

# THE LITERARINESS OF MEDIA ART



WITH SUCH  
A  
WISTFUL EYE

Claudia Benthien, Jordis Lau,  
and Maraike M. Marxsen



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The beginning of the 20th century saw literary scholars from Russia positing a new definition for the nature of literature. Within the framework of Russian Formalism, the term ‘literariness’ was coined. The driving force behind this theoretical inquiry was the desire to identify literature—and art in general—as a way of revitalizing human perception, which had been numbed by the automatization of everyday life. The transformative power of ‘literariness’ is made manifest in many media artworks by renowned artists such as Chantal Akerman, Mona Hatoum, Gary Hill, Jenny Holzer, William Kentridge, Nalini Malani, Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler, and Lawrence Weiner. The authors use literariness as a tool to analyze the aesthetics of spoken or written language within experimental film, video performance, moving image installations, and other media-based art forms. This volume uses as its foundation the Russian Formalist school of literary theory, with the goal of extending these theories to include contemporary concepts in film and media studies, such as Neoformalism, intermediality, remediation, and postdrama.

**Claudia Benthien** is Professor for German Literature and Cultural Theory at the University of Hamburg, Germany.

**Jordis Lau** is a PhD candidate at the University of Hamburg, Germany.

**Maraike M. Marxsen** is a PhD candidate at the University of Hamburg, Germany.



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Please visit the online platform doi: 10.25592/literariness for selected video material of the featured artworks.

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the outcome of the research project *Literarizität in der Medienkunst*, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from July 2014 to June 2018. The project was conceptualized and initiated by Claudia Benthien, who also published several articles on the topic in the preparatory phase. The corpus of about one hundred works of media art was assembled through extensive research in distinguished international archives and museums, such as Electronic Arts Intermix (NYC) and ZKM | Center for Art and Media (Karlsruhe), as well as international art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta (Kassel) or Dak'Art (Dakar).

This has been a thoroughly collaborative project, and the book has been jointly written by all three authors: Each chapter had two co-authors, and the third author was responsible for the final editing. This process ensured that each author's ideas and voice entered the book, which is also why the individual chapters do not have bylines. As they were writing this monograph, Jordis Lau and Maraike M. Marxsen also worked on their dissertations, which are related to the project but follow independent research agendas. The working title of Jordis Lau's dissertation is *Foregrounding the Past. Literary Modernism into Media Art*; Maraike M. Marxsen's dissertation has the working title *Deviant Girls, Deviant Forms. Female Adolescence in Experimental Film and Video Art*. Their dissertations are, respectively, related to the strategies of adapting literary texts and to literary genres in media art.

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Hamburg, December 2017

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### A Literary Approach to Media Art

“Language can be this incredibly forceful material—there’s something about it where if you can strip away its history, get to the materiality of it, it can rip into you like claws” (Hill in Vischer 1995, 11). This arresting image by media artist Gary Hill evokes the nearly physical force of language to hold recipients in its grip. That power seems to lie in the material of language itself, which, with a certain rawness, may captivate or touch, pounce on, or even harm its addressee. Hill’s choice of words is revealing: ‘rip into’ suggests not only a metaphorical emotional pull but also the literal physicality of linguistic attack. It is no coincidence that the statement comes from a media artist, since media artworks often use language to produce a strong sensorial stimulus. Media artworks not only manipulate language as a material in itself, but they also manipulate the viewer’s perceptual channels. The guises and effects of language as artistic material are the topic of this book, *The Literariness of Media Art*.

The force of language can be framed by the concept of literariness, which guides the theoretical discussions and the analyses of media artworks in our book. This concept was introduced by the Russian Formalists in the early 20th century as a new view of what constitutes the nature of literature. Literariness refers to the specific qualities of literary language, which the Formalists considered to be made distinct from the habitualized language of daily communication by the aesthetics of estrangement. Literary language defamiliarizes and disrupts perception, startling recipients and inviting them to take a second look. Hill’s statement resonates with the Formalists’ vision of literature—and art in general—as a means of revitalizing human perception that has been numbed by the automatization of everyday life.

As we will demonstrate, forms of literariness have played a significant role in media artworks by renowned international artists from the 1960s to the present, visible in poetic titles, lyrical elements, the playful use of script, narrative structures, and dialogical settings reminiscent of drama. Other artworks adapt specific literary genres or even appropriate material from pre-existing literary texts. When we visit art exhibitions today, we notice that a growing interest in an aesthetics that integrates language is often evident, and this is related to a documentary turn in media art. While this trend emphasizes narratives and voice-overs, it does not necessarily refer to literariness because language is mostly used in a pragmatic sense. This book focuses exclusively on works that integrate language in such a way that the “poetic function” dominates, leading to the

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“palpability of signs” (Jakobson 1960, 356)—the sensorial stimulus effected by media artworks that foreground the materiality of language.

Using literariness as a guiding concept, however, does not suggest that we believe certain features of language use are sufficient to define a work as literature. Literature is more than ‘the sum of its devices’; it is defined by various factors such as the context, the canon, individual taste and setting, or the ideology underlying culture. The qualities of language alone do not suffice for a definition but are one factor among others and change over time. In the discussions that follow, literariness serves as a heuristic tool—rather than a rigid, stable category—to analyze the aesthetics and effects of spoken and written language in analog and digital video art, experimental film, video performance, moving image installations, and a few instances of ‘net art’ (media art projects and practices that are based on web technologies and are thus usually not presented in an institutional context but can be individually accessed online). In this context, literariness strengthens the premise that the aesthetic features attributed to literature may also be valid for other forms of artistic expression.

As such, literariness not only delineates diachronic characteristics of an aesthetic use of language but is also useful for understanding forms of art beyond the sheer linguistic realm. Therefore, in our discussions we use literariness as a transmedial concept that is especially effective for analyzing art that features figurations of language, yet at the same time it is by no means limited to it. For example, the idea of literariness sheds light on the notion of the ‘poetic’ image, a term that is often used somewhat vaguely in art criticism to describe audiovisual moving image art that does not necessarily feature language. Literariness helps to frame and sharpen the subjective tone of this definition in an investigation of just what gives an image a ‘poetic effect’ (see Chapter 4, Section 1).

Our discussion focuses on the defamiliarization of linguistic elements in media artworks and the artworks’ communicative settings. Other audiovisual elements—such as sound, music, images, colors, movement, and rhythm—are nevertheless important for the aesthetic experience and creating meaning. In media art, meaning established through language inevitably enters into a relationship with other elements, which leads, for instance, to experimental “forms of interplay between visual and textual dimensions” or to the “reconstruction, deconstruction and dissolution of narrative structures and textual practices” (Lehmann 2008, 16). Media art can be characterized as an attempt to blend different art systems and forms; it looks for “the frictional process that comes about when [. . .] both strategies for semanticizing new materials and for dessemanticizing of conventional signs are probed” (Schneider 1998, 237). Investigating media art with the concept of literariness means to acknowledge language not as a mere transmitter of meaning but also considering its potentials that “do not depend on its phonic dimension,” such as the “spatio-visual representation” on a book page or a computer screen, or the atmospheric ‘gestalt’ of oral speech (Androutsopoulos 2007, 73).

Experiments with letters, words, and literary structures indicate that language and literature are at least as important for contemporary audiovisual arts as they were for the avant-garde visual arts (cf. Louis 2004). Many art movements from the early 20th century onward are precursors of language-based media art. The Dadaists and Futurists, for instance, used language as material by destroying and recombining linguistic signs (cf. D’Ambrosio 2009; see also Chapter 3, Section 1). The conceptual and aesthetic roots of media art are found in practices such as image montages, collages of linguistic and visual materials, or the integration of ready-mades and found footage (cf. Jana and Tribe 2006, 7f). The ‘neo-avant-gardes’ also devised many artistic innovations based on language, such as the invention of concrete poetry in Austrian and German art circles. The Fluxus movement has left its traces on experimental film and video art (cf. Meigh-Andrews

2006, 92–100; Eamon 2009, 72f). Language-based media art is also closely related to conceptual art (cf. Eamon 2009, 8f), such as the text-based paintings, works on paper, or sculptures by artists including Carl André, Marcel Broodthaers, On Kawara, Barbara Kruger, Lawrence Weiner, or the Art & Language collaboration.

These and other art movements have contributed to an ongoing process of (re)negotiating the boundaries between traditional art genres. While some artists embarked on (and critics praised) a quest for the purification of art forms by analyzing and foregrounding the essence of painting or film, for instance, others challenged such ideas by radically tearing down long-held presumptions and questioning the very existence of an essential core in an art form or medium; for example, consider John Cage's seminal performance, *Untitled Event* (1952), in which he collaborated with a group of interdisciplinary artists. Media art, with video art emerging around 1960, continues this tradition. Framing media art through literariness acknowledges the blurred boundaries between the traditional art genres that are still characteristic of contemporary artistic production. Thus, this book also contributes to the field of interart studies (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2010). Similar to the concept of intermediality, interart studies developed as an academic response to artistic developments primarily in the second half of the 20th century. Its domain can seem like a battlefield at times, charging and challenging the 'canon' with sharpened definitions that, however, create more blur than clarity and seem to be motivated by academic politics (cf. Schröter 2012, 16–20).

