]

Documentary cinema adopts similar visual aesthetics and narratives of data visualization widely adopted by the disaster media during the pandemic. The spectacle of pain with strong emotional impact, which historically characterizes the narrative of documentary cinema in portraying situations of crisis, war or natural disaster, changes significantly in the cases I intend to examine,

establishing a different relationship with reality and visual. What we can consider as a pre-existing media convention of crisis, namely the spectacular and sensationalistic images depicting human suffering, in this case, is often replaced by data visualizations and infographic material.

DATA VISUALIZATIONS IN COVID-19 DOCUMENTARIES

The first case I want to take into account is *Totally Under Control* (Alex Gibney, Ophelia Harutyunyan, and Suzanne Hillinger, 2020), produced by Hulu and realized during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. The film basically depicts Trump administration's response to the health crisis in the United States, retracing a timeline for the events, starting with the first documented case in Seattle back in January 2020 and then examining the spread of the virus over the following nine months. The documentary highlights the Trump administration's incompetence, corruption, and denial in the face of the global pandemic, often comparing the American response to that of South Korea. Alex Gibney with the co-directors Ophelia Harutyunyan and Suzanne Hillinger take an investigative path, focusing on how the President and his team in the White House put their personal power and political advantage above mitigating the spread of the virus. The film collects several zoom interviews, which are part of the pandemic imagery, of course, with scientists, healthcare reporters, correspondents from Asia, the ex-Secretary of Health and Human Services as well as the ex-CDC director, in order to provide a scientific counter narration, highlighting how the situation was not 'totally under control', as Trump affirmed, and the film title recalls.

In addition to that, the documentary adopts infographic material as digital storytelling tools in order to visualize the pandemic curve, the number of deceases and the spread of the virus, enabling viewers to comprehend complex information and to counterstrike the COVID infodemic.[12] Infographics, dashboards, 3D simulations, graphs and curves or graphical maps are widely adopted in documentary productions, because they make difficult information easily accessible even to non-experts, from a scientific point of view,[13] as well as for the storytelling potential of data visualization narratives.[14] The film refers, for instance, to one of the most reliable monitoring systems of the pandemic, which is the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard, launched by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at the University, for providing 'researchers, public health authorities, and the general public with a user-friendly tool to track the outbreak as it unfolds'.[15]

Referring to Ann Kaplan's study of trauma and its cultural politics, she differentiates a range of responses to traumatic events. Considering the war photographs of Rwanda and Iraq, Kaplan coins the term 'empty empathy', meaning 'the empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without any

context or background knowledge'.[16] To reflect upon the aesthetic strategies which produce traumatic effects on the viewers, she brings up Susan Sontag's description of her initial reaction to photographs of concentration camps victims,[17] which provides 'a clear example of vicarious image-induced trauma'.[18] According to Kaplan, Sontag and other scholars, such as John Berger,[19] for instance, it is necessary to re-approach the images of suffering, standing back and thinking, paying attention, re-conceptualizing other strategies for communicating, representing and understanding trauma. Ethical witnessing stands as a new level of responsibility, differentiating itself 'from vicarious trauma, from voyeurism/sensationalism, and from melodramatic attempts to close the wound as in Hollywood treatments of historical trauma'.[20] Besides leading to a broader understanding of the pandemic situation, rendering the scientific information real, accurate, and credible through a powerful narrative impact and emotional appeal, and stimulating a pro-social behavior, persuading viewers to take action and change their health behaviors accordingly, data visualizations as the substitution for photographic images of the phenomenal world reflect upon a reconceptualization of indexicality, realism, and evidence as well as of the representability of traumatic events. Data visualization narratives adopted in the documentary challenge 'the precedence of lens-based imagery as the privileged component of non-fiction filmic practice', shifting the reference status.[21]

In addition to that, even if it determines an experience of seeing without ever offering a concrete image, data visualization, as a rhetorical form that visualizes 'a relationship between the material world and its particular form of representation',[22] acts as a metaphorical authorial voice recalling the Bill Nichols's 'voice of God' concept.[23] Data visualization's narrative voice claims objective knowledge. It plays a key role in several scientific and educational documentaries such as National Geographic's production, *Mission Possible: The Race for a Vaccine* (Jesse Sweet, 2021), or the documentary limited series *Covid, Explained* (2020), which premiered on Netflix in April 26, 2020. The three episodes series, which is narrated by J.K. Simmons, Laura Linney, and Idris Elba, looks at how the virus grew and spread around the globe, the race to develop vaccines as well as the mechanisms for coping with the stress of the pandemic, and a global lockdown.

As Lisa Parks and Janet Walker point out, taking into account disaster media narration, infographic material concerning COVID-19 recalls data visualization referred to the global warming curve. The Hockey stick graphs, presenting the global or hemispherical temperature, have been used, for instance, in *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006), the documentary centered on the climate activism of former US vice president Al Gore. The film's global warming graph, depicting a dramatic climate shift, projecting an imminent catastrophe, tries to promote a collective action on climate change. In the age of big data and the current pandemic, graphs and curves dominate the mediascape and media imagery, through a collective image-building, insomuch as scientists and viewers are engaging with similar looking charts both for COVID-19 and

global warming. The disaster media heuristic, according to Parks and Walker, 'encourages us to reflect upon the coronavirus and global warming graphs together and in relation to other audiovisual mediations, which, as we argue throughout, co-produce the material realities they may seem only to depict'.[24]

THE ICONIC IMAGE OF THE VIRUS

Alongside the data visualization narratives, the 3D image of the coronavirus particle remains the most iconic symbol of the current pandemic imagery, its signature. Through this process of visualizing microbial entities, produced by sophisticated optical technologies and computational processes, it has been possible to give the virus an identity, a representation, a form, making tangible something invisible with the naked eye.[25] The iconic image of SARS-CoV-2 has been created by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins, medical illustrators at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. As Higgins affirms in an interview, they decide to create 'a realistic virus that people can envision when walking into public places or coming in close contact with strangers, something that says this virus is real, and it's to be taken seriously'.[26] 'Something to grab the public attention', Eckert states, a 'beauty shot', a detailed, solo close-up.[27] Working alongside scientists at CDC, in order to understand the microscopic virion, visible only through an electron microscope, the Coronavirus particle resembles 'a grey blob surrounded by a blurry haze of protein spikes'.[28] Even if they had a basic morphology of the structure, Eckert and Higgins wanted to present something that has no visual reference. Consequently, they made a series of design decisions and interventions, adding form, color, texture, and shadow for communicating the virus more clearly to the public as well as for provoking an emotional and visual impact. The color palette adds a feeling of danger, alarm, through the contrast between the bold red of the S proteins and the gray of the viral wall, for instance.[29]

Scientific images can be, of course, a powerful rhetorical expression in documentary cinema, for understanding the biopolitics of molecular life itself as well as, in this particular case, for reflecting upon the representability of the traumatic experience. It is certainly true that we can retrace an indissoluble link related to scientific and medical practice between documentary cinema and the microbiological world, since the early twentieth century. Techniques for filming radically transformed many scientific fields, including biology.[30] The first scientific film, *Fertilization and Development of the Sea Urchin Egg* (Julius Ries, 1907), capturing images of living, moving cells in a format that could be projected for teaching to medical students, adopts Marey's chronophotographic technique, exploring new possibilities through a dynamic medium instead of a static representation. Ries realized the first time-lapse film of cell development by condensing a 14-hour process in two-minutes, instead of presenting it through a series of still images.[31] Furthermore, the moving picture camera, which became necessary in scientific research since it has been commercially available in Europe, succeeds in depicting the microscopic world, making visible

the otherwise unimaginable, like the process of embryogenesis.[32] In the recent days, in the bioinformatic era, there has been an increasing shift from the analog depiction of biological processes to the digital renderings as, for instance, in *The Inner Life of the Cell* (2006),[33] which illustrates the leukocyte extravasation for defending the body against disease, through a computer-generated animation.

The conversion of hard data into animated images, as a modernist form of representation, challenges the production of documentary realism. Even if it refers to indexical qualities of medical imaging, data animated visualization is mediated and produced by algorithmic software that makes pictures out of numbers. However, these informatic images take on the status of evidence, functioning as bioinformatic media, producing new forms of biomedical knowledge. Reflecting upon the role that computers have played in transforming our conceptions of documentary evidence, Kirsten Ostherr affirms that 'these visualizations claim to document an unseen reality, and in doing so, they bring that very reality into being'.[34]

The iconic image of SARS-CoV-2 has been extensively used in the documentaries I have already mentioned, as well as in other productions, whose purpose was not strictly educational or scientific, such as in *In the Same Breath* (Nanfu Wang, 2021). In a similar way as *Totally under Control*, the HBO documentary focuses on the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, retracing how the Chinese and American governments reacted to the outbreak. Wang assembled a team of cinematographers, producers and field researchers to film and document what was unfolding in Wuhan and then in the U.S. after the spread of misinformation. The film intends to defy the obfuscation and disinformation which has characterized the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the responsibilities of the governments and how their lies have affected the lives of ordinary people. Analogously to her previous film, *One Child Nation* (2019), Wang explores how the governments and, consequently, the state-run media create political narratives out of tragedy, highlighting similar signs of propaganda and censorship effects both in China and in the U.S. However, in a different way compared to the previous film analyzed, *In the Same Breath* depicts more personal and intimate moments rather than addressing scientists, virologists and infographic material for educational purpose, through vlogs and video-diaries. It has been evident, indeed, how the impact of media technologies on users' daily lives, the new conditions of life under quarantine and the limitation of mobility have influenced collective and individual social narratives in the form of personal and intimate diaries written during the lockdown as well as the documentary lexicon. Collecting first-person self-documentation from who have filmed and published their life online under pandemic, *In the Same Breath* conveys an affective experience of fear and uncertainty. We meet several American healthcare workers traumatized by all the illness and death they have witnessed, who cannot speak about it because they have been warned by their own employers, as happened in China. The dramatic intimacy of these moments, as a man who has to decide whether his mother should be left to die at home or taken to die at an overcrowded hospital, or Wang's personal experience,

are juxtaposed with the data visualization narratives. The photographic realism of the images of pain and suffering are alternated with other scientific and incontrovertible proof of the virus manifestation, as the infographic material and the iconic image of SARS-CoV-2, recalling the collective pandemic imagery.

Reconceptualizing the images of suffering through different strategies and forms of representation for communicating and understanding trauma, the film suggests ethical witnessing, referring to Kaplan's notion. Biological digital renderings and data visualizations stand as modernist forms of representation, as techniques and practices increasingly used in contemporary documentary cinema like re-enactment, found footage, animation, which bring to a reconceptualization of indexicality, realism, and evidence as well as of the representability of traumatic events.

