

REFERENTIALITY: VIDEO BOOK CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of video as theory in the after.video project, reflecting the structural and qualitative reevaluation it aims at discussing design and organisational level. In accordance with the qualitatively new situation video is set in, the paper discusses a multi-dimensional matrix which constitutes the virtual logical grid of the after.video project: a matrix of conceptual atoms is rendered into a multi-referential video-book that breaks with the idea of linear text. read from left to right, top to bottom, diagonal and in 'steps'.

Keywords: *Critical Video Editing, Database film-making, Participatory Culture, after.video, Off network, Alternative Media, Media Arts.*

after.video: A Video Book

after.video is a video book (Hadzi, Sakr, Schultz, & deSoto, 2017). It is a peer-produced and collectively facilitated volume of digital video edited into a physical object – a Raspberry Pi board. The theoretical aspect of this project is articulated in the scholarly gesture of making this video book, constituted as it is of digital processes and audio-visual assemblages. It is a contribution to thinking through the world after digital video. The purpose of this project is to argue that the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by the after.video contributors and participants is, or can be, a form of research. As an area of individual, social and cultural inquiry, video as a format remains somewhat under-researched.

Unlike previous experiments with hypertext and interactive databases, after.video attempts to translate online modes into physical matter (microcomputer), thereby reflecting logics of new formats otherwise unnoticed.

Conceptual atoms are then re-combined differently throughout the video-book

– by rendering a dynamic, open structure, allowing for access to the after.video book over an 'after_video' WiFi SSID, approaching digital video and its assemblages as a mode of inquiry based on the theories, practices and contexts used by the after.video participants.

after.video uses Open Hypertext (OHV) as a video platform for the video book. OHV is about interpreting the organizational concept of hypertext for a film environment. Imagine the World-Wide-Web (as a hypertext system) where all the interconnected text fragments are replaced by film. The resulting web of film fragments becomes the organizational structure and the basis for document access. In the context of academic book culture this creates a digital, potentially networkable/connective object, that can be sculpted and designed, thereby resembling a “book” as traditionally conceived. This “videobook” object can hold the OHV-framework and itself be used as hybrid object. Part of this hybridity is to travel/mediate between the two domains of the digital and the physical (where traditional “books” and “papers” reside); another hybrid quality is a dual mode existence as offline and online device – while “offline” and non-connectivity answers to another trait associated with classical books, it also opens up to the aesthetics of maker-culture and the growing “offline”-movement (as it still remains attached to local uses of the “digital”).

The critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the Internet, in community spaces and in other places where makers, activists, artists, curators, organizers, editors and post-media splinter-cells gather, are forms of research based on practices of production. Rather than adopting methods of analysis adopted from the social sciences or understanding of theory in terms of pure ‘text’, these research practices subscribe to the view that similar goals such as dense referencing and theoretical framing can be achieved by following different yet complementary paths (Neves, Gabriel, Spreafico, & Tollmann, 2013). What they all have in common is the attention paid to quasi-systematic modes of inquiry that privilege the role of imagination, vision and multi-modal intellectual play in constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding.

Video as theory more particularly revolves around topics of a society whose re-assembled image sphere evokes new patterns and politics of visibility, in which networked and digital video produces novel forms of perception, publicity – and even (co-)presence. A thorough multi-faceted critique of media images that takes up perspectives from practitioners, theoreticians, sociologists, programmers, artists and political activists seems essential.

A short history: Post-Video and beyond

After video culture rose during the 1960s and 70s with portable devices like the Sony Portapak and other consumer grade video recorders it has subsequently undergone the digital shift. With this evolution the moving image inserted itself into broader, everyday use, but also extended its patterns of effect and its aesthetical language. Movie and television alike have transformed into what is now understood as media culture. Video has become pervasive, importing the principles of “tele-” and “cine-” into the human and social realm, thereby also propelling “image culture” to new heights and intensities (Beller, 2006; Cubitt, 2004; Sherman, 2008). YouTube, emblematic of network-and online-video, marks a second transformational step in this medium’s short evolutionary history. The question remains: what comes after YouTube? How might we understand a

time when global bandwidth and multiplication of – often mobile – devices as well as moving image formats “re-assemble” both “the social” (Latour, 2005), as well as the medium formerly-known-as video itself? What is one supposed to call these continuously re-forming assemblages? Or: how should one name the ubiquitous moving images in times when they are not identifiable any more as discrete video “clips”? Are we witnessing the rise of Post-Video? Extended video? To what extent has the old video frame been broken?