The concept of literariness is constructive, as it neither aspires to challenge or perpetuate the idea that specific art forms are bound to specific media (in the sense of a material base) whose goal is purification (cf. Greenberg 2000); nor does it need to view media art in general as just another possible form of literature. The concept also allows recognition of the impact that technology has had on literary forms, emphasizing what Marjorie Perloff, following Richard A. Lanham's notion of "radical artifice" (Lanham 1993, 9) has defined as "a return to *artifice*" (Perloff 1991, 27): "Artifice, in this sense, is [ . . . ] the recognition that a poem or painting or performance text is a *made thing*—contrived, constructed, chosen—and that its reading is also a construction on the part of its audience" (ibid., 27f). The awareness of how artworks are made implies a heightened focus on the materiality of the medium, its features, and its effects on the viewer, as opposed to a focus solely on the seemingly transparent illusion created by the artwork.

Some basic similarities between literature and audiovisual arts strengthened our decision to undertake a scholarly investigation into the diverse field of media art from the viewpoint of literariness. One shared feature is the relationship to temporality. Just as the reading of a literary piece unfolds along with the unfolding of time, media artworks are in themselves time-based, as the actual artwork is of a specific duration, independent from the viewer. The media artworks discussed in our study often reflect on the qualities of time, enforced by performances that emphasize duration. They also explore how the experience of temporality may change perception, as the works often possess a "time-criticality" (Blom 2016, 14), that is: an artistic investigation of passing time that becomes palpable as the sensation of boredom or, in contrast, a stimulus overflow that the recipient cannot process. This may happen, for instance, when one word is repeated over the span of several minutes, as in Jochen Gerz's *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung* (see Chapter 3, Section 1), or when multiple sensory channels are addressed, or even attacked, at once.

Thinking about the literariness of media art sharpens an understanding of the potential of specific arts, but this specificity is inclusive: what is at stake is the mutual elucidation of the arts. However, thinking about art and media is impossible without drawing demarcations. For purely practical reasons, we must define the objects of investigation. In its conceptual demarcations, our

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approach is heuristic: While this perspective makes use of the traditional, institutionalized classifications of art forms, it neither supports an essentialist notion nor aims to add fuel to the fire of a ‘new paragon’ (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014b, 15–18). And yet, scholarship must not be caught unaware by the pitfalls of mistaking taxonomy for hierarchy. As Irina Rajewsky points out: “Demarcations and the border as such can be understood [. . .] as enabling structures, as structures that provide room to maneuver and create new contexts of meaning and experience” (Rajewsky 2010, 47). In this sense, our research investigates the performative dynamics shared by the arts and their potential to create a perceptual and affective impact.

Our research originated in literary studies, although as scholars our backgrounds are in German and English literary and cultural studies, film studies, and art history. As such, it is a truly interdisciplinary project, which—as recent trends in the humanities suggest—may be the future of these disciplines. Literariness is the nexus that allows us to move among different viewpoints and interests. Related to this, estrangement is a theory that adapts well to a variety of concepts and contexts. Our theoretical approach reaches back to the origins of Russian Formalism and extends them to contemporary concepts in film and media studies such as Neoformalism, intertextuality, intermediality, remediation, postdrama, and historical poetics, as well as phenomenological approaches such as embodied perception or haptic cinema.

The tremendous development in digital media technologies, which permits the rapid global circulation of images (cf. Schaffner 2005, 87), has brought the long-standing primacy of language and literature into question within the humanities. In light of the ‘iconic’ or ‘pictorial turn’ as put forth by the literary scholar W.J.T. Mitchell and the art historian Gottfried Boehm (cf. Boehm 1994, Mitchell 1994), the prominence of the semiotic concept of textuality—the ‘writing culture’ debate, the notion of a ‘legibility of culture’—has diminished. This turn against language in general, and literature in particular, has been accompanied by an increased interest in the volatility of cultural expression. Due to the high esteem in which language was once held, primarily written sources were said to evoke associations such as “depth, meaning, thought, and seriousness” (Bachmann-Medick 2006, 349). Now, audiovisual and performance arts are considered more relevant expressions of contemporary mindsets and media culture. When we discuss media art, theoretical impulses against language and literature need to be questioned, since many works do, in fact, possess the potential for an expanded literary analysis. In exploring media-related aspects of literariness in media art, in this book we also examine the visual in relation to the acoustic—a phenomenon that has recently attracted attention in the emerging interdisciplinary field of sound studies. Various media artworks are enlightening in just this respect because it is spoken language that creates aesthetic and consequently literary dimensions.

Contrary to previous studies that deal with digital literature (cf. Hayles 2008, Gendolla and Schäfer 2010, Pressman 2014) or that transfer concepts from literary theory, for instance from narratology or lyricology, to film (cf. Kuhn 2011, Orphal 2014), our study investigates a corpus of works that has not been analyzed with methods from literary studies. Even in art history and media studies, research on media art is still an emerging field. This may be due in large part to its selective and temporal accessibility. Annette Jael Lehmann suggests why literary studies has expanded into the domain of media art:

In terms of both production and reception aesthetics, the use of new media changes the interaction with language, texts and discourses. Media art thereby transforms both the concept of text and the interaction with and use of linguistic and scriptural sign systems.

In particular, their order and organization is dealt with temporally and spatially. It is not processes of the intentional generating of sense and meaning that are at the forefront, but rather performances of communication and exchange within these sign systems. (Lehmann 2008, 16)

Examining the artifacts of media culture with a focus on words and texts may offer specific insights. Central to this task is the recognition of the role played by interpretation, in contrast to a strong tendency in recent years of “favoring an attention to the materiality of the signifier over any examination of its deeper meaning” (Simanowski 2011, ix). Literariness helps dissolve these binaries: It is a tool with which to consider materiality and meaning, to combine phenomenological and semiotic approaches. To make the defamiliarizing effects of language in media art palpable to the reader, our analyses combine detailed descriptions that allow the artworks and their literariness to take life in the reader’s imagination. These descriptions are followed by theoretically informed close readings, on the premise that the techniques of semiotic interpretation established in literary studies are also largely applicable to nonliterary works.

## Russian Formalism and Neoformalism

Poetry is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality. (Jakobson 1987 [1933/34], 378)

This description of poetry by the Russian Formalist Roman Jakobson can be easily applied to many media artworks discussed in this volume. His words point to the sensorial dimension of literary language, emphasizing its materiality, its form, rather than its ability to create fictional worlds in which the readers can lose themselves. The primary goal of literary language is not to construct meaning but rather to explore the linguistic material self-reflexively. This is implied in the Russian Formalists’ concept of literariness.

The Russian Formalist movement of literary and film critics emerged in Russia during the second decade of the 20th century and remained active until about 1930. Although they focussed first on literature and later on film, the Formalists conceptualized their theories as a general “art theory” (Brokoff 2014, 487), an approach pursued in our book. From its early days, the Formalist movement consisted of two distinct groups of scholars: the Moscow Linguistic Circle, founded in 1915 by Roman Jakobson and including critics such as Grigory Vinokur and Petr Bogatyrev, and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ), founded by scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eikhenbaum, and Boris Tomashevsky in St. Petersburg in 1916 (cf. McCauley 1994, 634). The Moscow circle was largely interested in linguistics and considered the study of poetics to fall under that broader category. The St. Petersburg group maintained a division between literary studies and linguistics, and was more oriented towards literary theory (cf. *ibid.*, 635). Both strands of the Formalist school rejected the contemporary standard of literary criticism and, often polemically, did not examine literature alongside the life of its creator or as a by-product of its sociocultural milieu (cf. *ibid.*, 634). The term ‘formalist’—first used in a pejorative sense by critics outside the movement—thus refers to the method of isolating the work from its context and investigating its formal features and internal mechanisms.



Formalist scholarship focuses on poetry and prose (see Chapter 4, Sections 1 and 3) and only occasionally deals with drama (see Chapter 4, Section 2). The main concern of Formalist research, literariness, is built on the hypothesis that poetic language is distinct from everyday language: “With slight variations, literariness in Formalism denoted a particular *essential* function present in the relationship or system of poetic works called literature” (McCauley 1994, 635). Formalists propose that literariness results from deliberate artistic deviations from the conventionalized norms of everyday language. This deviation is created by literary techniques such as “sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, meter, rhyme, narrative techniques” (Eagleton 1983, 3) that modify and deform ordinary language in various ways. Terms specific to Formalism that are used throughout our book and have entered literary studies are *ostranenie* (making strange), the alienation of the *fabula* through the *sužet* (foremost in prose), and the ‘thickening’ and ‘complicating’ of form.