Moreover, *In the Same Breath* recurs to another visual element which plays a key role in the cultural trauma narration concerning the pandemic, as the drone footage of unusually desolate cities, in a post-apocalyptic scenario. In early February 2020, evocative assemblage of drone sequences captured firstly in the city of Wuhan, then across the world, invaded all over the networks and social media platforms, standing for the iconic symbol of social distancing. The pandemic drone imagery evokes a spectral situation, the aftermath of war, that Teresa Castro proposes to read 'against the background of our current ecological crisis'.[35] She highlights the connections between drone footage realized during the pandemic and aerial footage of wild animals taking over empty cities around the world, as the nature takes back its proper space, as well as images of anti-racist protests, referring especially to Black Lives Matter movement. 'The iconic symbol of distance tech produces the imagery of social distancing', as Caren Kaplan affirms, referring to the drone footages produced during the pandemic, which represent 'a haunting, melancholic nostalgia for what has been lost'.[36] Focusing almost completely on urban landscapes, and their material and environmental empty infrastructure, drone imagery depicts a modernity in peril, with 'an increasing non-human agency in the production of visibility', challenging the human fantasy of optical mastery over the earth.[37] Even from above it is impossible to see where the virus is. Ai Weiwei's *Coronation* (2020) extensively uses drone footage in order to depict the lockdown in Wuhan. Filmed against a dull grey sky, the city resembles a sci-fi dystopian movie set with skyscrapers empty of people, railways without trains, highways without cars. However, drone imagery, intensified by a soundtrack that sounds like atmospheric electronics and ghostly screams put through a vocoder, alongside footage representing survival situations like an unemployed man living out of his car or anonymous patients hospitalized in the intensive care unit offer a sensationalistic narration and form of representation. With no data visualizations, infographics, onscreen titles, or interviews but through fragmented images of individual pain, the film seems to arouse 'empty empathy', following Kaplan's concept, which could maybe provide an initial shock in the viewer rather than stimulating a pro-social behavior or a critical thinking. That's the risk films as *76 Days* (Hao Wu and Weixi Chen, 2020) or *The First Wave* (Matthew Heineman,

2021), for instance, can run into, focusing mainly on sensationalistic images of human suffering in intensive care units.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in the present contribution I have examined different communicative and narrative strategies adopted by some documentary productions in order to visualize something invisible, like the virus and its effects. Infographics used to communicate complex quantitative or qualitative information in a visually engaging manner, in the age of big data and the current pandemic, tend to dominate the mediascape, signaling, consequently, a transformation of visual representation in documentaries as well. Even if it is difficult to historicize a current event as the COVID-19 pandemic, to locate a single prevailing trend in these pandemic non-fiction productions, or to propose a new categorization, it is possible to retrace new forms of imaginary geographies and visual devices in order to shape and construct the pandemic as historical agent of cultural trauma. The way of representing a pandemic has been very different considering, for instance, HIV, which, obviously, promoted documentary activism of the epidemic era, through films that criticize the social and political causes of the disease and mourn the huge losses within largely invisible communities.[38]

Nevertheless, a documentary concerning emerging viruses such as Ebola or SARS, like, for instance, *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020), adopts a deeply different audiovisual lexicon and forms of visualization compared to the cases I have taken into account. The six episodes documentary series, released on Netflix in January 2022, just before the COVID-19 was beginning its rampage all over the world, covers a range of specific issues concerning the possibility of an influenza pandemic, the search for a universal vaccine or anti-vax movement. It is possible to retrace an educational purpose since the series aims to explain how to prevent and contain a potentially global outbreak, even if the narration, structured like an espionage thriller, mainly focuses on sensationalistic rhetoric of contagion, from the deadly ramifications of the 1918 Spanish flu to the current days. Depicting a crowded animal market or a run-down farm as a possible center of contagion as well as focusing the attention on seriously ill people are explicative intents for conveying a sensationalistic sense of disaster.

On the other hand, mixing interviews with infographic material, maps, dashboards, photomicrographs, and computer graphics animations, some of the COVID documentaries I have taken into account reconfigure the collective imagination of the pandemic in a bioinformation era. The invisibility of the virus has led to a series of indirect and abstract images. Data visualization, using different kinds of elements like images, lists, graphs, charts, attractive color schemes, descriptive headings, and subheadings, going beyond an educational purpose and its explanatory and pedagogical power to narrate, can be considered a modernist form of representation, a new audiovisual lexicon to reconceptualize the images of suffering and the traumatic event.

Notes

[1] Jihoon Kim, 'Data Visualizations, Vlogs, Drone Imagery: Expanded Documentary Forms in the COVID-19 Emergency', *Film Criticism*, 45.1 (2021), <https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/article/id/1060/> [accessed 15 July 2022]

[2] Ibidem, 3.

[3] COVID-19 in *International Media: Global Pandemic Responses*, ed. by John C. Pollock and Douglas A. Vakoch (London, New York: Routledge, 2022).

[4] Lisa Parks and Janet Walker, 'Disaster Media: Bending the Curve of Ecological Disruption and Moving toward Social Justice', *Media+Environment*, 2.1 (2020), 4, <https://mediaenviron.org/article/13474-disaster-media-bending-the-curve-of-ecological-disruption-and-moving-toward-social-justice> [accessed 27 April 2022]

[5] Ron Eyerman, 'Cultural Trauma and the Transmission of Traumatic Experience', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 87.3 (2020), 679–705 (679).

[6] See, for instance, Kirsten Ostherr, *Cinematic Prophyaxis: Globalization and Contagion in the Discourse of World Health* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Nikita Mathias, *Disaster Cinema in Historical Perspective Mediations of the Sublime* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020); *Defining Disaster: Disciplines and Domains*, ed. by Marie Aronsson-Storrier and Rasmus Dahlberg (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

[7] Karen Redrobe Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Greg Siegel, *Forensic Media: Reconstructing Accidents in Accelerated Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[8] Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Forseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, ed. by Anil Narine (London, New York: Routledge, 2014).

[9] T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); *Moving Images: Mediating Migration as Crisis*, ed. by Krista Geneviève Lynes, Tyler Morgenstern, and Ian Alan Paul (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[10] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995).

[11] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light: Shadow Optics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 32.

[12] The term infodemic, from information and epidemic, refers to a situation where 'a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation, and rumor, amplified, and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies' affect economies, politics and security. The term has been coined by the journalist and political scientist David Rothkopf in 2003 in connection with SARS. David J. Rothkopf, 'When the Buzz Bites Back', *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/05/11/when-the-buzz-bites-back/bc8cd84f-cab6-4648-bf58-0277261af6cd/> [accessed 27 April 2022]

[13] Florian Hoof, 'Media of Trust: Visualizing the Pandemic', in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, ed. by Philipp Dominik Keidl, Philipp Dominik Keidl and others, (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020), 231–242. Hoof's study on different data visualizations about the virus and the pandemic as a trustworthy form, since the society is acquainted with this specific visual culture, has been the starting point of my research.

[14] Deborah Toschi, 'Bodies and maps, display the habitat of the contagion', *Visual Culture Studies*, 2 (2021), 97–114.

[15] Ensheng Dong, Hongru Du, and Lauren Gardner, 'An Interactive Web-based Dashboard to Track COVID-19 in Real Time', *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 26.5 (2020), 533–534 (533).

[16] Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture. The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 93.

[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1977).

[18] Kaplan, 91.

[19] John Berger, 'Photographs of Agony', in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 41–44.

[20] Kaplan, 22.

[21] Kim, 6.

[22] Tess Takahashi, 'Data Visualization as Documentary Form: The Murmur of Digital Magnitude', *Discourse*,

36.3 (2017), 376–396 (376).

[23] Bill Nichols, 'The Voice of Documentary', *Film Quarterly*, 36.3 (1983).

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[27] Cara Giaimo, 'The Spiky Blob Seen Around the World How C.D.C. medical illustrators created the coronavirus pandemic's most iconic image', *The New York Times*, 1 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/health/coronavirus-illustration-cdc.html> [accessed 25 April 2022]

[28] Dan Higgins in Fairs.

[29] Julia Sonnevend, 'A virus as an icon: the 2020 pandemic in images', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 8 (2020), 451–461.

[30] Jean Painlevé, 'Scientific Film' (1955), in *Science Is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé*, ed. by Andy Masaki Bellows, Marina McDougall, and Brigitte Berg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 160–169.

[31] Kirsten Ostherr, 'Animating Informatics: Scientific Discovery Through Documentary Film', in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, ed. by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2015), 280–297.

[32] Hannah Landecker, 'Seeing Things: From Microcinematography to Live Cell Imaging', *Nature Methods*, 6.10 (2009), 707–709.

[33] The short film is commissioned by BioVisions, a multimedia collaboration based in the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at Harvard University and funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

[34] Ostherr, 281.

[35] Teresa Castro, 'Of Drones and the Environmental Crisis in the Year of 2020', in *Pandemic Media*, 81–90.

[36] Caren Kaplan and Patricia R. Zimmerman, 'Coronavirus Drone Genres: Spectacles of Distance and Melancholia', *Film Quarterly*, (April 2020), <https://filmquarterly.org/2020/04/30/coronavirus-drone-genres-spectacles-of-distance-and-melancholia/> [accessed 15 July 2022]

[37] Ada Akerman, 'Covid-dronism: Pandemic Visions from Above', in *Pandemic Media*, 168–169.

[38] As far as HIV activist videos concerns see, for instance, Alex Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

BEYOND CINEMA

Hands at Work:
Patching Women's Film Histories through Sabrina Gschwandtner's Film Quilts

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This paper examines the work of artist Sabrina Gschwandtner, whose recent series of 16mm and 35mm film quilts reproduce sequences from early women directors' films and from orphaned textile-production documentaries and re-edits their narratives through spatial montage by sewing celluloid strips into traditional quilt patterns. Appropriated from film archives, each strip of film holds embedded within it a history of women's labor, and through her sewing techniques, which call attention to the connection between film's intermittent motion mechanism and the sewing machine, Gschwandtner patches women's film histories back together. By considering the techniques of colorists and editors in early cinema as originating within handcrafting and 'feminine' labor, the traces of their hands at work form new histories through Gschwandtner's quilts. In her artwork, the invisible contributions of these forgotten women become visible, foregrounding their tactile, intensive, and time-consuming labor. Gschwandtner's film quilts also suggest that, rather than digital technology marking the death of cinema, it has just liberated the celluloid strip to be used and encountered in endless new ways.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, in a dimly lit gallery, Sabrina Gschwandtner exhibited *Hands at Work*, a solo show comprised of eleven quilts sewed from 16mm films which showed women's hands at work — 'weaving, knitting, sewing, dyeing cloth, tying string, spinning yarn, and feeding fabric into machines.'[1] The vibrant quilts were softly illuminated from behind, exhibited in lightboxes mounted on walls like recessed television screens — though, from afar, the colorful compositions looked more like ornate stained glass windows, varying in shape and size [Fig. 1]. Only upon closer examination did the films' materiality become evident and the images legible, repeated in intricate patterns through the quilts' graphic forms.

The show served as a sort of culmination of almost a decade's work, having made several dozen quilts meticulously sewed together from strips of forgotten 16mm films — from orphaned industrial films and textile-production documentaries to student theses — which would have otherwise been discarded. Her recent series of 35mm film quilts continues to highlight forgotten films, this

time reproducing sequences by early women directors. Through both bodies of work, Gschwandtner revaluates films that have traditionally been overlooked and underappreciated by film historians, giving them new life through her expanded cinema collages. As I hope to show in this article, each strip of film in Gschwandtner's quilts holds embedded within it a history of women's labor which is activated as she patches women's film histories back together, creating an archive of women's labor across textile crafts, fine arts, and film history.

Gschwandtner's work is part of a larger movement to revise film historical accounts of women's participation in the film industry. Maggie Hennefeld has summarized the project of feminist film history as 'the ongoing rewriting of the past through the lens of gender/sexual difference and from the perspective of women, whose work is too often erased or sidelined in dominant narratives of the history of cinema'.[2] This project has been undertaken on various fronts internationally over the past few decades: conferences like 'Women and the Silent Screen' and 'Doing Women's Film and TV History' host biannual meetings for scholars to share current research and keep up with the field; book series like *Women and Film History International* (University of Illinois Press) and journals like *Feminist Media Histories* (University of California Press) provide outlets for scholarly publication; online platforms like the *Women Film Pioneers Project* and *Edited By: Women Film Editors*, hosted by Columbia and Princeton Universities, respectively, provide biographies of hundreds of women directors, editors, screenwriters, actresses, designers, curators, and every other occupation imaginable; and distributors like Kino Lorber help bring the restored films themselves back to audiences through boxsets like Pioneers: *First Women Filmmakers* (2018) and *Cinema's First Nasty Women* (2022). Filmmakers

and artists are also part of the conversation, making documentaries, writing historical fiction, and creating art installations showcasing the work of early and contemporary women filmmakers.

Aside from women's film history, Gschwandtner's work is also deeply engaged with the histories and traditions of textile crafts and needlework — crocheting, knitting, sewing, and quilting in particular — the objects of which have similarly been neglected and ignored as women's pastimes rather than taken seriously as art. While neither textile crafts nor film have truly been embraced by the art world, it is precisely in art galleries and museums that Gschwandtner's film quilts are exhibited, in a sense infiltrating and critiquing the very institutions that had tried to keep them both out from within. Her work proceeds as a two-pronged investigation of women filmmakers, women crafters, and the absence of these women artists in both film and art historical accounts, foregrounding questions of value and acts of valuation through her recuperative process, which rewrites both histories at once.