Given the rise of networked, viral and vernacular video, with video drones literally swarming into all pores of society – video has been ‘diffused’ in different ways: it has become an agent of change, as well as a register of governmentality; a tool of control society, as well as a carrier of a re-invented society of the spectacle (Adelmann, 2003); a vehicle for new knowledge practices as well as a weapon. However, it has also grown into a life – or a sphere – of its own, a ‘social beast’ of ambivalent qualities, yet to be deciphered. Video by now functions as a non-human ‘eye’, capturing reality with quadcopters or deepwater gear, adding an extra-dimension to surveillance techniques – and: it is even read by machines, discovering patterns to act upon. Video ‘perspectives’ now a from First Person View (FPV) inserted in a soldiers helmet or a gamers gear, to collective sights and crowd documentation, from individual views of remembrance to non-human ‘views’ of robots, from medical devices to military machines. This triggers a whole new wave of reflection on the role, reach and realities of the (moving) image and video. Forsure: No consumer product and no online media today could function and compete without video-like mini-formats; the same is true for identity creation, political discourses, let alone news. Then, on another social plane, the infrastructures of these extended video spheres – from YouTube, Smart TVsatellite images, from fibre optic cables to ‘image rights’ – are currently and for some time to come feverishly contested and embattled.

In light of new questions of critical visibility – with Abu Ghraib, remote drone attacks, Wikileaks and the Snowden files bringing home the point to everyone – the impulses to become invisible or to make things socially visible has gained urgency. In a society whose image economies push forward new patterns and strong pressures of visibility (Skype Video, iris and facial recognition, apps like Vine or Snapchat) (Verhoeff, 2012), a critique of media images and – now per-se political – representation practices, is essential (Holert, 2008). That is also why it becomes more and more important to look at what is (still) rendered invisible – such as working conditions in industrial and other ‘zones’, while in the meantime stock video footage seem to dominate the aesthetics and ‘realities’ seen in the visual domain; meanwhile users invent strategies to interrupt predominant moving image streams and create new visual and narrative styles and cultures (e.g. remix culture, supercuts, fake videos, etc.). New actors and formerly ‘peripheral’ subjects, especially the so-called ‘Global South’, enter this new domain of networked, flowing and moving images. This raises issues regarding the need to re-negotiate, exemplified by the discourses of ‘Fourth Cinema’ or image politics around indigenous cultures, as well as around activist discourses on Syntagma or Tahrir Square. We have all recently witnessed hitherto unseen political, cultural and technological

revolutions through the privileged and animated channels of global video culture. These revolutions span vernacular video clips taken on millions of mobile phones, via online platforms circulating clips as special form of evidence, at ever faster rates through the fragmented global public, to ever more dramatic narrations of the political within the video-saturated domains of news, documentation, art and infotainment. In this, it has also become clear to us, as global collective, that there has been a further revolution of video itself. This revolution is a techno-visual revolution that is intrinsically tied up with the ‘revolutionary’ changes of global high-tech capitalism, as ruptured as high-tech capitalism might be. Indeed, video and its cultural formations have themselves become a site to experience these ruptures of global society in a concentrated and aesthetically concerted form.

Video Book as a time-capsule for future reference

With the ubiquity of video comes not only a need to reflect on its cultural status, beyond the online video revolution as now encapsulated by YouTube and the new players of networked capitalism, but also a need to acknowledge video itself, in its multiple new vernacular forms, as an integral part of the global cultural repertoire and horizon (Treske, 2015). Video might now be an integral part of the ‘collective intellect’ – what some call ‘cognitive capitalism’ and others ‘transmodernism’ (Beller, 2006). There is now, alongside these global labels, a world of video to be theorized together with all its new interrelations, affordances and contradictions (Steyerl, 2013).

Video, for better or worse, has become a new format for social communication and, by extension, theoretical reflection, including all kinds of ‘communities of interpretation’ and social movements. Video is also now a primary tool enlisted by the structures of the new ‘Societies of Control’. Reality ‘widely consists of images’, and as a way to cut-up and reshape the world, video postproduction has been generalized onto the whole of society (Steyerl, Aikens, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum., & Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane, 2014).

Video cameras are now everyday tools on our mobiles, video editing software is cheaply available, online platforms such as YouTube are plentiful, and a culture of movies and television has sunk into our collective psyche, meaning video has become a mode of expression both produced and consumed by a wide community of reflective and critical minds. Video is now undoubtedly ‘a way of seeing’ (Mills, 2014), and acting – some might even say it is a corporeal being (Richardson, 2015).

after.video therefore intends to develop a theoretically engaged series of video books that not only reflects on the disseminations and hybridizations of video and its intimate blending with our general cultural and social fabric (Casetti, 2015), but also features video as a medial mode of seeing, referencing and expressing, including criticism and scholarship. In this respect it follows earlier projects that also attempted to engage with video as a form of theoretical reflection: Vectors (McPherson & Anderson, 2013), Scalar, Liquid Theory TV (Hall, Birchall, & Woodbridge, 2012), to name but a few. The extension of traditional textual theory into new medial modalities, particularly those concerned with the visual and video, is something that has previously been called

for in several places, not least with regard to focussing on video essays as a ‘style’ (Faden, 2008) of choice. In this vein, after.video partakes in ‘a second-order examination of the mediation of everyday life’ (McPherson & Anderson, 2013), with a focus on video as a form, as well as a topical subject.

The after.video book is a time capsule for when the network (and Netflix, Popcorn Time and others) is down and for afro-futuristic (Akomfrah, 1996), satelliteless movements and other amateur space travellers. It is a historic assembly of postcinematic media artefacts allowing future generations of media archaeologists to get a glimpse of fragments of after.video.

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