These literary devices or techniques of defamiliarization slow and thereby prolong the process of perception. It is thus important to note two points of interest in Formalism: the poetics and the perceptual effects of art. Frank Kessler notes “the two-sidedness of defamiliarization as a constructional strategy and an effect produced at the level of reception” (Kessler 2010, 64). Similarly, Viktor Shklovsky stresses the link between form and perception in his early, pre-Formalist, monograph, *The Resurrection of the Word*:

If we should wish to make a definition of ‘poetic’ and ‘artistic’ perception in general, then doubtless we would hit upon the definition: ‘artistic’ perception in which form is sensed (perhaps not only form but form as an essential part). (Shklovsky 1973 [1914], 42)

Form is inherently tied to perception, and Boris Eikhenbaum comments on this quote in his treatise, “The Theory of the Formal Method” (1926), in two regards. First, that perception must be understood “as an element in art itself” and second, that the element of form “acquires new meaning.” As such, “it is no longer an envelope, but a complete thing, something concrete, dynamic, self-contained, and without a correlative of any kind” (Eikhenbaum 1965 [1926], 112). The spoken and written word as raw material gains “esthetic efficacy” (Erlich 1980, 188) through artistic devices. Artistic self-consciousness—a “language [that] draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being” (Eagleton 1983, 2)—is based on techniques of ‘laying bare’ or ‘foregrounding’ the dominant poetic devices to deautomatize the reception process and to destabilize a mimetic, immersive experience of reading.

Critical approaches developed by Formalism can be connected to media art, since it often works with estranged perspectives, with a complication of form, or with other aesthetic techniques such as iteration. Anna Katharina Schaffner’s application of Formalist and Structuralist terminology to the examination of avant-garde poetry could also be applied to media art:

The taking apart of linguistic units from text to word, the discovery of the visual and acoustic dimension of the linguistic sign, the instrumentation of typography, the reduction of the word material and the conceptual use of space by means of non-linear arrangement of letters on the page are vital innovations of the movements of the historical avant-garde. Of particular interest here is their distinct method of operating with language: the foregrounding and scrutiny of the linguistic material, the poetic act of cutting open and laying bare structures and properties of language at different levels of organization—be it at the level of text, sentence, word or letter, at the level of semantic compatibility, syntax, lexicology or phonetics. (Schaffner 2005, 150)

This quote mentions many techniques found in media art: Video performances, for instance, repeat a single word or line without variation for the duration of the performance. Other artworks integrate kinetic typographic elements that move across the screen, are blown up to enormous size, and/or challenge both viewers' perceptual capacities to see and their intellectual response when reading. Still others explore unfamiliar acoustic dimensions by distorting the language material by varying the way of speaking or by technological means.

We want to stress once more the close link between avant-garde arts, particularly the Russian Futurists, and Russian Formalism. Scholars have emphasized that the tradition of the historical avant-gardes “addresses the question of technology from the viewpoint of the uncanny and de-familiarization” (Gunning 2003, 52). When framed in this way, the notion of ‘techniques’ or ‘devices,’ so prominent both in Russian Futurist and in Formalist discourse, points to both the artistic and the technological dimension of an artwork (cf. Van den Oever 2010b). More generally, the concept of literariness, of focusing on the materiality of language and art, seems to be embedded within contemporary visual culture, when notions of seeing and vision were redefined (cf. Efimova and Manovich 1993, xxi–xxiv). Just as language was made palpable, avant-garde art movements such as Cubism and Constructivism deconstructed the notion of ‘internal’ pictorial space in favor of an ‘external’ space, building up plastically on the picture plane so that space became nearly ‘tactile’ (cf. Bowlt 1974, 6f).

In short, what was valid for literature was factually true for other arts as well, as evident in the Formalists’ discussions on early cinema. The arts and their techniques were fundamentally reframed by an approach “from a new, primarily *perceptual* perspective” (Van den Oever 2011, 11). As Annie van den Oever and others have argued, the Formalists were “medium-sensitive viewers” (ibid., 9) and very stimulated by early cinema, which is reflected in their scholarship. Van den Oever even claims that important essays such as Shklovsky’s “Art as Device” should not primarily be considered as literary scholarship but “first and foremost an urgently required and utterly relevant *theoretical* answer to the tremendous impact early cinema had on the early avant-garde movements in pre-revolutionary Russia” (Van den Oever 2010a, 11). Making this claim about critical essays that explicitly deal with literature—in this case the narrative prose of Leo Tolstoy—and not with film may be disputed, but that is not the point here. Her line of argument reveals the potential of the concept of defamiliarization to cross the boundaries of disciplines and shift between perspectives of literary and film studies.

As we discuss in Chapter 2, the propositions by Russian Formalism connect to a wide range of theoretical schools, which makes their concepts appealing to an interdisciplinary investigation of media art from the perspective of literariness. While some schools directly evolved out of Formalism (such as the Prague School of Structuralism), links to other schools such as the Russian linguistic circle around Mikhail Bakhtin may be more indirect. For example, the Bakhtin school attacked the Formalists for ignoring social and ideologist discourse and focusing exclusively on the form of the artwork; nevertheless, their work remains “historically connected to the broader aims and implications of the Russian Formalist movement” (McCauley 1994, 636). Both Formalists and Prague School Structuralists contributed to the development and enhancement of the concept of literariness, which is why their ideas—especially those by the later Jakobson as well as Jan Mukařovský—are discussed in this book to shed light on the use of poetic language in media art.

Our work also applies ideas from Neoformalism, a U.S. school of film analysis that is based on the Formalists’ writing on literature. Neoformalism, as conceptualized by Kristin Thompson, offers insights into which devices film uses to cue audience responses (cf. Thompson 1995, 6). She interprets ‘device’ as any element that can make up a film, such as editing or framing, and

claims that artworks “achieve their renewing effects [. . .] through an aesthetic play the Russian Formalists termed *defamiliarization*” (Thompson 1988, 10):

Art defamiliarizes our habitual perceptions of the everyday world, of ideology [. . .], of other artworks, and so on by taking material from these sources and transforming them. The transformation takes place through their placement in a new context and their participation in unaccustomed formal patterns. But if a series of artworks uses the same means over and over, the defamiliarizing capability of those means diminishes; the strangeness ebbs away over time. [. . .] The frequent changes that artists introduce into their new works over time reflect attempts to avoid automatization, and to seek new means to defamiliarize those works’ formal element. Defamiliarization, then, is the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in our lives. (ibid., 11)

Thompson describes a general artistic principle, valid both for avant-garde arts and contemporary artistic practices. Neoformalism not only supports the validity of the Formalist approach for the study of audiovisual media, but it also makes clear that defamiliarization is a dynamic principle, continuously changing over time. When we discuss the concept of literariness as device, technique, or artistic maneuver in this book, we do not want to imply that it is a timeless, essential, and unrelated category but rather a feature that is constitutively related to the leading aesthetic paradigms of its time and culture. Neoformalist film scholar David Bordwell therefore rightly emphasizes in his ‘historical poetics’ of film “the importance of looking at individual works against the broader background of historical norms” (Kessler 2010, 64) and applies terms closely related to Formalist ideas such as “deviations” and “disturbance” (Bordwell 1979, 4). In an argument similar to that made by the Neoformalists, Cylena Simonds states that video art productions “overtly manipulate language and [. . .] negotiate the bombardment of image/text juxtapositions in everyday life.” Moreover, “the use of text to present and represent language in video art” can be regarded “a strategic device” (Simonds 1995, 27).

Two decades after Simonds made this observation, the bombardment of everyday life by images and texts is ubiquitous. The generation of digital natives who grew up with every form of social media and smart mobile devices is familiar with navigating, using, and manipulating an endless stream of texts and images and all their combinations. Video art that once had the power to defamiliarize language might now seem normal, even dull. When we discuss defamiliarization, our analyses therefore take into consideration not only theoretical reflections on art-immanent aesthetic devices but also the artworks’ historical contexts. The often-stated criticism that Formalism is an ‘autonomous’ study of the artwork is thus negated, and our analyses demonstrate how a reading informed by Formalism also offers insight on the cultural implications of media artworks.

## Reflecting on Terminology: Media Art and Its Categories

What do we mean by the term ‘media art’? Film scholar Vinzenz Hediger observes that media art is a “product of practices that often involve rapidly changing technologies and ephemeral performance elements” and as such it “is difficult for critics, curators, and archivists to pin down in terms of the established taxonomies of art history or film and media studies” (Hediger 2013, 23). The individual terms ‘art’ and ‘media’ are already intractable. Definitions depend not only on the specific object under investigation or the critic’s aesthetic preference, but also on historical and institutional contexts, and they vary according to (and within) the focus of academic disciplines (cf. Wiesing 2010).