Gschwandtner's interests in revising film history and revaluating textile crafts, however, meet most directly through the figure of the film 'cutter' who, leaned over a flatbed editor, labored with her hands as she carefully cut and spliced film strips together with tape or cement. As Jane Gaines, Su Friedrich, Erin Hill, and others remind us, women worked predominantly as editors or 'cutters' in the early film industry.[3] Joshua Yumibe, Gregory Zinman, and others have also shown that the work of coloring films in early cinema was performed by an almost entirely female labor force — by women who painted each frame and every release print by hand.[4] As these authors maintain, editing and coloring were among the first jobs available to women in the film industry, both because this kind of work was tedious, demanding, and time-consuming and women could be hired and exploited at lower wages than men, but also because women were believed to be innately suited to this type of detail-oriented, hands-on work thanks to their handcrafting skills and 'nimble fingers'.[5]

If we start from the conception that cinema, at its inception, was materially related to the field of textile crafts and handiwork — not only through the work of the cutter and colorist, but also through the relation of the sewing machine and the intermittent motion mechanism that advances film through cameras and projectors, as well as the use of cellulose nitrate in both film and fabric[6] — we can then read Gschwandtner's dual engagement with film history and the history of craft as one and the same. By considering the techniques of editors and colorists as originating within handcrafting and 'feminine' labor, the traces of their hands at work form new histories through Gschwandtner's quilts, which not only directly appropriate these handcrafting techniques to produce new and revisionist histories but make the invisible contributions of these forgotten women visible, foregrounding their tactile, intensive, and time-consuming labor. This article provides a more-or-less chronological account of the artist's work, detailing how these ideas and connections between medium and material, content and form, pattern and technique are identified, referenced, developed, and refined throughout her bodies of work.

EARLY WORKS

Sabrina Gschwandtner is an American artist based in Los Angeles, and over the past two decades, her work has been centered around the relationship between handcrafting, women's undervalued labor, material culture, and cinema. She studied art and semiotics with Leslie Thornton at Brown University, from whom she learned to think about 'cinema as a mode of shared thinking',[7] and spent a summer in Salzburg, Austria studying video with VALIE EXPORT. Gschwandtner is part of the generation that learned to edit film on Steenbecks and video on Media 100 simultaneously, and her film editing experience — working directly with the 16mm film in her hands, splicing strips of film and threading projectors — has deeply influenced the way she thinks about editing her film quilts today. She taught herself about textiles and crafts outside of school, including through her work as founder of the zine KnitKnit, which ran for seven issues between 2002 and 2007 and culminated in the book *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave*.[8] Central to her thinking was that the materials she was working with were embedded with histories of women's labor and creativity, and that because of this the materials — whether thread, fabric, or film — were already infused with meaning. She embraced this understanding of the materials from the get-go and worked to reinforce these meanings rather than circumvent them.

In one of her earliest works, *Sewn Film Performance* (2001), Gschwandtner sewed thread and bits of fabric onto short strips of Super8 film, cutting some of the strips in half and sewing mismatched pieces together. With a video camera trained on her hands, she fed the film strips, piled around her, into a projector with its side opened, pushing and pulling at the thick strips of film, thread, and fabric to make them go through the projector, projecting the analog, handcrafted images and the live-feed of her hands at work next to each other. Performed as part of Xander Marro's *Movies with Live Soundtracks* series, the noise of the projector — which sounds like a sewing machine — served as the soundtrack to the performance. Two years later, in the spirit of the 'mending and recycling' handcrafting ethos, Gschwandtner sewed the remains of the Super8 strips together as a 'relic' of her performance, measuring eight by sixteen inches. This became her first film quilt, although it would take several years before she made another one.

Sewn Film Performance may sound a lot like Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* (1973), in which Nicolson 'ran a loop of film from the ceiling, through the threadless, hand-operated sewing machine where she sat, and back into the projector',[9] continuously taping and splicing the film as she went along until it was too damaged to be projected. The film image showed a recording of Nicolson sitting by a sewing machine, while another projector positioned behind her beamed her live shadow onto a separate screen, projecting herself caught in two acts of sewing at once to foreground her labor as the real visual spectacle of the performance, while two audience members equipped with operating

manuals for a film projector and a sewing machine read the instructions aloud.[10] While documentation of Nicolson's performance is scant, five decades later it remains a seminal work in avant-garde film and expanded cinema practices.[11] Gschwandtner has retrospectively compared their pieces, but acknowledges that at the time of her performance she was unaware of Nicolson's earlier work, highlighting how the relationship between sewing and cinema continues to be a generative site of experimentation for artists working between textile arts and the moving image.[12]

Following *Sewn Film Performance* and the *Sewn Film Performance Relic* (2003), Gschwandtner pursued several other projects, including *Crochet Film* (2004), a site-specific installation created for the 40-foot long lower-level gallery at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York. For this installation, Gschwandtner shot an 80-foot long 16mm loop of herself crocheting an 80-foot yarn 'replica' of the 16mm film, continuing the motif of projecting images of herself and her hands at work. The same-sized objects were exhibited facing each other on opposite walls in the gallery — one object moving and one still — with their durations listed: two minutes and fourteen seconds for the film, marking the time it took for the looping images to transport through the 40-foot gallery and back again, and 575 minutes for the yarn object, marking the almost ten hours it took to crochet it by hand. The juxtaposition of the two objects highlighted and invited reflection on their differences — the widely divergent materialities and temporalities of the two objects — and similarities — like the film strip, which consists of an accretion of discrete images, the crocheted yarn object was an accumulation of individual stitches.

Crochet Film was followed that same year by *Phototactic Behavior in Sewn Slides*, in which Gschwandtner sewed threads onto 35mm slides with a sewing machine. The slides, which had been produced as documentation of a Super8 loop but came back blurry from the lab, were reused by the artist in the same handcrafting ethos of 'mending and recycling', a strategy that has been central to Gschwandtner's work throughout the past two decades. Phototaxis refers to the ability of organisms to move in response to light sources, and, when projected through a slide carousel, the projector fan blew on the thread, creating minute motions that, like *Crochet Film*, continue to play with the binary of movement and stillness, as the automatic slide projector struggles to keep the fluttering thread in focus.

Gschwandtner's early works showcase a sustained and sharp exploration of the dualisms of still and moving image/object, analog and digital, handcraft and fine art, amateur and professional, utilitarian and decorative, preservation and appropriation, which continue to inform her work to this day. These dualisms become even more pronounced in the film quilts, which are sewed together from strips of found films using traditional quilting techniques and exhibited in museums and art galleries, breaking down and traversing the triple barriers between the fine arts, handcrafting, and cinema.

16MM FILM QUILTS

In 2009, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York deaccessioned its 16mm teaching film collections and donated them to Anthology Film Archive. Archivist Andrew Lampert selected a few films to keep for Anthology's permanent collections and gave away the rest of the material — the stuff that was not deemed worth preserving and archiving — to found footage filmmakers, including Gschwandtner. This collection became the core of Gschwandtner's working materials throughout the next decade, as she embarked on her first series of film quilts, although she has occasionally also acquired footage through eBay and other sources. Over time, she developed a spreadsheet where she kept track of all the information she could find about the films — titles, directors, production companies, copyright years, film stock, and edge codes — and pursued further research depending on her interests.

The films — which date from the 1950s to the 1980s, and range from sponsored industrial films and documentaries to student thesis projects — are all centered around textile production, crafts, and fashion.[13] The collection also traces the shifting representation and appreciation of textile crafts and women's labor as the form and content of the films grow progressively feminist by each decade. One of Gschwandtner's earliest quilts, *Fibers and Civilization (1959)* (2009), features footage from Lewis Jacobs' *Fibers and Civilization* (alternately dated 1958/1959). Sponsored by Chemstrand Corp., a synthetic textiles manufacturer, the film surveys the historical use of natural fibers from ancient China and India — visualized through exotic song and dance numbers featuring women 'working' 'primitive' looms — through the late fifties, when scientists developed synthetic alternatives that 'could be produced in limitless supply and forever free the textile from the whims of nature' to meet the demands of modern society — visualized by men in lab coats with scientific instruments and industrial machinery. As Gschwandtner explains:

> In the films from the '50s there's usually an omniscient male narrator talking about, say, how dresses are important for women to wear, and by the 1981 film Quilts in Women's Lives, *we are presented with women describing where they live and how they work in their own words. The film breaks from a controlling narrative about what things mean and opens itself up to embody the care, the improvisation, and the craft the women put into their quilts.*[14]

The colorful, oversaturated images of synthetic fibers being dipped in dyes, pulled and pressed through a series of machines, and wound and spun onto spools are sewed by Gschwandtner into six even square blocks, each made up of eight even triangles and featuring roughly twenty-eight rows of 16mm film across. The six blocks are surrounded by twelve rows of darker, black-and-white 16mm strips, creating a stark contrast between her vivid composition and the almost-black frame [Fig. 2 and Fig. 3]. While Jacobs' film places contemporary fibers
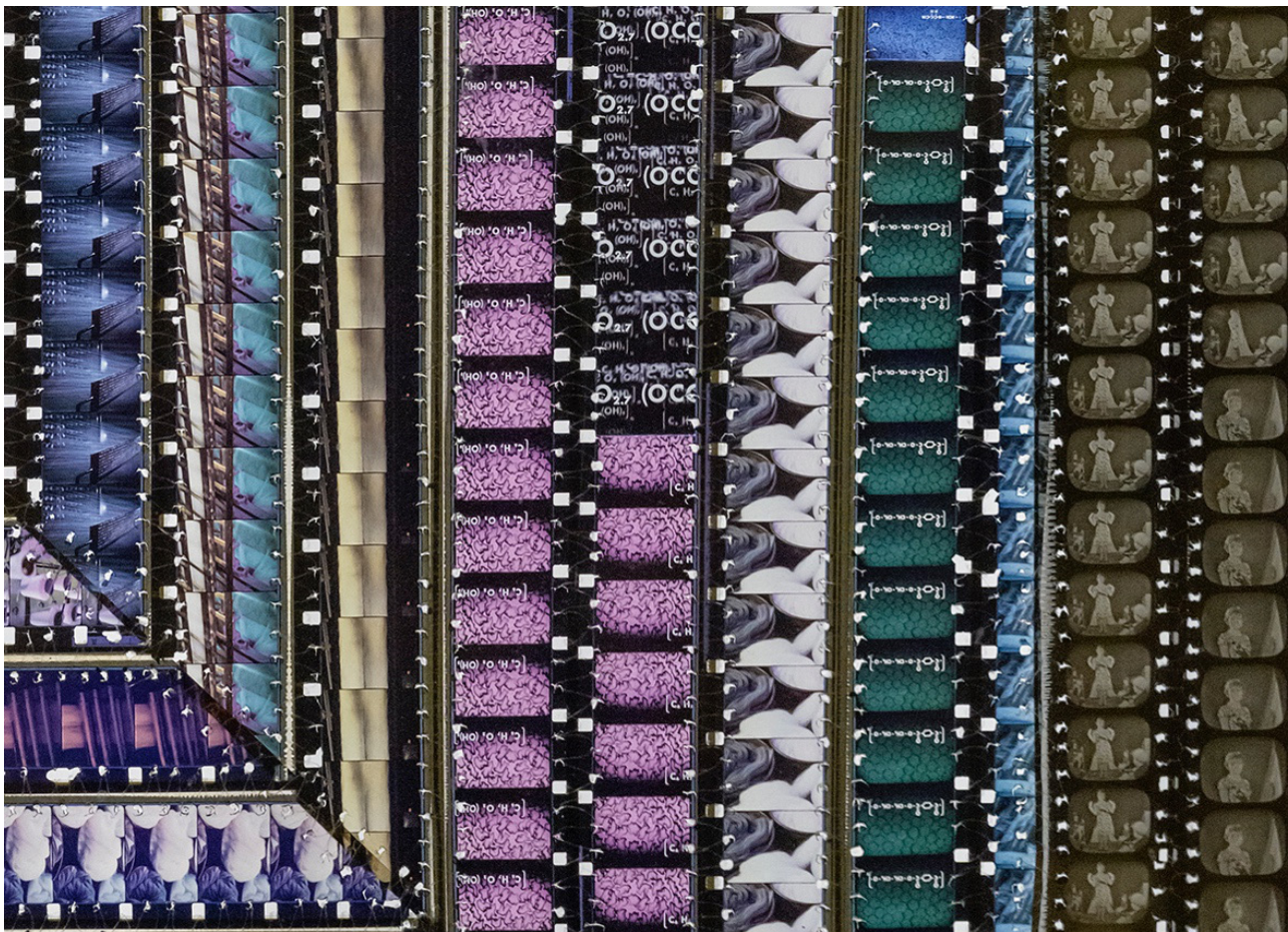
squarely in the context of science, automation, and commodity, Gschwandtner brings them back into the realm of craft, labor, and art.

Gschwandtner has likened her quilting process to editing in three dimensions, using shots, scenes, and sequences as building blocks. After viewing and selecting specific clips, depending on what the source material is, she'll either work directly with her original prints or have clips reprinted through a film lab. Using quilting tools — a rotary cutter, quilting ruler, cutting mat, and Bernina sewing machine — she cuts the film strips into rectangles, squares, or triangles depending on the pattern she's following, and tapes the strips onto a light table, moving pieces around until she's satisfied with the composition. She arranges the strips according to the logic of a spatial rather than time-based cinematic montage, playing with the length of sequences and the similarity of image content to shape the material into graphic form, balancing color, light, and darkness, and rearranging the composition if the 'edit' is too dense and needs more breathing room. Before she sews the pieces together, she takes a photo of the quilt assemblage (the 'rough cut', so to speak) so that she can look at it on different screens and at different scales, before committing to the final composition.

The 16mm film quilts, measuring typically between fourteen by fourteen and twenty-eight by twenty-eight inches — but at their largest up to forty-eight by seventy-two inches — are composed of a range of types of footage in compositions

where the sequential film strips are primarily perceived as abstract color swatches and individual frames and images are only recognized and made legible upon close examination. These images include the aforementioned industrial textile production scenes in *Fibers and Civilization* and other films like it juxtaposed with images of women's hands at work — at sewing machines and looms or with needles in hand — as well as title sequences, countdowns, and black and clear (and tinted) leader — in other words, film scraps. These disparate materials are skillfully fashioned into arrangements that follow traditional American quilting patterns and motifs, entwining the history of the American crafts movement with film history. As Joan Mulholland argues, quilting has for the past few centuries been an important place for women's discourse to develop: at a time when women's freedoms were limited and voices restricted, quilting became a form of speech through which the materials one worked with, the patterns one created, and the care and skill with which one stitched all inscribed values and meanings into the quilts, which were displayed in homes and at fairs, exchanged with friends and family, or made to commemorate important life events.[15] These forms of signification were certainly not lost on a former student of semiotics, and Gschwandtner's quilts likewise speak to us through her choices of material, content, pattern, and technique. Each strip of film she works with holds embedded within it a history of women's labor, which through Gschwandtner's quilts are rescued from their decaying reels and put on display, front and center, to 'record and preserve the motions of [women] sewing, dyeing, [and] spinning'.[16]

Two of the films Gschwandtner returns to most frequently for her source material are Pat Ferrero's *Hearts and Hands* (1988), a documentary surveying the role quilting played for women in the nineteenth century, and *Quilts in Women's Lives* (1981), a documentary featuring a series of portraits of seven contemporary quilters from widely different backgrounds. Footage from the films is used in pieces like *Hearts and Hands Octagonal Star* (2015 and 2017), *Hearts and Hands Black Block* (2014), *Quilts in Women's Lives III* (2012), *Quilts in Women's Lives IV* (2013), and *Quilts in Women's Lives V* (2014), all employing short strips of 16mm film — typically anywhere between half a frame and forty frames, or roughly one foot of film — sewed in alternating patterns that contrast repetition and variation, symmetry and asymmetry, light and dark, opacity and transparency, image content and clear leader, and so on. In each instance, Gschwandtner invites viewers to read the quilts closely to reflect on the photographic image content, which is often repeated due to the repetitive nature of the cinematic medium (a five-second shot generates 120 individual frames with only slight variations); on the medium and technique, which are foregrounded through the visible film frame, edge, and sprocket holes, as well as the seams and threads that hold them together; and on the quilting patterns themselves, which invoke the traditions and histories of American quilting.

Mulholland notes that the block, for example, is a distinguishing mark of American quilting, as American women settlers created lap-sized blocks — which could be completed independently, set aside, and sewn together once

all were finished — as an alternative to working from the middle outwards or from one end to another on a piece that would grow increasingly heavy and difficult to maneuver.[17] The block is also a signature feature of Gschwandtner's film quilts, which are often composed of one, four, six, sixteen, or even twenty-four squares — upwards of a hundred, depending on how you count them in works like *Quilts in Women's Lives V* [Fig. 4]. *Spindle Log Cabin Square* (2014), *Hearts and Hands Log Cabin Squares* (for Susan) (2014), *Arts and Crafts* (2012), and several others also use variations on the log cabin pattern, which begins with a center square and feature strips that grow larger in size around the sides of the square, typically alternating between light and dark. *Hands at Work Crazy Quilt (for Teresa Li)* (2017) and *Hands at Work Crazy Quilt (for Roderick Kiracofe)* (2017), on the other hand, use the random 'crazy quilt' technique, which thwarts any perceptible patterns or motifs — a technique, as Mulholland explains, that historically foregrounded the 'stitchery between the pieces rather than the patterning of pieces', which deemphasized the quilts' utility and instead showcased a woman's skill and artistry.[18] Gschwandtner's choices of form are thus not random, but serve as active referents to these histories and the meanings and values conveyed through these women's work.

While Gschwandtner's work in many ways is about remembering and preserving the histories of women's labor in crafts, art, and film, her use of material — photochemical film — and technique — cutting and stitching —

Fig. 4
Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Quilts in Women's Lives V* (2014). 16mm film with polyester thread and lithography ink. 23 5/16 x 23 7/16 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles.

challenges and complicates any sense of permanence or preservation. As these materials face the very real threat of decomposition and obsolescence, as the films and their contents disappear and are forgotten, Gschwandtner's project can on the one hand be read as archival as she rescues and reuses footage from orphaned films otherwise unlikely to ever see the light of day or a projector again. On the other hand, some critics have expressed concern about her process being destructive, destroying and dismembering the original prints she acquired, though she feels confident that the prints she's working with are not unique, but that other copies exist in other archives and collections, whether on 16mm or video. Some of the films, like Ferrero's *Hearts and Hands and Quilts in Women's Lives*, are still available for rental or purchase through the original distributor,[19] while *Fibers and Civilization* is preserved by, and accessible through, the National Film Preservation Foundation and Library of Congress. For some of the rarer materials she uses most frequently, she has even made her own video copies and created new negatives so that she can strike new prints if necessary. Ultimately, she thinks of her own role not as to preserve these materials as they originally existed, but to 'bring into material existence what exists as possibility' in the archive.

For Gschwandtner's first film quilt exhibition, *Watch & See* at Gustavsbergs Konsthall in Sweden in 2009, the quilts were installed hung against the gallery's windows, leaving the rest of the space empty as viewers had to view the content of the transparent film frames against the world outside the gallery, while the light from the sun shifted the legibility of the images throughout the day.[20] The direct sunlight also accelerated the films' decomposition, and since then the film quilts have more typically been exhibited in custom-built lightboxes mounted on walls, providing softer but more consistent illumination from behind. The lightboxes help protect the sensitive acetate material from decaying too quickly, as the photochemical material inevitably deteriorates, fades, and changes colors, while also situating her work in a particularly archival *dispositif*. This archival quality comes through most strongly in her most recent work.

35MM FILM QUILTS AND THE CINEMA SANCTUARY

In 2019, after a decade committed to her 16mm film quilts, Gschwandtner embarked on a new series of 35mm film quilts, exploring the legacies of early women filmmakers from the silent cinema period. The four 35mm film quilts she has completed so far use footage from Marion E. Wong's *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (1917), Alice Guy-Blaché's *Serpentine Dance by Mrs Bob Walter* (1897), Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927), and Lotte Reiniger's *Cinderella* (1922). For this series, rather than using found footage from her own collection, Gschwandtner worked with film archives to access and license high-resolution video footage

of restored silent films, which she brought to a lab to create her own 35mm prints: Wong's *Curse* came from the Academy Film Library and Kino Lorber, Guy-Blaché's *Serpentine Dance* from the Gaumont-Pathé Archives in Paris, and Dulac's *Seashell* from EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. This has in some ways limited which films she can work with, as she needs high-resolution footage, which is not available of films that have not been preserved, restored, and digitized yet, while some archives are also hesitant to provide a license for her unusual requests.[21]

All four filmmakers featured in Gschwandtner's 35mm film quilts — Wong, Guy-Blaché, Dulac, and Reiniger — are renowned for being film history 'firsts': Wong is often called the first Asian-American filmmaker, founder of the first Asian-American film studio (the Mandarin Film Company), and the director of the first film to feature an all-Asian-American cast[22] (1917 papers called her 'the first Chinese girl to write and stage a movie'[23]); Guy-Blaché is regularly claimed to be the first woman director and the first narrative filmmaker;[24] Dulac is alternately referred to as the first feminist and the first surrealist filmmaker;[25] and Reiniger is the director of what is believed to be the first feature-length animated film.[26] It is then fitting that their films should also be the first to be turned into quilts by Gschwandtner as she embarks on this new series of work.

The Curse of Quon Gwon tells the story of a culture clash between a young, westernized immigrant couple and their more traditional Chinese family. The film was never picked up for distribution during Wong's life, and it wasn't until after her death in 1969 that Violet Wong, Marion's sister-in-law, who starred alongside her in the film, tasked her grandson with preserving the two surviving reels — reels four and seven out of eight or nine. The extant material, a little over half an hour of footage, was restored by the Academy Film Archive in 2005, and added to the National Film Registry the following year.[27] Gschwandtner's quilt focuses on a scene where the villainess, played by Marion, tries to give the heroine, played by Violet, a more traditional Chinese hairdo in advance of her wedding, but the bride resists and ends up doing her own hair. The quilt, arranged as a diagonal log cabin, features black leader and technical printing images in the smaller, middle squares — including an image of a Kodak 'LAD' Lady, a white woman accompanied by a color or, in this case, grayscale bar used as a reference to ensure consistent tonal density and color balance across film prints, also commonly known as a 'China Girl'[28] — and alternates between clear leader and images of Violet brushing her hair, with black leader occasionally interrupting the pattern for dynamic effect. It is a striking and expansive composition, whose diagonal squares push like arrows against the edge of the frame, while the emptiness of the clear leader poignantly echoes the loss of the majority of the film [Fig. 5]. The image of the 'China Girl' — a minor detail that can easily be overlooked — further emphasizes how the photochemical film medium was originally calibrated for white skin tones and makes the reproduced frames of Violet looking at herself in the mirror while brushing her hair and fashioning her own image all the more remarkable. While the film was only screened twice during Wong's life, Gschwandtner grants Marion's film and image new life as
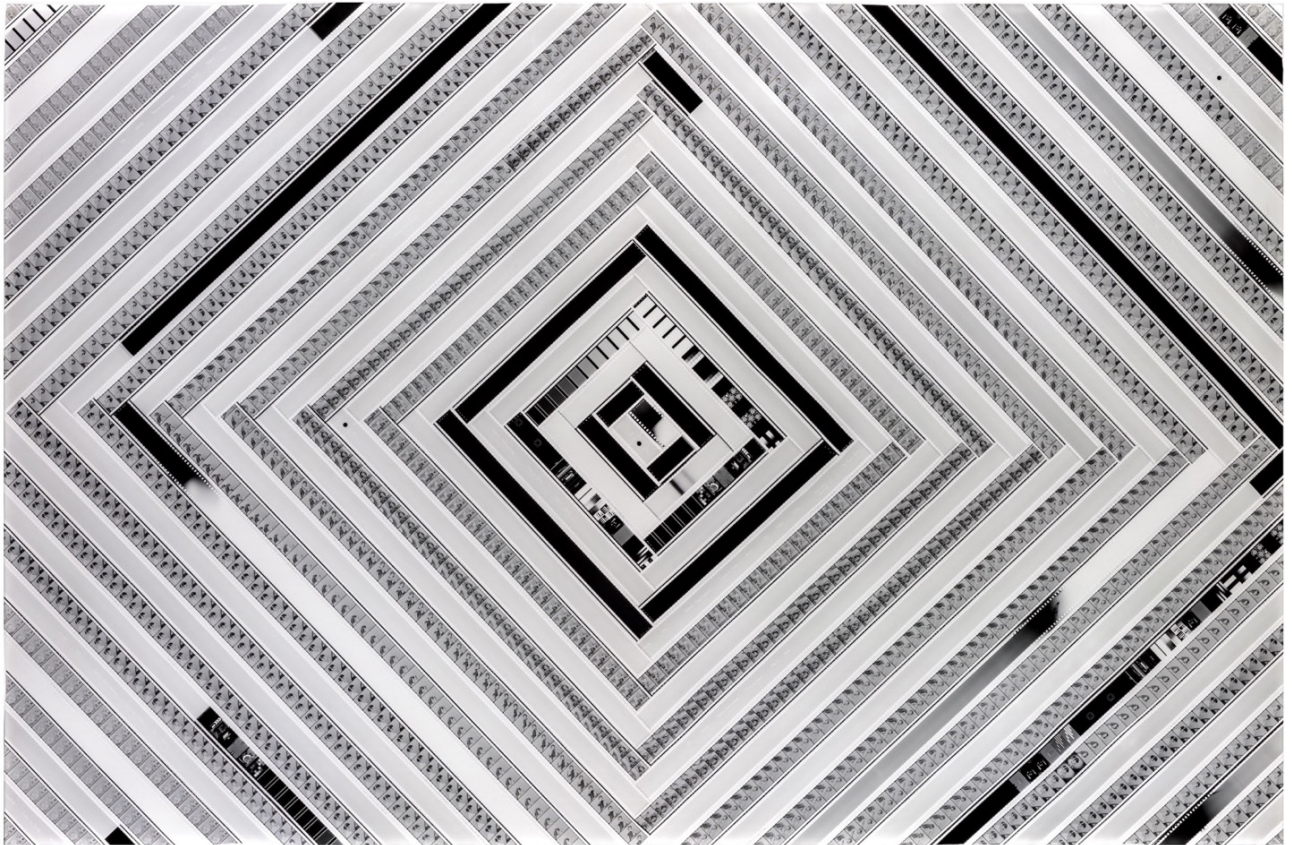
they are exhibited anew in museums and galleries as part of her quilt.