Using literariness to frame media art is connected to an examination of media from a phenomenological perspective, which generally regards language as medium and literature as art made of linguistic material. Lambert Wiesing considers media as “tools that make possible to separate genesis from validity” (ibid., 126f). In reference to Edmund Husserl, ‘genesis’ here signifies processes of production or emergence, whereas ‘validity’ denotes the existence of something that remains ‘the same’ (cf. ibid., 127f). ‘Same’ is used in the sense of the Husserlian *Selbigkeit* (‘self-sameness’), which means that “media allow for the production, in different places and at different times, not only of an equivalent but also of the very same thing” (ibid., 129). Validity is in Wiesing’s view an abstract entity, perceived only through a concrete medium (cf. ibid., 131). In the case of media art, it refers, for instance, to a performance that took place at a certain point in time, which is then distributed and made visible and audible via video, film, or whichever medium is chosen as carrier. In this way, the recorded performance as validity is made present to people in various locations and across time.

One characteristic of media art is the disruption of the transparency of media, resulting in the self-thematization of language, sound, and moving images. Wiesing has criticized phenomenological media theories that “define media exclusively via their presence with the user” and thematize the “transparency of media or the self-denial of the medium” (ibid., 123). However, according to Wiesing, ‘transparency’ is only one side of this coin; ‘opacity’ must not be ignored (cf. ibid., 126). These opposing terms—also relevant for other approaches discussed in our book, such as the concept of ‘remediation’—imply dependency on perspective: If recipients are concerned solely with the content of a message, they may block out the technological properties. Yet if they shift their awareness, they might also observe the mediating technology as such. This means that the phenomenological *sine qua non* of unthematized media transparency is not a sufficient criterion: While media usually remain as transparent as possible in order to fulfill the function of everyday communication, in media art the aesthetic function dominates, so that the medium itself becomes opaque and palpable.

The compound term ‘media art’—albeit firmly established in European museums and academia—might sound redundant because different genres of art have long been categorized according to their specific media in the sense of ‘material,’ and, therefore, all art could be regarded as media art (cf. Westgeest 2016, 6). Depending on the perspective, the terms ‘medium’ and ‘material’ are often used synonymously. ‘Media’ may refer to materials such as clay, celluloid, or language, as well as to the electronic media of mass communication such as radio, television, and the internet. To complicate things even more, a general term such as ‘film’ can mean a specific physical carrier as well as an art form that transcends its very carrier. In addition, an artwork may be immaterial or created by using various technologies, which often makes the differences and relationships between work, medium, and material difficult to delineate. These difficulties of terminology are not necessarily a result of scholarly persnickiness or rivalries; they also mirror tremendous technological developments and drastic changes in artistic practices that have profoundly transformed the notion of art.

Since the emergence of photography and film in the 19th century, and particularly that of the ready-made in the early 20th century, the concept of art has been in constant flux. After Marcel Duchamp “performed the subtle miracle of transforming, into works of art, objects from the *Lebenswelt* of commonplace existence: a grooming comb, a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel, a urinal” (Danto 1981, vi), a general aesthetics, a definition of what constitutes works of art based on the essential characteristics of their materials, is hard to defend. Art theory has reacted to the challenge of works that dispute the boundaries between traditional artistic genres and the increasing ‘contaminations’ between the realm of ‘art’ and ‘non-art’ with the diagnosis of a ‘post-medium’

condition of art (cf. Krauss 1999), as well as with a new emphasis on the category of ‘experience.’ This does not imply neglecting the notion of artworks (or genres) as such but emphasizes a certain ‘processuality,’ which leads to the realization that the artwork “only appears in and as the dynamics unfolding between itself and a subject relating to it” (Rebentisch 2013, 93).

Literary theorists have followed a similar approach. As definitions of literature based on formal comparisons of standard and literary language often prove deficient, Terry Eagleton discusses literariness as “a function of the *differential* relations between one sort of discourse and another” that frames literature subsequently as “‘non-pragmatic’ discourse” (Eagleton 1983, 5 and 7). This means that language can, strictly speaking, be defined as literary only in relation to its context (cf. *ibid.*, 7f) and that one should “think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing [. . .], than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing” (*ibid.*, 9). Therefore, literariness is not a fixed feature of literary texts themselves, but rather an outcome or effect of a treatment by both writers and readers. The literary status of a text does not depend exclusively on its intrinsic aesthetic qualities; rather, it is also informed by recipients, contexts, or paratexts. To borrow from art philosopher Arthur Danto: It needs the world of literature, to constitute literature.

In this book we understand ‘language’ as material, and ‘literature’ as an umbrella term for the art that makes language palpable. As philosopher Sybille Krämer emphasizes, the graphic and the phonic need to be considered as distinct media (cf. Krämer 2009, 159); language itself is realized as script and voice. Another terminology for the different manifestations of language is suggested by, for instance, Ludwig Jäger, who defines language “as a medium that appears both as *multi-modal* and in different *medial* formats” (Jäger 2010b, 302). Voice and script are two ‘modalities’ of language that are presented in different ‘medial formats,’ such as live performances, audio recordings, or analog and digital books. Following this line of thought, media art could be considered a format that draws “the *mediality* of the medium of language [. . .] into the focus of attention” (*ibid.*). Voice and script become palpable in media art when their materiality or sign character is foregrounded. Literariness is a specific processing of language, which can be experienced in many works of media art. Thus, our assertion: Literariness may itself be considered ‘the dominant’ of many media artworks.

As mentioned briefly earlier, art historian Rosalind Krauss countered the “exhausted modernist paradigm of medium specificity” (Balsom 2013, 71), and in particular its most prominent proponent, Clement Greenberg, with the idea of the post-medium condition of art. Instead of restricting the discussion of art to an analysis of a medium’s essential characteristics, she proposed an understanding of medium as “differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support” (Krauss 1999, 53). This means that although an artwork is, of course, defined by its material, and the medium becomes palpable in relationship to other media, the use and perception of a medium is always influenced by conventions that determine its use and must never be confused with its (physical) properties. Several scholars have subsequently made similar arguments. In her study of video art, art historian Helen Westgeest defines a medium “as both a technology that enables communication and a set of interconnected social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology” (Westgeest 2016, 8). Media scholar Michael Z. Newman underlines that “[b]eyond technology, the concept of the medium also includes typical or authorized formats, genres, and other textual qualities” and therefore “a medium is understood not only as a technological form but also [as] a set of supporting protocols” (Newman 2014, 100). When recognizing these ideas, two general notions become clear: Although the terms ‘medium’ and ‘material’ may be understood and used

as synonyms, media are more than physical carriers or technologies, and artworks cannot be defined by essential properties but are in fact an effect of processing and perception.

In the introduction to an anthology on the preservation and exhibition of media art, media scholar Julia Noordegraaf defines media art as “[t]ime-based artworks that rely on media technologies for their creation and exhibition such as slide-based installations, film-, video-, and computer-based artworks, and net art” (Noordegraaf 2013, 11). This pragmatic definition does not conflate ‘media’ with all (artistic) materials, but specifically refers to electronic media. Preventing essentialist interpretations of the definition, she moreover underlines that:

Media artworks often play on the wider cultural role of media, such as the formats of television broadcasting or the sociocultural and economic uses of software and online social media. Understanding the role and function of media in art thus requires knowledge about the nature of time-based media (technical features, narrative, aesthetics, *dispositifs*, and specific sociocultural and economic contexts of production and distribution) and of the relationship between work and viewer (spectatorship, use, participation). (ibid., 13)

Similar to arguments made by Krauss, Westgeest, and Michael Z. Newman, Noordegraaf highlights that media art is not sufficiently defined by a characterization of the technology alone. From her perspective, the term ‘media art’ does not encompass photography because photography is neither time-based nor does its exhibition require media technologies, yet it is more inclusive than ‘new media art’ or ‘digital art.’ These often-used terms are limited to media art whose production and exhibition rely on digital technologies, media art that is composed of digital code, and is based on algorithms (cf. Paul 2003, Simanowski 2011). New media art is often characterized as “process-oriented, time-based, dynamic, and real-time; participatory, collaborative, and performative; modular, variable, generative, and customizable” (Paul 2007, 253)—although these characteristics apply equally to analog works or even performance art.