Based on a script by Antonin Artaud, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* portrays the erotic hallucinations of a priest. When Artaud had to step away from the project (he was originally scheduled to play the priest), Dulac subverted his vision and infused it with a feminist critique of male sexuality and patriarchal institutions.[29] Even though it was the first surrealist film made, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* was overshadowed by Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), released the following year, which continues to be referred to as the 'quintessential' surrealist film into the present. Gschwandtner's quilt, also following a log cabin pattern, centers on a sequence from early in the film where the clergyman repeatedly pours wine from a shell into round bottom flasks and drops them on the floor, over and over, as if in a trance or dream state. The quilt's patterns, produced by alternating between dark imagery and clear leader, preserve the dizzying and disorienting effect of Dulac's film through their geometric composition. The alternations produce stair-like structures that turn upside down and bend into each other — the composition seems almost completely random, except that black (image) and white (leader) are mirrored along the vertical middle, like a surreal, inverse Rorschach inkblot. Reiniger's film is similarly turned into an abstract pattern that emphasizes the alternation between black and white, even more so as Reiniger's hand cut silhouette animation was made with black puppets against a white background, creating a higher contrast through the original imagery as well as through the geometric shapes Gschwandtner constructs. In her quilt,

Gschwandtner focuses on Reiniger's refusal of the square or rectangular frame, instead carefully cutting unique shapes with jagged lines around her animated tableau, and the result is a composition full of dots, triangles, squares, and diamonds. The Reiniger quilt's strong graphic form echoes the film's highly stylized animation, while the Dulac quilt's seeming refusal of symmetrical form — the patterns point in several directions at once — emphasize Dulac's refusal of conventional narrative and film language.

Finally, the Guy-Blaché quilt features footage of a serpentine dance performed by a Mrs. Bob Walter and filmed in 1897, based on the popular dance by Loïe Fuller that spawned dozens of imitators and became one of the most popular filmed attractions in the early years of cinema. The quilt is stitched together to mimic and replicate the circular movement of the serpentine dance and transforms the seductive spectacle into abstract square shapes and patterns. More recently, Gschwandtner has also created a series of smaller-scale, limited edition *Serpentine Dance Square* photo prints from the original quilt (the large quilt consists of six squares, each featuring eighteen rows of 35mm film across, while the prints feature one square with only eight rows across). The prints are hand painted with watercolor and photo dye to mimic the coloring that would have been used both in the lighting of the original dance performance and in its reproduction on film [Fig. 6]. Gregory Zinman reminds us that '[h]and coloring, tinting, toning, and stenciling are all labor-intensive and time-consuming processes, but they have been employed since the start of movie-making'[30] and were extensively used from the early 1900s until the advent of sound and later photochemical color filmmaking in the late 1920s and 1930s. Hand painted images could be used for magical tricks and illusions, to highlight important objects or create otherworldly landscapes, or, as in this case, to turn the performer's gendered body into a visual spectacle. As Zinman relays, '[t]hese films were colored by scores of young women and girls who worked slowly, frame by frame, with small brushes, aided by magnifying glasses'.[31] Not only each frame, but every release print of a film had to be colored by hand. Joshua Yumibe, in his work on early coloring techniques, describes the labor division in these coloring labs, looking specifically at Berthe Thuillier's Paris studio, where she managed two hundred women who colored Pathé Frères and Georges Méliès films: Thuillier would sample and test the colors at night, and during the day instructed and oversaw her workers, each of whom applied a single color to a strip of film through a highly systematized division of labor.[32] Gschwandtner directly evokes and appropriates this handcrafting labor through her Serpentine Dance prints, each being individually and uniquely colored by applying the dye to the gelatin silver prints directly, rather than reproducing them photographically, thus working in solidarity with the women colorists and editors whose work film history has overlooked and forgotten.

Instead of being installed in lightboxes on the walls, the four quilts of Wong's, Dulac's, Reiniger's, and Guy-Blaché's films are intended to hang in a circle throughout the gallery. The 'Cinema Sanctuary', as Gschwandtner calls it, is imagined as a safe space for women in film, designed to honor the creativity

and legacy of women filmmakers, both historical and contemporary, in the face of blatant abuse and misogyny in the film industry. The Cinema Sanctuary was designed in collaboration with architects Catherine Clark and Tughela Gino, and features mobile and modular seating, which makes it possible to reconfigure the space to allow for different types of programming to happen in the sanctuary — including screenings of films by the women whose work appears in the quilts as well as that of contemporary women filmmakers. The design of the Cinema Sanctuary is not only based on a quilt pattern but also references a quilting circle, in a way harkening back to Gschwandtner's 2007 participatory installation *Wartime Knitting Circle*, in which museumgoers were provided with a table and knitting tools and invited to work on their own or collective wartime projects. In the same ethos of participation and interaction as her earlier installation, perhaps it would not be farfetched to suggest that the Cinema Sanctuary also serve as a filmmaking circle, replete with 16mm scraps, thread, and splicing tape?

CONCLUSION

In 2017, Gschwandtner translated the quilting strategies she deployed in the film quilts into video form. *Hands at Work Video* (2017), a three-minute loop

made up of 35 small triangular shapes, is a collage of clips of close-ups of hands threading needles, sewing, weaving, and crocheting, juxtaposed with 16mm film leader and the credits from Pat Ferrero's films. Another video quilt, *Screen Credit* (2020), featuring some of the same footage and more, was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and exhibited throughout 2020 and into 2021. Most recently, *Three Overlooked Women Filmmakers* (2022), three short videos displayed on an advertising billboard on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles from October 2022 to January 2023, further revises and reimagines Gschwandtner's video quilt concept, this time featuring footage from Wong's, Guy-Blaché's, and Reiniger's films. It is perhaps these videos that make the politics of Gschwandtner's work most explicit, as *Screen Credit* features clips and credits from Ferrero's films, including the entire three-minute credit roll from *Hearts and Hands*, alongside credits and clips from Lotte Reiniger's Cinderella (1922). In Gschwandtner's words: 'Too many women artisans have gone uncredited. Too many women working in film have gone uncredited'.[33] In these videos, for once, women's work is finally recorded, recognized, and credited on screen.

Gschwandtner, through her film quilts, installations, and videos, traces the lost and ruptured lineages of women filmmakers and women crafters and, through her patchwork, recuperates and reconnects their work to film and art history. Rectifying the historical blackout that has rendered women's contributions to filmmaking in its first few decades invisible is crucial as contemporary women filmmakers look for historical influences and role models. Through her inventive, appropriative, and appreciative arts practice, and as a curator and community activist, Gschwandtner participates actively in the feminist film history movement, not only paying tribute to women filmmakers through her artwork, but also raising pressing questions about both the materiality and politics of film preservation and historiography. Ultimately, Gschwandtner honors the unrecognized material labor women performed and the marginal role they were attributed in history, and her film quilts stake a claim for women as cultural producers by finally providing credit where credit is due.

As digital cinema technology continues to render photochemical film obsolete, Gschwandtner's work also raises compelling questions about the afterlife of the cinematic medium — points to which I have only cursorily alluded due to space constraints, but which are worth pursuing further. What are educational institutions and libraries to do with their film collections that are no longer in use after having been displaced by newer technologies, from VHS tapes and DVDs to online streaming services? Is offering these collections and materials up for creative destruction and artistic appropriation better than sending them to landfills? What responsibility, if any, do found footage filmmakers have toward ensuring that they don't destroy the only extant copy of a film? And what other possibilities besides film projection could allow audiences to experience these films anew? Gschwandtner's film quilts are only one example to suggest that, rather than digital technology marking the death of cinema, it has just liberated the film strip to be used and encountered in endless new ways.

Notes

[1] See the gallery's press release: 'Sabrina Gschwandtner – *Hands at Work* – Shoshana Wayne Gallery', <http://shoshanawayne.com/sabrina-gschwandtner-hands-at-work> [accessed 10 October 2022].

[2] Maggie Hennefeld, 'Film History', *Feminist Media Histories*, 4.2 (2018), 77–83 (77).

[3] Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016). See also *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. by Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries), <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>, and *Edited By*, ed. by Su Friedrich (Princeton: Princeton University), <https://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/>.

[4] Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Gregory Zinman, 'Handmade: The Moving Image in the Artisanal Mode' (PhD diss., New York University, 2012); *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema*, ed. by Tom Gunning and others (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

[5] See Joshua Yumibe, 'French Film Colorists' and Kristen Hatch, 'Cutting Women: Margaret Booth and Hollywood's Pioneering Female Film Editors', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/french-film-colorists/> and <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/cutting-women/> [accessed 30 October 2021].

[6] See Wanda Strauven, 'Sewing Machines and Weaving Looms: A Media Archaeological Encounter between Fashion and Film', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 19.3 (2020), 362–77.

[7] Unless otherwise noted, Gschwandtner's quotes are from an interview with the author, conducted on 25 September 2019 in her Los Angeles studio. The author is grateful for Gschwandtner's hospitality and generosity.

[8] *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave*, ed. by Sabrina Gschwandtner (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007); information about the zines, including tables of contents and lists of contributors, is archived at http://www.knitknit.net/.

[9] Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Movie: Handcrafted Cinema and the Other Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 139.

[10] As Wanda Strauven aptly remarks, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Singer Corporation — the same brand of sewing machine Nicolson used in her performance — also manufactured film projectors. See Strauven, 368.

[11] Kayla Parker, 'Jamming the Machine: The Personal-Political in Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time*', in *The Arts and Popular Culture in History: Proceedings of the Role of the Arts in History Cross-Disciplinary Conference*, ed. by Rebecca J. Emmett (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2013), 217–33.

[12] See Mary Stark, 'Film as Fabric: Connecting Textile Practice and Experimental Filmmaking through Expanded Cinema Performance' (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2020).

[13] While the films in Gschwandtner's collection were primarily from the 1950s through the 1980s, Marketa Uhlirova and others have shown that fashion films have been made since the inception of early cinema. See, for example, Marketa Uhlirova, '100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories', *Fashion Theory*, 17.2 (2013), 137–58.

[14] Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Tactility and Transparency: An Interview with Sabrina Gschwandtner', in *Sunshine and Shadow: Film Quilts by Sabrina Gschwandtner*, ed. Priya Bhatnagar (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2013), 39–45 (42–43).

[15] Joan Mulholland, 'Patchwork: The Evolution of a Women's Genre', *Journal of American Culture*, 19.4 (1996), 57–69.

[16] Leah Ollman, 'Her quilts are made of 16-mm film. Here's what they reveal, frame by frame', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-sabrina-gschwandtner-review-20170630-htmlstory.html> [accessed 30 October 2021].

[17] Mulholland, 64.

[18] Ibidem, 62.

[19] Four of Ferrero's films are currently available through New Day Films as of 10 October 2022. See https://www.newday.com/filmmaker/162.

[20] Julia Bryan-Wilson, 43.

[21] Gschwandtner recounts that she had intended to work with a Lois Weber film but was unable to get access to the requested footage.

[22] Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, 'Marion E. Wong', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-marion-e-wong/> [accessed 30 October 2021]; Cy Musiker, 'Made in Oakland in 1916, First Asian American Film Still Inspires', KQED, 7 August 2015, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/10881796/made-in-oakland-in-1916-first-asian-american-film-still-inspires> [accessed 30 October 2021].

[23] The syndicated news piece 'Chinese Girl is Author of Real Oriental Movie' appeared in *Bay City Times* (Michigan) on 29 May 1917, *The Day Book* (Chicago) on 31 May 1917, *The New York Call* on 6 June 1917, and *Tacoma Times* (Washington) on 6 July 1917, among others. See Alex Jay, 'Marion Wong, 1917', *Chinese American Eyes* (blog), 31 July 2015, <http://chimericaneyes.blogspot.com/2015/07/marion-wong-1917.html> [accessed 30 October 2021].

[24] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 'Alice Guy-Blaché', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 27 June 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alice-Guy-Blache> [accessed 30 October 2021].

[25] Tami Williams, *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

[26] Frances Guerin and Anke Mebold, 'Lotte Reiniger', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/lotte-reiniger/> [accessed 10 October 2022].

[27] Cy Musiker, 'Made in Oakland.'

[28] As Sarah Laskow explains, the China Girls 'were meant to show the person developing a film that everything had gone right technically; if it hadn't, the China girl's skin tone would look unnatural'. See Sarah Laskow, 'The Forgotten "China Girls" Hidden at the Beginning of Old Films', *Atlas Obscura*, 30 January 2017 <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-forgotten-china-girls-hidden-at-the-beginning-of-old-films> [accessed 10 October 2022].

[29] Williams, *Germaine Dulac*.

[30] Zinman, 'Handmade', 54.

[31] Ibidem, 55.

[32] Joshua Yumibe, 'French Film Colorists.' These same gendered labor divisions, rather than shifting when natural photochemical coloring techniques developed, were maintained twenty years later, in the emerging cel animation studios, like Disney, where women were relegated to the Painting and Inking Department. As Elizabeth Bell explains, '[t]he hands of women, painting and transcribing the creative efforts of men, performed the tedious, repetitive, labor-intensive housework of the Disney enterprise.' See Elizabeth Bell, 'Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies', in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 107–24 (107).

[33] Bobbye Tigerman, 'Screen Credit: Artist Sabrina Gschwandtner on Filmmaking, Quilting, and the Forgotten Labor of Women', *LACMA Unframed*, 8 March 2022, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2022/03/08/screen-credit-artist-sabrina-gschwandtner-filmmaking-quilting-and-forgotten-labor-women> [accessed 10 October 2022].

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Adriano D'Aloia

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image: Gravity and Vertigo in Contemporary Cinema

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 254

In the conclusion of a 1964 seminal essay, Christian Metz argued that, up to that point, there were four ways to approach cinema: film criticism, film history, film theory and filmology.[1] The latter two were distinct mainly because at that time 'theory' was widely practiced within the film institution, i.e. by filmmakers and critics. Otherwise, filmology was practiced outside of any film institution by scholars and researchers from different academic disciplines. The label *filmologie* brought together studies in aesthetics, psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and included speculative as well as empirical contributions, which often shared a particular interest in the effects of moving images. Indeed, one of the main focuses of the filmological approach was the receptivity and the sense-making abilities of the viewer's mind, understood in relation to its cultural and biological aspects.

After Metz, film theory acquired methodological rigour and partly moved from the film institution to the academic one.[2] At the same time, and for many different reasons, the term 'filmology' was progressively abandoned, and part of the filmological project merged within that of film theory. Thus, at the origins of film studies, concepts and results from French filmology became part of the then emerging semio-psychoanalytic paradigm. In other respects,

the focus on psychological processes and the interest in empirical studies that characterized filmology were subsequently included in what was sometimes called the 'post-theoretical' approach, which disregarded dominant theoretical paradigms and tended to dismiss its fundamental concepts and procedures.[3]

In sum, the new millennium inherited a film theory that was torn between two seemingly incompatible models. The dialogue between theoretical frames, which was necessary in order to address and understand contemporary society, was prevented for a quite some time.

This brief, simplified premise serves to highlight how references to filmology today do not imply a nostalgic attitude or vintage quirk, rather they expresses the desire to recover an existing research paradigm to overstep the divergences and emphasize the points of contact between different approaches. In fact, to recall the filmological framework is a way of looking forward by harking back to a notable tradition that preceded the above-mentioned theoretical split.

The disciplines that help us to understand the impact of film on its viewer have evolved today, together with filmic experiences and theoretical sensibilities. Therefore, a new filmology unavoidably takes into account new trends in

cognitive science, phenomenological aesthetics, or philosophy of the mind, and generally all of those disciplines that have benefited from the recent epistemological breakthrough made possible by neuroscience towards the comprehension of the human mind.

A few years ago, Adriano D'Aloia and Ruggero Eugeni proposed a new frame of study labelled as 'neurofilmology',[4] aiming to an informed understanding of the viewer's experience and the effectiveness of film form, in order to update the agenda of film studies to include the state of art of cognitive science and in particular of neuroscientific knowledge, in both their theoretical and empirical aspects. Among other things, this attitude sought to offer a partially alternative research frame to the existing empirical ones,[5] though the main goal was to hold different approaches together, by integrating different theoretical backgrounds and analytical tools, and with a renewed attention to the 'continental' tradition of film studies. In a neurofilmological framework, the variety of approaches collected was seen as creating values and a strength rather than as irreconcilable divides.

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image, the latest book by Adriano D'Aloia, follows this spirit by bringing together phenomenological and cognitivist perspectives within the theoretical framework of the embodied and enactive cognition, with a special attention to the embodied simulation hypothesis.[6] One of the main purposes of the book is to offer a 'thick comprehension' of cinematic effectiveness, going beyond the usual disembodied notion of gaze, and considering the vision within the bodily and multisensory complexity of filmic experience. To do this, D'Aloia also employs more traditional approaches, which constitute a sort of genealogy: from late 19th century aesthetic theory to the phenomenological tradition, from Gestalt to Ecological Psychology, and of course from early film theory to classic filmology.

The subtitle, *Gravity and Vertigo in Contemporary Cinema*, indicates the direction in which the book develops its framework. Indeed, the book is focused on the mechanisms of *tension* in mainstream cinema, especially in recent decades: an experientially intense cinema which addresses particularly the viewer's body, and whose major challenge is to put in motion a seated and motionless spectator, drawing on 'filmic motifs' such as acrobatics, falls, impacts, overturnings, and drifts in order to play with the sense of loss and recovery of body weight and balance.

Each of the book's central chapters discusses a particular figure — from violent impact on the ground to a more ethereal drift in the void — while the concluding chapter links up with the introduction to propose a framework for the study of the tensive experience evoked by contemporary film style. To explain how cinema engages the spectator's body in an experience of distant immersion and 'modulated continuity', D'Aloia analyses excerpts from films such as *The Dark Knight* (C. Nolan, 2008), *The Walk* (R. Zemeckis, 2015), *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008), *Alice in Wonderland* (T. Burton, 2010), *Gravity* (A. Cuarón, 2013), not forgetting the lesson of great classics such as *Trapeze* (C. Reed, 1956) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (S. Kubrick, 1968).

Neurofilmology of the Moving Image is a major book, and not only because it reinforces and relaunches embodied cognition film theory. It is also important for its 'ecological' sensibility, which makes it relevant from the point of view of an incipient *elemental approach* to film analysis. In this book the element is the air, but the author has also worked elsewhere on 'enwaterment', and this promising perspective can be valuable for a new comprehension of the role of cinematic elemental features in the viewer's immersive experience.

I would only add, to conclude, that D'Aloia is also a very good writer, capable of making tangible the sense of the filmic experience he describes. This is why this book is recommended, for the value both of the scholarly approach it presents

and the journey through images, spaces and acrobatics it offers to the reader.

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Notes

[1] Christian Metz, 'The Cinema: Language or Language System, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 90.

[2] See Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema*, 1945-1995 (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1999), 89-93.

[3] *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell, Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

[4] *Neurofilmology. Audiovisual Studies and the Challenge of Neuroscience*, ed. by Adriano D'Aloia and Ruggero Eugeni, *Cinéma & Cie.,* 22-23 (Spring/Fall 2014).

[5] See e.g. *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, ed. by Arthur P. Shimamura (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[6] See Vittorio Gallese, Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* [2015] (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Global Perspectives on Amateur Film Histories and Cultures

ed. by Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020, pp. 336

After having edited, in 2018, the Spring issue of *Film History* entitled 'Towards a Global History of Amateur Film Practices and Institutions', Masha Salazakina and Enrique Fibla expand their research on amateur cinema with this substantial collection of essays, in which the term *global* returns. The declared objective of the volume is, indeed, the widening of the geographical scope of the scholarship on amateur cinema beyond the Western world (mainly Europe and the USA, such as in the pioneering works of Roger Odin and Patricia Zimmermann) and beyond the bourgeois environment, to include non-Western and unconventional practices, from China to Venezuela, from Tunisia to the stateless Yiddish community.

The opening essay — written by Benoît Turquety, who has recently devoted pivotal studies to small-gauge cinema — provides a solid theoretical foundation by considering the amateur as the *true subject* of film history, and focusing not so much on single inventors as on the multifarious ways of using small-gauge technologies (and not only: there is also a way to use standard gauge as amateurs, as demonstrated in the second essay of the volume, referring to a 35mm film made for an amateur competition, that was never shipped).

However, this proposal does not result in a mere hierarchical overturning 'from the center to the margins', which would run the risk of forcing amateur cinema to be considered as a mainstream, rather than minor, phenomenon. Following the methodology of media archaeology, the volume invites us instead to deviate from a linear historical development, in order to shed light to the dead ends of film history (for example the utopian and unsuccessful attempt to institutionalize amateur cinema in Vichy France), to the even heretical forms of appropriation of technology (for example, repurposing the amateur media infrastructure by activists in the political environment of Bologna's social movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and, more generally, to the continuities in the viewing experience instead of the breaking points (e.g., the same representations of travel recur across decades). To this end, it is essential, as many of the authors of the essays collected here do, to broaden the range of sources and also include oral testimonies, newspapers, booklets, and the underground press.

The plural adopted in the book title — *Histories and Cultures* — signals the heterogeneity of the historical and geopolitical contexts of the practices under analysis. Indeed, the volume focuses mainly on economic, political and cultural issues in relation to amateur cinema,

without, however, neglecting technological aspects (for example, the transition from film to video is also a transition from analog destructive editing processes to a nonlinear and nondestructive editing; the weight of the U-Matic equipment had an impact on the mobility of the amateur filmmaker; the commercialization of Kodak's synchronized Super8 cartridge in 1973 eliminated the need for separate sound recording equipment). The case studies under consideration can in fact be arranged on an ideal continuum between two poles. At one end there is the peak of normativity: amateur cinema is conceived as 'an extension of the apparatus of state power and regulation' (p. 97), a practice that confirms hegemonic modes of production and consumption, which are subjected to direct institutional control. This is the case, for example, of the small-gauge films made in the corporate culture of Sulzer factory in Switzerland, or of Israeli commemorative home videos endorsed by the state itself. At the polar opposite, amateur cinema is instead conceived and used as a radical alternative to dominant power and hierarchies, as a countercultural and subversive agent of self-representation. This is the case, for example, for the activist orientation of one of Detroit's amateur film cultures in the 1960s or of the Mexican *superocheros* movement of the 1970s.