In analog media, data are continuous, while in digital media data are converted into numeric codes, or ‘digitized’ (cf. Manovich 2001, 28). An analog film, for instance, consists of hundreds or thousands of individual photographic frames printed on a transparent film strip, whereas digital film is a representation of individual data points as binary code. Despite the fact that analog film has seen a revival in recent years and the use of film projectors in museums seems to have become a spectacle in its own right, digital devices and processes now dominate the production, exhibition, and distribution of film. To account for this media convergence (cf. Partridge 2006, 180), many scholars use the term ‘moving images,’ as it is more inclusive than film or video art and more specific than media art (cf. Newman 2009, 88; Westgeest 2016, 7). According to art philosopher Michael Newman’s definition:

Moving image is an art that implies both time and a spatial display in the gallery. [. . .] A bodily relation to the image may be established that is very different from that experienced by the spectator of cinema fixed to their seat and taken out of themselves, identifying with the image and engrossed by the narrative. Contrary possibilities are opened up by moving image installation: the freedom to move around the space may enable a more detached and inquisitive attitude towards the apparatus, or alternatively the multiplication of screens may induce an absorption into a panoramic spectacle. (Newman 2009, 88)

Although the term ‘moving image art’ is tempting, it has one disadvantage in relation to our study: It latently excludes the dimension of sound through its terminological focus on images. We therefore prefer the term ‘media art,’ while considering corresponding theoretical approaches to moving image art.

Based on the definitions and descriptions noted here, we use ‘media art’ as an umbrella term for audiovisual time-based artworks that rely on analog and digital media technologies for their creation and exhibition, and that make palpable the cultural practices surrounding and the communicative contexts enabled by these technologies. We consider works in the following categories: experimental film, video art, video performance, video installation, and multimedia installation. These classifications arise from our own taxonomy but are based on information provided by archives, exhibition catalogs, research publications, and the websites of artists and galleries.

We speak of ‘experimental film’ when the work is based on analog film, the analog material is foregrounded, and the filmmaker “set out to create films that challenge normal notions of what a movie can show and how it can show it” (Bordwell and Thompson 2013, 369). Although the terms ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ are controversial (cf. Rees 1999, 3f; MacDonald 2007, 2; Balsom 2013, 21f), they usually refer to films that investigate the possibilities of the filmic medium (the film strip, the projector, the screening space) and refer to the history of film and cinema; challenge traditional modes of production, exhibition, and distribution; and reflect on the filmic *dispositif*. The context of experimental films is often the black box, the movie theater, and when screened in a white cube it is important to consider that the “protocols of the gallery space are strikingly different” and “inextricably tied to the ideology of modernism and the desire for an artistic autonomy free of the contaminating tentacles of a mass culture” (Balsom 2013, 39).

The terms ‘video,’ ‘videotape,’ or ‘video piece’ are used for single-channel works that are based on various video technologies. Although ‘video’ is now frequently used to describe any moving image clip that is not celluloid film, it originally referred

to an electrical analogue waveform produced by scanning the light (the latent image) focused onto a photosensitive plate in the video camera which is then re-created into the pattern (or raster) of horizontal scanning lines made by an electron beam onto the photosensitive surface of a cathode-ray-tube that in turn creates the image that appears on a television. (Partridge 2006, 181)

In contrast to film, video images do not need to be photochemically developed but are instantly visible on a monitor (video is also a technology of surveillance). Because they are recorded on magnetic tape, they cannot be watched without a device, whereas individual images on film can be seen without a projector. Video technology is related to audio recording (cf. Sundberg 2015, 264) and at the same time must be considered in the cultural context of television (cf. Newman 2014, 30).

Video art emerged in the 1960s when Sony introduced a portable and affordable video technology known as Portapak (cf. *ibid.*, 31; Balsom, 2013, 11f). Until the 1980s, video artists not only critically engaged with the mass medium of television but also with more traditional art forms, such as sculpture. In the gallery space, video art was often presented on a TV set mounted on a pedestal, but it was also broadcast as experimental television programming, as in Jan Dibbets’s *TV as a Fireplace* (1969; produced by Gerry Schum for the German TV station WDR) or

Stephen Partridge's *Sentences* (produced for the British Channel 4; see Chapter 3, Section 2). From the 1990s onward, large wall projections became the standard (cf. Martin 2006, 11f). Due to their size (and surround-sound technology), projections tend to be more immersive than 'TV sculptures,' and they are often presented in a black cube, which is tied more to the public-yet-isolating viewing experience of the cinema than to the shared intimacy of watching television. Today, digital technologies dominate the workflow of moving image production, post-production, and exhibition, which makes considering video art "as a separate and distinct practice within the fine art canon" (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 283) increasingly questionable. In line with common practice, we use the term 'video' or 'digital film' for all single-channel works that are not analog film.

A subgenre of video art that was especially prominent in the 1960s and 1970s is 'video performance'—a "time-based and ephemeral" artwork also termed "performance video" (Eamon 2009, 85). Video performances are usually also presented on television monitors, and they are closely related to performance art that evolved simultaneously in the 1960s and 70s. Video performances present a singularly executed action, although the performer and the audience are temporally and spatially separated. The performance is recorded in a temporal continuum with a single, often stable camera. The artist performs alone, not in front of an audience but in front of and for the camera (a set-up that led Krauss to define video as a 'narcissistic' medium; see Chapter 3, Section 1). Coherence is not created through editing but evolves in real time.

A 'video installation' involves more than one television set or projection screen and highlights the spatiality of the exhibition environment. Confronted with spatially arranged monitors or screens and often various sources of sound, the audience is often overwhelmed by acoustic, visual, and spatial signals. Whereas a single-channel video demands full attention—especially when the sound is presented with headphones—video installations potentially deny the possibility of experiencing the work in its entirety. The aggressive "spatial paradigm" (Lehmann 2008, 158) forces viewers into a disorienting situation that not only highlights the parameters of the exhibition space and the time-based nature of the moving images but also ultimately makes viewers aware of their own subjectivity. Because each spectator decides how much time to spend in the installation and how intensely to engage with what he or she sees and hears, each spectator experiences and thus co-creates a different work. This individuality of the viewing experience with its "structure of temporal openness" (Rebentisch 2012, 185) is constitutive for installations in the museum context.

'Multimedia installations' are closely related to video installations. They either combine different audiovisual media (for instance a television set with an interactive wall projection) or media artworks with artifacts that are not based on media technologies; in the latter case these installations are also termed 'mixed-media installations.'

This book also analyzes some works of net art, which is often interactive—or, in its other extreme, radically abnegates interactivity, as in the text-based works of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries discussed in this book. A category that is not media art *strictu sensu*, but interesting for the focus of this study, includes text-based 'neon sign works.' The neon sign installations by Bruce Nauman, for example, are demanding word plays that create a very peculiar literariness. The same is true for 'xenon light projections,' such as the works by Jenny Holzer that are projected in public spaces, or site-specific sound art installations by Nauman. They are particularly relevant to our study when they exhibit the poetic use of kinetic script or the uncanny effects of the acousmatic voice.



## Four Artistic Approaches: About the Structure of this Book

All our discussions of media art are structured chronologically, starting with the oldest artwork and moving towards the most recent. This offers insight into the development of the guises of literariness and illustrates its persistence. In this book we group media artworks according to their central aesthetic strategies with regard to voice and script. This organizational scheme made more sense than a medium-based or a purely chronological ordering of all the works discussed, for the two reasons Edward Shanken gave for his thematic approach in his book, *Art and Electronic Media* (2009): “it would foreground the technological apparatus as the driving force behind the work” and “it would fail to show how related conceptual and thematic issues have been addressed by artists using varied media” (Shanken 2007, 61). In our analyses, we highlight the detail under examination while considering other aspects in the background. This is why, for instance, a few works that rely on existing literary texts are not included in Chapter 5, “Works of Literature in Media Art,” but are discussed earlier. A few works are also analyzed more than once, each time focusing on a different aesthetic strategy.

We investigate the literariness of media art on four different levels: the use of spoken poetic language; the poetically motivated integration of written texts; the exploration of literary genres; and the adaptation of works of literature into media art. While the first and second categories highlight the defamiliarization of the media of language (voice and script), the third and fourth explore experiments with literary genres and concrete literary texts. The main chapters in this book correspond to these central aesthetic practices. The theoretical scope of the book is developed in Chapter 2, establishing the general theoretical background of literariness and related concepts. Each following chapter develops additional theoretical approaches that connect the analyses to a more specific historical and academic framework.

Chapter 2, “Literariness and Media Art: Theoretical Framing,” is divided into two sections. The first, “The Aesthetics of Language: Literary Theory,” investigates the notion of literariness as introduced by the Russian Formalists. As previously noted, the Formalists saw literariness as the leading aesthetic quality of literary language. Literary language is distinct from other forms of language in that it intentionally deviates from established norms and rules. In Section 2.1, these observations are connected to, *inter alia*, Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia, hybridity, and double-voiced discourse; Mukařovský’s principle of foregrounding; Jakobson’s concept of ‘the palpability of signs’ and his structural model of language; and Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality.

Section 2.2, “Literariness Beyond Literature: Transdisciplinary Perspectives,” promotes a new understanding of literariness as a transmedial device and effect. From the outset, Formalism was not solely concerned with literature but was also highly invested in exploring general aesthetic, as Formalist writings on film reveal. Therefore, our research highlights tendencies that are present in the original Formalist theory. The re-emergence of Russian Formalism in film theory is also discussed, including the advent of Neoformalism, formulated by Thompson and Bordwell. The section moreover introduces theories of intermediality, which we propose as an artistic device that affects the viewer and promotes an aestheticized perception. The concept of intermediality opens the way to the domain of media theory. Concepts from media theory that are linked to literariness are remediation (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) and transcription (Ludwig Jäger), both of which work with media’s oscillation between states of transparency and opacity. This oscillation is foregrounded in many of the media artworks we analyze. Finally, in this section these notions are related to corresponding concepts in postdramatic theater and performance arts as well as phenomenological theories such as those proposed by Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks.

Chapter 3, “Voice and Script in Media Art,” is dedicated to media artworks that explore literariness in the two media of language. Section 3.1, “Voice and the Materiality of Sound,” investigates the voice as artistic medium, its performative and atmospheric qualities, and how the effects of mediated voices influence aesthetic perception. Of particular importance to the theories discussed here is the Formalists’ idea of *zaum*: poetry created purely with the effects of sound, freeing it from meaning. Media art also alters and defamiliarizes the human voice, which we discuss by referencing early performative works by Vito Acconci and later technical-synthetic manipulation by artists such as Pipilotti Rist or Ursula Hodel. Other works discussed in Section 3.1 deal with iteration and the alphabet as aesthetic devices or exhibit the power of the acousmatic voice. As a transition to Section 3.2, we explore artworks that demonstrate the relation of voice and image or voice and script.

Under the heading “Script: Between Visuality and Legibility,” Section 3.2 investigates the spectrum of defamiliarizing effects triggered by the use of script. The theoretical discussion introduces concepts that underline the pictorial dimensions of written language. We consider the complex relationship of script and image as discussed across disciplines, including the importance of layout and typography in Russian Formalism. In contrast to the conventional use of written text in moving images, script in works of media art often resists intelligibility: its pace is too fast or too slow, or an individual letter might be blown up to fill the whole screen. Through different uses of fonts and highlighting spatiality, the materiality of script becomes palpable. Some artworks, like those by the net art collective Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, feature both different script systems (e.g. Latin versus Korean) and juxtapose them deliberately to foreground script’s iconic dimensions.

Chapter 4, “Literary Genres in Media Art,” explores how media art investigates and appropriates literary genres. The triadic classification into poetry, drama, and prose is an effective tool for forging a path into the complex terrain of a literary language use in works of media art. We discuss in detail how the Formalists considered genre a “central mechanism of literary history, and its proper object of study” (Duff 2000, 7), claiming that it is defined by evolving functions and forms. Media art both joins the critique on genre norms and refers—implicitly or explicitly—to literary genres as such. Our book therefore uses the genre triad as a background against which allusions to and deviations from norms can be retraced.

Chapter 4, Section 1, “Elements of Poetry,” is based on an understanding of poetry as the literary genre marked by an ‘excess structuring’ as a key aesthetic characteristic. Our theoretical discussion introduces prominent discourses on poetry from the perspective of literary theory—the idea of lyric subjectivity, for instance, or discussions on versification, rhyme, or written versus oral poetry—with a focus on the notions of verse language explored by Russian Formalism. We then introduce forms of poetry that are especially suited to audiovisual transformations, such as concrete and visual poetry. Lastly, we discuss the adaptation of poetry theory to the field of experimental and avant-garde film practice and studies, referring to Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bordwell and Thompson, and P. Adams Sitney, among others. The analyses of media artworks—video poems by Bill Seaman and Seoungcho Cho—rely on both literary and film theory and highlight their benefits and shortcomings that become evident when discussing works of media art.

The second genre section, 4.2, “Elements of Drama,” discusses media artworks that apply formal elements of drama, such as the dialogical and stage-like setting of multi-channel video installations. Other artworks employ elements of classical tragedy, such as versified and choral speech, messenger’s report, or teichoscopy, as in recent works by Magdalena von Rudy or Hajnal Németh. A critical attitude toward dramatic structures and tragic telos is evident throughout the 20th century, most notably in the Brechtian alienation effect and Bertolt Brecht’s notion

of epicization, which is closely related to *ostranenie*. Brecht's innovations are based on a theater that demonstrates rather than embodies, one that creates distance between the showing and the showed, the represented and the mode of representation. This results, as Hans-Thies Lehmann argues, in contemporary 'postdramatic' theater. Media art often employs similar strategies, such as ironic distancing, foregrounding, multimediality, a 'constitutive overload' of meaning, or a 'retreat of synthesis.' Media artists play with meta-theatrical elements, such as voice-over comments that appear to be from a stage director or repeating the same scene with different dialogs or protagonists, alluding to the theatricality of staging.

Chapter 4, Section 3, "Elements of Prose," focuses on instances of narrative prose in works of media art. In contrast to narrative feature film, media artists often allude to 'peculiar' narrative subgenres, such as the epistolary novel, as in an auto-fictional work by Mona Hatoum; autobiography, as in works by Tracey Emin; and, more generally, variations of first-person narration, as in a work by Tracey Moffatt. Devices include the self-conscious exposure of the act of mediation, the pluralization of communicative channels, and the dominance of a disembodied articulatory instance. In the theory subsections, we review basic concepts from recent narratology that are necessary for an understanding of the genre conventions, such as narrative order and integration, narrative voice, and narrative mode. The section thus encourages a more comprehensive notion of narrative, time-based arts: We highlight how elements of narrative prose can operate as defamiliarizing devices that heighten the perception of mediacy instead of fostering illusionary immersion as associated with narrative feature film.

Chapter 5, "Works of Literature in Media Art," is devoted to allusions to, quotations from, and appropriations of concrete literary works. These references occur mostly in abstract media artworks, which are fundamentally different aesthetic objects than conventional feature film adaptations. Often, even the cues themselves are easily overlooked. Chapter 5 opens with a discussion of adaptation theory and considers the most promising, prevalent, and controversial approaches to this practice. The idea of adaptation as a dialogic and intertextual practice, as proposed by Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon, offers an essential background to inform our analyses. Its strength lies in erasing any hierarchical structures between the 'original source' and allegedly 'secondary' or 'inferior' adaptation. Film adaptations of literary works are almost as old as film itself, and a discussion of the phenomenon surfaced in Formalist theory. We link Eikhenbaum's writings to recent contributions to the field of adaptation studies and develop a practical framework for the analyses that follow. We also show how an adaptation may be considered a defamiliarization of the literary work, but the defamiliarization is not a destructive attack; instead, it is a perspective that emphasizes the interdependence of all artistic production.

Building on this theoretical base, the analyses in Chapter 5 investigate the relation of more than a dozen particularly complex media artworks that artfully adapt literary texts, mostly novels or poems by a diverse group of international writers. The first group of analyses relates to Chapter 3, Section 1, and presents 'acousmatic adaptations' of literature by filmmaker Matthias Müller and video artist Cho, where texts are spoken by a voice-over and combined with moving images, music, and sound. Adaptations that are grouped under the heading "Baring the Signifier: Written Allusions" foreground the aesthetics of poetic script and are therefore related to Chapter 3, Section 2, and include works by Rick Hancox, Jonathan Hodgson, and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. The third and fourth subsections deal with an "Aesthetics of Superimposition": with media art that foregrounds mediality and employs both script and voice. By superimposing and layering, the first two works by Eder Santos and Daniel Reeves employ strategies similar to poetry. Three works by Tom Kalin create narrative collages but also vaguely refer to the aesthetic of music clip composition while dealing with existential topics

such as loss, displacement, and alienation. Works by media artists Gary Hill and Mike Kelley are discussed under the heading of “Theatrical Appropriation: Personifying Literary Figures”, in which alludes to Chapter 4, Section 2, creating an intricate relation to the literary work through embodiment or verbal articulation. In a final set, two extensive performative-installative works by the artists Joan Jonas and Nalini Malani are presented in a comparative analysis with regard to their ‘transcreation’ of literariness in media art.

Taken as a whole, this book sheds light on the multifaceted and enigmatic ways in which the literariness of media art startles viewers to make them take a second look and envision what has become automatized in a fresh way.