Most of the case studies collected here, however, are located not at the extremes but in the central area of this ideal continuum that stretches between norm and subversion, in that 'neither / nor status [...] beyond center-and-periphery binaries' (p. 55), 'supplementing already existent amateur film forms and practices rather than supplanting it' (p. 73), and, in so doing, challenging historical and cultural classifications. An example of an intermediate position between the purely oppositional and the purely cooperative-collaborative, in relation to power, can be seen in the essay on Latvia (annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, the country obtained independence in 1991): the corpus of

amateur documentary films of the late Soviet era on the ethnic Latvians of Siberia, analysed in chapter 13, challenges the political institutions of the Soviet Union not openly but *from within*, thanks to the minor status of amateur cinema as compared to professional cinema and also thanks to the peripheral position of this national minority. This nuanced and complex relationship with the socio-political context is just one among the many other occurrences that the volume enlightens.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence of the breadth of the meanings of amateur, which runs through the entire collection like a common thread, is the lexical choice to define texts and practices: different words are needed to illuminate different elements of amateur cinema. For example, while the adjective amateur had a certain stigma in the debate on American experimental cinema of the 1930s, in the 1960s an underground author like Jonas Mekas was proud to call himself amateur. Or, preserving the space between film and maker (film maker instead of filmmaker or film-maker) aims to point not to an already codified profession, but to an artisanal practice in which it is the gesture of construction, of manufacturing, rather than the finished product (the making, rather than the film) that is to be emphasized. In some cases, the term independent rather than amateur is preferred (chapter 4); when amateur is used as a noun, it is also frequently made even more specific, in expressions such as 'advanced amateur' or 'expert amateur' (or 'serious leisure'), culminating in significantly long and clumsy phrases ('amateur-though-progressively professionalizing quality of the [...] work', p. 159). Similarly, as the last essay demonstrates, the term vernacular functions in several registers and it suits even substandard cinema very well.

The category of the amateur throughout the book also crosses the three steps of the traditional theatrical production chain: alongside an amateur production mode, there are also an *amateur distribution mode* and an *amateur*

exhibition mode, for instance in occupied university classrooms; in neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood tours of screenings as opportunities for conversation (this happened in Santa Fe); in participatory and performative gatherings like the Galician Xornadas do Cine, where the boundaries between amateur and professional were negotiated. According to Vivian Sobchack's proposal, it is even possible to trigger an *amateur reception mode*, which is placed not in the film itself, but in the spectator's viewing experience: when the 'home movie attitude' is adopted, 'any type of film can be experienced as a home movie' (p. 125). The amateur mode, finally, can also be applied to the pre-production of a film, as in the case of the *fotodocumentales*, inherited from Neorealist *foto-documentario* as an informal teaching tool. In this case — paraphrasing the famous phrase on Neorealism — amateur is a moral attitude more than a cinematographic style, insofar as the term indicates a provisional stage in the elaboration of an idea, a visual research project and a social investigation that are still in progress.

What all the essays gathered in the volume share is, ultimately, the recovery of the etymological meaning of the term amateur, with its reference to the Latin root *amare*, to love (even the term 'enthusiast' bursts out on many pages): as Erik Kessels and Patrice Flichy — the former is a Dutch artist, designer and curator whose target are creative professionals; the latter is the well-known French sociologist — suggest in two recent small books,[1] it is necessary, in spite of the rhetoric of hyper-specialization, to interpret the enthusiasm and the lightness of the amateur not as starting points, but as goals to be achieved. One suspects that continuing to call them amateurs is no longer enough.

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Notes

[1] Erik Kessels, *Complete Amateur. A Pro's Guide to Become More Amateur* (Milan: Corraini, 2022) and Patrice Flichy, *La sacre de l'amateur. Sociologie des passions ordinaires à l'ère numérique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil et La République des Idées, 2010).

Amit Pinchevski

Transmitted Wounds. Media and the Mediation of Trauma

'Media constitute the material conditions for trauma to appear as something that cannot be fully approached and yet somehow must be' (p. 3): this idea summarizes the double — epistemological and ethical — stakes of Pinchevski's research. For the author, the eminently technological operations of recording, transmitting and processing are constitutive parts of what he calls the 'mediation of failed mediation', that is, the rendering of a traumatic memory that was originally marked by resistance to narration — a resistance, in other words, that media witnessing challenges and, at the same time, incorporates. The book's introduction retraces the 'traumatic' thread that runs through media theory, indicating a path that starts with Walter Benjamin, passes through Marshall McLuhan and ends with Friedrich Kittler. While the first two examine the way in which media technologies participate in the formation of a sensory apparatus capable of reconfiguring the experience of modernity, Kittler interprets the contemporary digital technological dimension as an ontological redesigning of reality in a post-human perspective. Pinchevski derives his epistemology of media technologies from Kittler's work and develops his ethical and political view in a continuous reference to the philosophical thought of Emmanuel Levinas and the interdisciplinary work of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman.

The first chapter examines the radio broadcast of the Eichmann trial in Israel. The media event was, for many Israelis, the first sympathetic encounter with the trauma of the Holocaust that the Zionist identity politics of the 1950s had tried to remove, turning survivors into marginalized and speechless bodies. The radio, Pinchevsky points out, has the power to separate the body from the voice and to reconstruct a disembodied voice that is omnipresent and otherworldly, akin, in some respects, to symptoms linked with schizophrenic and paranoid psychopathology. This case study reveals that the national radio broadcast of the Eichmann trial made survivors' claims of truth legitimate for the first time, placing them in the gap between narratology and traumatography.

The second chapter analyzes the relationship between videography and testimony, focusing on the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. The production of an archive of the traumatic memory of the survivors, supervised by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, 'combines oral history, the psychoanalytic session, and the television interview' (p. 45). Videotape technology is characterized by a predisposition to accessibility and distribution of content in

different contexts such as museums, classrooms and TV broadcasting, which, in the will of the promoters of the project, means an increased educational capacity. In addition, 'the videotape performs the Real that it inadvertently captures' (p. 54), preserving the performative aspects of testimony, such as the tone and cadence of the voice, gestures and nonverbal cues. Making the non-verbal visible, videotape leads the audience towards an understanding of trauma which cannot be reduced to the historical account.

The third chapter deals with traumatic exposure to the media, also known as vicarious traumatization. The existing PTSD clinical criteria (see DSM-V 2013) recognizes the potentially traumatogenic nature of visual media, however restricting it to work-related activities. The development of contemporary clinical history concerning trauma is studied through three events: the research project called 'the trauma film paradigm' in the early 1960s, the September 11 attacks, and the increase in diagnosis of PTSD among drone pilots involved in Afghanistan and Iraq wars. These three case studies involve three different media — film, television and digital — that are united by co-extensiveness between technical and mental. The most emblematic case of this direct relationship is that of drone operators who suffer a trauma due to a violence inflicted by them to strangers at a distance. It is a post-traumatic disorder caused by being an active participant in the production of a trauma that poses a moral problem. Can the aggressor and the attacked be understood under the same category of mental suffering? Pinchevski highlights here the shift from pity through media — at the core of Sontag and Boltanski's studies — to trauma by media.

The last two chapters analyse virtual witnessing and virtual therapy in the digital age. The book focuses on the New Dimensions in Testimony project which combines human-computer speech interaction capabilities with three-dimensional holographic imaging. The aim of the project is to create an immersive experience using the logic of the database. At stake in this case study is the specific temporality fielded by digital media that produces the impression of a contemporary exchange between the witness and the public. For Pinchevski what is lost in the new temporality, based on discrete and semantically pre-classified narrative units, is the precariousness of the testimonial narrative. Emphasizing the side of the audience through a user-centered design, virtual testimony assumes the absence and the separation from witnesses as resolvable predicaments, erasing the incommensurability of past and present. The reification of deep memory generated by algorithmic logic erases the performative aspects of traumatic memory, raising ethical problems. In conclusion, virtual therapy — and in particular the clinical therapy called VRET (Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy) developed within the Institute for Creative Technology of University of South California in collaboration with X-box platform for treating war-related PTSD — is the latest and most controversial case study examined by the author. VR therapy exposes patients to virtual scenarios that recreate the traumatic event in a computer-generated and safe environment in order to achieve habituation to anxiety triggers. VRET can be used to both heal and train soldiers, blurring the lines between warfare and entertainment.

Transmitted Wounds is an archeology of the mediation of trauma from analog to digital that exposes the moral stance implied in media witnessing. Preserving and transmitting traumatic memories seems more difficult in the cultural logic of big data that invites users to assert their own presence at the expense of the vulnerability of the subject who experienced the violence. Nevertheless, the choice between the democratization of trauma through the feeling of pity and its neutralization remains an unavoidable necessity.

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Long Live Sport

Toward an Interdisciplinary Approach to Liveness and Televised Sporting Events

Danilo Callea / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract[1]
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In the current media landscape, which is apparently dominated by new consumption habits, both the concept of liveness and the category of live sport broadcasting seem to challenge the same scenario. While the conceptualization of liveness still represents a central topic in the latest academic research on television and digital platforms,[2] the combination of liveness and sport broadcasts requires a more in-depth study, highlighting new paradoxes of scholarly interest. The aim of this doctoral thesis is to explore a reconfiguration of liveness within a specific case of media events: sport competitions and tournaments. This has been enriched by the ongoing growth of over-the-top and so-called 'sports-oriented' streaming platforms (e.g., Dazn). At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic — and its huge effects on the experience of live cultural events, including sports — has played a central role on rethinking the same concept of liveness due to social limitations of face-to-face meetings.

The research question of the thesis is structured around two main issues: the relation between media and sport events, in view of constructions and claims of liveness, and how this same construction can be historicized in a wider interpretive framework. The same concept of liveness here becomes a sort of 'interdisciplinary vector': the best practices of institutions and media industries are connected to aesthetic and linguistic trends of cultural products, including sport contents. As such, the methodology follows an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary scheme, resulting in a convergence between two main areas of studies. Sport sociology — including what has been called 'sport media studies'[3] — is put in relation to the field of television studies, digital media studies and platform studies. Due to the severe restrictions imposed by the pandemic on a possible field observation, this doctoral thesis consists foremost of desk research. Analyses of official guidelines, best practices and interviews with insiders and experts — from TV directors to IT developers and engineers — are undertaken thanks to sector journals on the field of media and sport contents.

The first part of the doctoral thesis consists in an investigation of the state of the art and academic debates on the concept of liveness within a wider frame: from performance and music studies to media and television studies. Deconstructing the myth of a 'natural' TV liveness, the quality of televisual live broadcast emerges as something ideological, rhetorical and at the same time 'naturalized'. Following van Es's recent theorization,[4] the same concept of liveness is best understood as a socio-technical construction reconfigured by institutions, technologies, and

audience/users. Following this perspective, liveness defines both a field of tension between live events, on one hand, and media devices that reproduce them, on the other, alongside a request for social connection beyond the *hic et nunc* of live performances.

However, the connection between liveness and sport media has required a rethinking of these same concepts. First, the thesis identifies some stable or synchronic coordinates — such as immediacy, presence, and social sharing — as essential mechanisms involved in the construction and claim of a possible liveness of the sports event. Second, a systemic perspective on liveness is integrated by the historicization of live sports broadcasts through a *long durée* pattern of study. Third, the conceptualization of sport media is updated to the most recent perspective of 'sport and mediatization',[5] shifting the analysis from a media-centric approach to a more media-*centred* one. Within this theoretical framework, both 'unstable accelerations' and 'nostalgic persistence' have been detected in the field of tension around liveness and televised sporting events.

The main research on the history of live sports broadcast is approached systematically, too. Best practices involved in the production of a televised sports text are bound together with a study of the economic forces that regulate and make possible watching matches on TV, or not. At the same time, the evolution of technologies and media devices also considers audience and user habits, including informal channels of consumption of media contents. Dating back to the early twentieth century, a first glimpse of liveness is apparent in the rise of live scoreboards located in theatres and public squares. From the first years of television to the advent of pay-per-view, the liveness of a televised sporting event appears as something constantly constructed and 'naturalized' at the same time. In this sense, the quality of liveness seems to define the first proto-televisual experiments of live sport broadcasts, as well as more recent live streaming OTTs, placing all of

these in the same timeline.

The last section of the project deals with the specific case of elite football within the Italian media landscapes. Here a single football match — treated as sort of 'expanded spectacle' — is constantly re-shaped by large screens in or outside of stadiums, for instance in public spaces and pubs. In the meanwhile, the recent embracing of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) further confirms the tangled overlap between live performance — including sports — and its mediatization. Focusing on the most recent live streaming of football matches, the thesis recognises new challenges and objects of inquiry – from IT infrastructures to production values and social network interactions. The qualities of immediacy, presence and social sharing are now constantly reshaped by as many outcomes: from issues involving the infrastructures of content delivery networks (CDNs) to live game statistics on second screens — such as smartphone and tablets — or live video chat rooms employed by football fans and users.

A first perspective from this research reveals the multi-layered influence of new technologies and media devices on the very nature of contemporary sports — especially the 'sport-spectacle'. The arrival of Covid-19 somewhat accelerated new habits of connection between remote fans and audiences, including the video-presence of the latter inside stadiums and sports arenas too. At the same time, social distancing facilitated an almost unexpected desire to return to live spectators, and their *hic et nunc* presence on the stands of sports arena. Indeed, contemporary sport event is at centre of this field of tension between 'unstable accelerations' and 'nostalgic persistence' around the same concept of liveness.

A further and significant standpoint of this doctoral thesis comprehends the importance of sports competitions on different media devices. Defusing a rhetoric of disruption, the project highlights not only mutations and transformations of technologies and users' habits, but also remarks on traces of continuity and unexpected returns. Older patterns of watching sport matches

live on TV or in public spaces cohabit alongside sports simulation videogames on live streaming platforms like Twitch. Not by chance, a sort of *fil rouge* is represented by the notion of liveness as socio-technical construction. On this path, the (old) medium of television still appears a perfect companion of the sporting event and its intrinsic social request to be seen 'now' and 'together' by an audience that is as heterogenous as possible.

Notes

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[3] *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. by Lawrence A. Wenner (London, New York: Sage, 1989). See also: Brett Hutchins and David Rowe, *Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Media Sport* (London, New York: Routledge, 2012).

[4] Karin van Es, *The Future of Live* (London: Polity Press, 2016).

[5] Kirsten Frandsen, *Sport and Mediatization* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020).

An History of Italian Movie Theatres

National Policies and Local Modes of Exhibition in the Province of Brescia

Virgil Darelli / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract[1]
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Recent historiography has been tackling cinema history from the bottom up, meaning from the point of view of the moviegoing experience. This activity has been the basis of the entire cultural industry of cinema. For a long time, since its institutionalization[2] at the end of the 1900s, cinema consisted in a form of entertainment practiced in a dedicated place. Studying the cultural history of that social institution then means to focus on all the elements that form such an experience,[3] which are physical, administrative, political, etc. It follows that scholars have proposed a renewed attention to the historical methodology, assessing 'rediscovered' empirical data, which is not necessarily strictly tied to the cinematic world and thus expands towards an intermedial landscape. What also follows is a specific regard for the 'margins', be they social (black and female moviegoing), geographical (the rural), or industrial (small business or non-profit theatres), therefore potentially producing more precise historical accounts.[4]

My thesis has focused on the Italian context. The aim has been to assess the state of the art — referring to academic literature and historic sources (especially under-exploited ones) — to experiment with a methodology based on 'new cinema histories', and to produce a chronology of the Italian exhibition sector from a cultural, political, and economic point of view. To do so, the first section, after a systematic review and a theoretical discussion, sought to answer the question 'how should we look into the history of Italian cinemas?'. Two general and broad tendencies were found in the literature: a first one, closer to cultural studies, focuses more on the analysis of political and promotional discourses;[5] a second one, using non-reflective (i.e., administrative) sources, retraces the actual form of the exhibition network.[6] The research developed around this division: one section is dedicated to the negotiation between social actors in the process of regulation, another one follows the traces left by movie theatres in documents created by modernization processes, such as bureaucratization and information.

I started with national regulation and traced a first chronology based on changes in the main policies: cinemas' opening licences, screen quotas, taxes, financial aid, and direct intervention of the State in managing movie theatres. Then I selected some transition periods (1925-27, 1936, 1947-49, 1956, 1994), where cultural ideas about cinemas could emerge distinctly in parliamentary debates, trade journals, political newspapers, and government documents. Tracing conflicts and positions to

their actors could help to define underlying problematics. The protagonist of that story was the relationship between the national exhibitors' association (born in 1925) and governments. The conflict between cultural (and propaganda) and economic needs was strong, along with the opposite process of 'corporatization' (in the sense of economic corporatism) that favored big industry exhibitors, while small and rural ones were on their own until much more recent interventions of financial aid.

In the second part of the research, I analyzed the exhibition sector in the province of Brescia, Lombardy. I built a database of movie theatres by combining industry yearbooks, newspapers, archives, and guidebooks. The dataset contains information mainly about the number of seats, management type (commercial, parish, non-profit), location, name, manager, category, and opening days. This has allowed to investigate the number of theatres beyond SIAE statistics (which underestimated that number because of its methodology), their geographic distribution (the ratio between provincial capital and the rest of the province, the number of cinemas per municipality), their typology, their characteristics, and ownership (national and big chains in the city, very small circuits in the countryside). In addition, I conducted an in-depth study on a single municipality, in order to understand the ways the cinematic landscape changed, consistently comparing it to the broader provincial and national contexts. The final chapter of the section is dedicated to the role of newspapers: local editions of national ones, city-based, and hyper-locals. Which movie theatres appeared in those publications? How advertised? What differences between different ideologically oriented papers? What differences between city and out-of-the-city cinemas?

Various findings about the different types of cinemas, their operational characteristics, and their degree of diffusion emerged within this research, especially underlying the difference between urban and non-urban contexts. In small

towns, for example, movie theatres often were born under the influence of mutualistic societies, which were very politicized. Commercial theatres were rare compared to those owned by municipalities, factories, or local associations. This was particularly true from the late 1920s, when the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), a state managed leisure organization, started managing its own cinemas – which were often taken away from those previous societies. I found that in non-city areas of the province those were the majority (though the situation was different in Southern Italy, where OND was less present), whereas in big cities premiere venues were owned by the biggest Italian exhibitor, ENICM, which was also State owned, although totally business oriented. After World War II, the leading role in small towns was taken over by parish cinemas.

In terms of the spread, an important finding was that the attendance crisis of the mid-1950s was delayed in non-urban areas. Ticket sales in provincial capitals became a minority in Italy around that period, while attendance per capita rose in the countryside. Many new theatres were built in small towns, and the competition was thriving, especially between commercial theatres (now sometimes operated by city exhibitors) and religious cinemas that had a public license. The microhistory of Gardone Val Trompia has shown that government authorizations were in the hands of the trade associations and political mediation, while local administration had the first say and often called for its own benefits. It has also been found that number of seats and operating days grew in the 1950s. This distinct period of out-of-the-city moviegoing came to an end in the mid-to-late 1970s, when cinemas slowly but surely declined before disappearing completely, while, on the contrary, city cinemas were much more resilient.

The historical analysis ends in the mid-1990s, alongside a major regulation change, which canceled screen quotas, allowed multiplexes, and progressively canceled centralized

authorization. Other areas of work require further investigation: the thesis aimed to provide a strong framework chronology, an overview of sources and methods, and a handful of themes requiring further scrutiny. Other perspectives are almost left unexplored, such as the specific film programs of movie theatres.

Notes

[1] Ph.D thesis supervised by Professor Massimo Locatelli (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore). For more information: virgil.darelli@unicatt.it.

[2] Paul S. Moore, 'The Grand Opening of the Movie Theatre in the Second Birth of Cinema', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, XI.2 (2013), 113–25.

[3] Robert C. Allen, 'Relocating American Film History: The "Problem" of the Empirical', *Cultural Studies*, 20.1 (January 2006), 48–88.

[4] Jane M. Gaines, 'Why We Took the "Historical Turn": The Poisons and Antidotes Version', in *At the Borders of (Film) History*, ed. by Alberto Beltrame, Giuseppe Fidotta, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum Edizioni, 2015), pp. 179–90.

[5] Charles R. Acland, 'Cinemagoing and the Rise of the Megaplex', *Television & New Media*, 1.4 (2000), 375–402.

[6] Daniel Biltereyst, Kathleen Lotze, and Philippe Meers, 'Triangulation in Historical Audience Research: Reflections and Experiences from a Multi- Methodological Research Project on Cinema Audiences in Flanders', *Participations*, 9.2 (2012), 690–715.

The Voice in Transition

Cinema, Contemporary Art, and Audiovisual Culture

Annalisa Pellino / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract[1]
Università IULM, Milano

The voice in cinema has often been confused with the word, and dialogues have assumed more relevance than the modes of expression. When in 1982 Michel Chion tried to develop a theory of *sound cinema* as *talking cinema*, he started from a very simple question: 'By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what after all is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice?'[2] After four decades, the stories and theories of cinema have not yet sufficiently developed the pivotal proposal of the French scholar in the light of the recent transformations and migrations of cinema.

Starting from this consideration, the research accounts for the so-called 'relocation of cinema'[3] in contemporary art and investigates the voice occurrences, framing its aesthetic and political uses in both cinema and moving image-based art practices, considering the first as an *aural model* for the analysis of the second. In particular, the research's principal aim is to affirm the voice's heuristic value for the interpretation of the relationship between image and sound, trying to overturn the 'ontological fallacy'[4] of cinema as a visual medium, both from the technical and epistemological point of view. Furthermore, drawing on the idea of cinema as a *mise-en-scène* of bodies, 'performance oriented medium'[5] and 'ventrilosquism'[6] the voice has been considered

primarily in its materiality, as a sounding body and embodied consciousness, that lies beyond language or, at least, on the border between body and language or, by referring to Julia Kristeva, between '"phenotext" (coded semiotically) and "genotext" (coded socially and physiologically)'.[7]

From a methodological point of view the dissertation assumes the *phoné*'s paradoxical status between embodiment and disembodiment, sonic emission and aphonia, between the Self and the Other,[8] with reference to the anti-essentialist approach of the Voice Studies: they refuse to build a stable ontology or epistemology of the voice, and dismiss the idea that it can be considered as a clear identity index, rather considering it as the result of an 'enculturation' process.[9] Consequently, the voice has been framed as a techno-cultural practice that evades gender, racial and social stereotypes. At stake there is the interaction between different aspects: the physiological qualities of the voice, its relationship with media and technologies, and its responses to the socio-cultural context, with clear consequences in terms of cinematic representation.

Hence, the first part of the dissertation examines different features that help to define the materiality of the *phoné*, which concerns not only the body, but also its prostheses, devices and media environments, trying to answer the

following questions: what exactly does this materiality consist of? How do we go beyond the idea, as fascinating as it is elusive, of 'the grain of the voice'?[10] Particular attention has been paid to the somatic occurrences of the voice, outlining a radical phenomenology where humanity and animality converge in the same expression — breath, hums, whispers, peeps, vocal mimicries, shouting and singing voices, and all sorts of inarticulate sounds — observable in cinema when it questions the nature–culture continuum and the female–animal sonic entanglement.[11] It has been the occasion to draw a map of diverse theories on voice, its cultural meanings and representations[12] as their technological roots, with a particular emphasis on the media-archeological approach.[13]

The second part of the dissertation delves into the 'topology of the voice'[14] and follows its *transitions* inside and outside image, text, and the cinematic dispositif, which produce a tension between narration and 'attraction',[15] leading to calls for a continuous reconfiguration of the relationship between gaze and listening. These passages have been considered from both historical, theorical and practical perspectives, firstly highlighting the shift of interest of the Feminist Film Studies from gaze to listening occurred during the Eighties — that meaningfully coincides with the growing interest of Film Studies for sound; secondly, taking into consideration a 'queer aesthetic of the voice'[16] based on the possibility to address the voice as a form of sonic cross-dressing.

Finally, the research identifies a body of films and video-installations that invites us to re-evaluate the so-called 'audiovisual contract',[17] that emphasizes the materiality of the voice, and that makes use of it as an aesthetic and political gesture. Indeed, the case studies section — that challenge the stereotypes of representation and stage the issue of identity from an intersectional[18] point of view — has been divided into three areas which concern the geopolitics of the voice (Chantal Akerman and Lawrence Abu Hamdan), the question of the female sounding body and agency (Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe) and

vocality as a special field of articulation for non-white subjectivities (Martine Syms and Arthur Jafa).

Notes

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5 Rick Altman, *General Introduction: Cinema as Event*, in Ibidem, 1–14 (9).

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8 Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) (first publ. 2003).

9 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound. Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (New York: Duke University Press, 2018); *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*, ed. by Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1975).

12 Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

13 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) (first publ. 1986); Wolfgang Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines. Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

14 Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', *Yale French Studies*, 33–50.

15 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde' in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381–388 (first publ. 1986).

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