# 2

## LITERARINESS AND MEDIA ART

### Theoretical Framing

#### 2.1 The Aesthetics of Language: Literary Theory

##### *The Obstreperousness of Poetic Language*

In this study, the Russian Formalist notion of literariness is the key that opens the door to our analysis of the various aesthetic uses of language foregrounded in works of media art. Roman Jakobson coined the neologism *literaturnost* (литературность) for what he conceived of as the central “subject of literary scholarship” (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 62). The term is a variation on Alexander Potebnja’s *poetičnost* (поэтичность), translated into English as ‘poeticness’ or, more common, ‘poeticity’ (cf. Potebnja 1976 [1862], 174). Both literariness and poeticity were used by the Formalists and continue to be used—often quasi-synonymously—in literary theory. Whenever poeticity is not equated with literariness, it denominates the linguistic specificity of the literary genre of poetry (cf. Van Peer 2003, 111; Philipowski 2011, 172). For an investigation such as this—which is not solely concerned with reflections of poetry in media art but considers aesthetics that could be described, more generally, as literary—the term ‘literariness’ is preferable.

Litariness suggests a certain quality within texts that “makes of a given work a work of literature” (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 62). Literary scholar Lutz Rühling situates the concept in the broader scope of aesthetics, arguing that literariness “is merely the text-related variant of a property that could be described as ‘aestheticity,’ an attribute that, in general, distinguishes objects of art from items that do not belong to the realm of art” (Rühling 2003, 26). Media scholar Frank Kessler emphasizes the concept’s validity beyond the realm of literature (cf. Kessler 2010, 61), a claim backed by the Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum, who summarized that the Russian Formalists aimed at “a general theory of aesthetics” (Eikhenbaum 1965 [1926], 104). In so doing, “they narrowed the distance between particular problems of literary theory and general problems of aesthetics” (ibid.).

On the most basic level, literariness is defined by the dynamic between the automatization and deautomatization of language. This dynamic is not limited to language and literature; it has already proved fruitful for the study of film and can be transferred to the analysis of media art (cf. Benthien 2012). If what applies to the aesthetics of literature may also be valid for other forms of art, Russian Formalism can become a tool with which to perforate the borders between academic disciplines, a perspective that puts the fraying of the arts into the spotlight. This line of thought will be pursued later, after the basic concepts have been introduced.

### ***Art as Device: Estrangement and Complicating Form***

Formalism was guided by the question of which attributes define literary or poetic language. Generally speaking, the literary text distinguishes itself from nonliterary texts by its particular use of language. It is distinct from nonliterary texts because it activates the “aesthetic function” (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 62) of language. This assumption, whose “importance [...] for the entire Formalist enterprise cannot be overstated” (Steiner 1984, 139), was later defined by Jakobson in Structuralist terms. Within his general model of communication, he distinguishes six functions of speech that exist, to a varying degree, in every utterance: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic (cf. Jakobson 1960, 353–359). For instance, the referential function establishes a certain “set (*Einstellung*) towards the referent, an orientation toward the CONTEXT” (ibid., 353), whereas the poetic (or aesthetic) function focuses “on the message for its own sake” (ibid., 356). As Jakobson stresses, early Russian Formalism’s equation of a poetic work with a solely aesthetic function was too limited:

[A] poetic work is not confined to aesthetic function alone, but has in addition many other functions. Actually, the intentions of a poetic work are often closely related to philosophy, social didactics, and so on. Just as a poetic work is not exhausted by its aesthetic function, similarly the aesthetic function is not limited to poetic works. (Jakobson 1987 [1935], 43)

By mentioning philosophy and social didactics, Jakobson clearly recognizes how embedded literary artworks are in culture and, in a very important point for our study, extends the aesthetic function beyond the literary text. He recommends being aware of the different functions of a text while also focusing on the intrinsic function that “unites and determines the poetic work,” concluding: “From this point of view, a poetic work cannot be defined as a work fulfilling neither an exclusively aesthetic function nor an aesthetic function along with other functions; rather, a poetic work is defined as a verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant.” (ibid.)

Though dubbed ‘Formalism,’ Russian Formalism considered not form but rather the literary device as its central concept for the study of literature and art (cf. Eikhenbaum 1965 [1926], 115; Jakobson 1973 [1921], 63). The Formalists regarded a literary work as a unit, “a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices” (Jakobson 1987 [1935], 44). Inspired by Broder Christiansen (cf. Christiansen 1909), the concept of the ‘dominant’ became a guiding principle for the Formalist study of literature to describe the hierarchy and functioning of the devices. As Jakobson claims: “The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure” (Jakobson 1987 [1935], 41). The dominant can take on various shapes and influence, structure, and subordinate all other elements of the artwork. Dominants can be found in individual artworks, for example in the use of intonation, the canon, or in a “set of norms of a given poetic school” (ibid., 42), or even in entire epochs (Jakobson refers to music as the dominant that influences the Romantic and verbal arts). He thus makes clear that a dominant can also be “external to the poetic work” (ibid.). In our study, literariness is considered the dominant of the media artworks discussed.

Jakobson saw the internal relations in literary works—which are responsible for cohesion and density—as a result of parallelisms and equivalences, and established an influential structural model: ‘the horizontal axis of combination,’ which is characterized by relational contrasts and connectivity (one subject, one verb, one object); and the ‘vertical axis of selection,’ which is characterized by alternatives from which one has to choose (the grammatical subject of the

phrase, for example). A brief look at the famous couplet in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" illustrates this model: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, | So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare 1986 [1609], 85). On the horizontal axis, the words of each line are combined based on grammar, forming a syntagmatic unit. The two lines are also linked by the vertical axis: Their first similarity is the parataxis at the beginning of each line ("So long") along with the sentence structure. Another similarity is their equal meter, and a third is the end rhyme. The two lines are further connected by a rhetorical comparison of the duration of life, and the self-referential mention of the 'life-preserving' qualities of the poem itself. The two images in lines one and two are united by a principle of selection: Shakespeare selected his specific formulae from a much larger—even infinite—spectrum of possible poetic images.

With his axiom, Jakobson aims to define the poetic function of language as establishing intensified relations of similarity and proximity between words and letters. These relations correspond structurally to the syntactic connectivity established by grammar. In poetic texts, however, linguistic entities are connected not only through grammatical relations alone but also through various other layers of equivalence and correspondence, such as sounds, letters, syllables, or phonemes (rhyme, rhythm, paronomasia, alliteration, anaphora, etc.), so that "[e]quivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence" (Jakobson 1960, 358). For instance, the second line of the Shakespeare sonnet consists of many identical vowels (lives, this, this, gives, life) that create coherence and emphasis. Jakobson gives numerous examples of such equivalences:

In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assured to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae or stresses. (ibid.)

He continues to explain this dynamic with regard to the general phenomenon of parallelism (cf. *ibid.*, 368f; Winko 2009, 387), for instance when formal correspondences are foregrounded and establish isotopic (i.e. semantic) relations. As Ralf Simon states, levels of equivalence can be formed between "elements that contribute to word formation (e.g. parts of speech, tempus, modalities)," "elements that contribute to sentence formation (e.g. sentence types, sentence elements, punctuation)," and "elements of phonology," and they can also be found in "figures and tropes," as well as "the iconicity of script" and "genre-specific features" (Simon 2009, 187). The various literary devices that establish correspondences within literature are also prominent within language-based media art. They can all become an artwork's dominant, or contribute to the deautomatization of perception, the latter being a central concern of Viktor Shklovsky's theory.

The concept of the device—'technique' in alternative translations—was put forth in Shklovsky's seminal essay, "Art as Device" (or "Art as Technique"). Our study uses both translations, as each brings out different aspects of concern to our investigation into the literariness of media art. Shklovsky wrote his essay to refute the notion, as held by Alexander Potebnja, that poetry is essentially a form of thinking in images, with the metaphor serving to clarify "the unknown by means of the known" (Shklovsky 1965 [1917], 6). In contrast, Shklovsky regarded a work of art as the result of devices or techniques "designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible" (*ibid.*, 8). Consequently, the poetic image is classified as one device among others (cf. *ibid.*, 9). With regard to prose, the Formalists—Shklovsky and Yury Tynyanov, in particular—perceived

the *sužet* (sujet) as the most important device and construction factor, weaving motifs and plot elements into a composed structure (cf. Brokoff 2014, 501; also see Chapter 4, Section 3). In “Art as Device/Technique,” Shklovsky proposes the now famous concept of the artistic devices of “‘enstranging’ objects and complicating form” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6):

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. ‘If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.’ And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (Shklovsky 1965a [1917], 12)

Or, as another translation reads, this device has the power to liberate perception from the deadening effects of automatization:

Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war. | If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been. | And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘enstranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious.’ The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.* (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 5f)

This rich quote—reproduced here in its two common English translations—contains many of the key ideas that resurface in the writings of other Formalists and Structuralists: the emphasis on perception as central to the aesthetic experience, an experience made unfamiliar by using artistic devices in a particular way; the importance of materiality for the process of perception; and a socio-critical move against the dulling automatization of daily life. Shklovsky defended art’s potential to effect a “complete perceptual overhaul” (Lesič-Thomas 2005, 17). The concept of *ostranenie* (остранение) has been translated into “making objects unfamiliar,” the “enstranging” of objects, or “defamiliarization” (cf. Lachmann 1970, 228). It is also referred to as “estrangement,” “deautomatization,” or “alienation,” while Frank Kessler assumes the translation of “making strange” to be closest to the Russian term (cf. Van den Oever 2010a, 12; Kessler 1996, 52). Kessler takes into account both meanings of the concept of *ostranenie*, resulting from the different translations of the term. According to him, “*making strange*” refers to the estranging devices of an artwork; the notion of “*defamiliarization*” delineates the effect on the perception of the recipient, which is caused by the devices being ‘made strange’ (cf. *ibid.*). Shklovsky uses several narrative sequences by the novelist Leo Tolstoy as examples of how devices achieve defamiliarization. For instance, by not “call[ing] a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6), or by observing a social interaction from the unusual



perspective of an animal, so that “the objects are estranged not by our perception but by that of the horse” (ibid., 8).

The concept of poetic language encompasses “all literature that is deliberately structured to present an artistic impression” (Sherwood 1973, 28), including poetry, prose, and drama. Literary language is viewed in opposition to prosaic, functional, everyday language, whose main purpose is communication. From a phenomenological perspective, Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described everyday language as necessarily self-effacing in order to fulfill its communicative function: “The perfection of language lies in its capacity to pass unnoticed. *But therein lies the virtue of language*: it is language which propels us toward the things it signifies. In the way it works, language hides itself from us. Its triumph is to efface itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 10). In daily communication, language needs to become transparent in service to its content, whereas artistic language strives for the opposite effect, opacity.

Shklovsky differentiates between poetic and practical language by looking at their “laws of expenditure and economy” (Shklovsky 1965 [1917], 11), denoting different levels of perceptual energy demanded by a verbal expression. While ordinary language, as Rudolph Helmstetter puts it, is “over-hasty, hurrying ahead towards the intended meaning” with comprehension following suit, “[p]oetic language hinders, slows down and problematizes comprehension” (Helmstetter 1995, 34). Shklovsky himself explains this issue:

In our phonetic and lexical investigations into poetic speech, involving both the arrangement of words and the semantic structures based on them, we discover everywhere the very hallmark of the artistic: that is, an artifact that has been intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception. It is ‘artificially’ created by an artist in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text. This is when the literary work attains its greatest and most long-lasting impact. The object is perceived not spatially but, as it were, in its temporal continuity. (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 12)

Art demands a higher level of energy from its recipient by slowing down the process of perception. Instead of tapping into the realm of the known by relying on ‘recognition,’ art enables ‘seeing’ as if for the first time. This opposition between recognition and seeing plays a pivotal role in understanding how media artworks create effects of literariness.

As Shklovsky concludes: “The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language” (Shklovsky 1965 [1917], 22). The idea of a roughened form is related to the formula of making the ‘stone stony.’ The reader ‘stumbles’ over and pays attention to the words of the text. The resulting slow down of perception caused by the complicated form offers the chance of “observing language at work” (Helmstetter 1995, 34):

By staging ‘the word as word,’ poetic language draws our attention to the material, structural and relational qualities of the words themselves: the words do not carry their meaning within them; their meanings are assigned to them in speech. When language comes around to itself in poetic language, it loses its transparency with regard to the objects being signified (feelings etc.); it confounds the automatism of signification. (ibid.)

Poetic language is characterized as opaque, no longer serving a primarily referential function. Literary art and art in general are a means to experience the very process of creation or of becoming ‘something.’ This is most evident in certain works of media art that feature, for instance, an extreme use of devices such as deceleration or iteration.

A final point on the device of ‘estranging’ objects is the German translation of *ostranenie* as *Verfremdung* (alienation) because of the similarity to the well-known Brechtian concept of the same name (cf. Lachmann 1970, 229, 246 and 248). Brecht may have been aware of Shklovsky’s ideas and adapted them for his concept of the ‘A-effect’ in the theater, a question that is still discussed among scholars (cf. Kessler 1996, 52; Günther 2001; Robinson 2008; Brokoff 2014, 491). The potential relationship between these concepts is explored in Chapter 4, Section 2.

### **Poetics of Deviation**

In order to perceive a defamiliarization of language, the recipient must be aware of that which has been made strange. In Formalist theory, everyday language is seen as literary language’s ‘other.’ In general, literary language may differ from everyday speech on three levels: pragmatics, semantics, and syntax. First, literary language uses signs differently depending on its pragmatic context. Second, it is characterized by the modification and extension of the way that the signs signify. Third, it is distinguished by anomalies in the syntactic combination of those signs (cf. Saße 1980, 698).

Some scholars consider the Structuralist notion of ‘foregrounding’ as one of the “resurgences” (Sternberg 2006, 126) of *ostranenie*. Indeed, in his essay “Standard Language and Poetic Language,” Prague School Structuralist Jan Mukařovský introduces the notion of foregrounding (*aktualisace*) as “the opposite of automatization” (Mukařovský 2007 [1932], 19). A process of deautomatization makes conscious an act or utterance:

In poetic language foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background as the objective of expression and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. (ibid.)

This quote resembles two ideas that are included in Russian Formalist criticism. First, making the communicative act secondary echoes Jakobson’s notion of literature as language whose poetic or aesthetic function is dominant. Second, the idea of foregrounding an utterance that has no need to communicate may increase the awareness of the language’s material. Deviations from existing standards appear in many guises. Helmstetter rightly remarks that “poetization is not limited to the stylistic level [. . .], but can avail itself of a wide range of techniques” (Helmstetter 1995, 36).

Linguists as well as literary theorists have claimed that the idea of literariness as a poetic ‘deviation’ from standard language is relevant to both written and spoken texts (cf. Mukařovský 2007 [1932], 20f)—which is important when examining audiovisual artworks and their oral performances of literary aesthetics. Mukařovský refers to the possibilities of foregrounding certain components through intonation (cf. ibid., 19f). Literariness generated through foregrounded iteration is, for instance, prominent in Gary Hill’s video *Mediations*, in which the plosives of the uttered sentences are stressed, or Bruce Nauman’s menacing *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (see Chapter 3, Section 1). Another example offered by Mukařovský is the inclusion of foreign words in everyday language: “Words originating in slang, dialects, or foreign languages, are, as we know from our own experience, often taken over because of their novelty and uncommonness, that is, for purposes of foregrounding in which aesthetic valuation always plays a significant part” (ibid., 25). This device is most common in media artworks that

utilize two different language systems at once, as in Shelly Silver's digital film *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown*.

Apart from everyday language, Jakobson views poetic language as embedded within a set of different contexts, "the existing poetic tradition, the everyday language of the present time, and the developing poetic tendencies with which the given manifestation is confronted" (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 58). These contexts developed into the concept of 'backgrounds' in later Formalist and Structuralist theory. The differing qualities of literary language from these backgrounds have been established as a 'poetics of deviation' (cf. Levin 1971) in literary studies. Mukařovský remarks:

The violation of the norm of the standard, its systematic violation, is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibility, there would be no poetry. The more the norm of the standard is stabilized in a given language, the more varied can be its violation, and therefore the more possibilities for poetry in that language. And on the other hand, the weaker the awareness of this norm, the fewer possibilities of violation, and hence the fewer possibilities for poetry. (Mukařovsky 2007 [1917], 18)

Mukařovský acknowledges literature's force by tying it to a strategic violation, a rupture or destruction of a standard form of language. The latter is the norm that forms literary language's "background" (ibid., 18), enabling the identification of the deviation. He further stresses that 'deviant' literary language may nevertheless use components of standard language elements "against which the distortion of the other components is reflected" (ibid.). Without elements that are standardized or automatized, there is no effect of deautomatization or foregrounding. Harald Fricke emphasizes the importance of the norm when he argues that poetry, for instance, cannot always be identified with aesthetic complexity and 'complicatedness' alone because a strategic lack of these features could be perceived as especially 'poetic' in that it defies the genre expectations and consequently deautomatizes the recognition of aesthetic norms. A text is considered poetic "if it establishes a relationship that would not exist without this deviation" (Fricke 1981, 101). In other words, literary devices are not 'aesthetic' on their own but need to brush against a norm to create aesthetic effects.

Norms and backgrounds may concern everyday language as well as the literary tradition, rules, and expectations brought about, for instance, by the literary canon of a given time. Norms and deviations are subject to change, a point that resurfaces throughout Russian Formalist and Prague School Structuralist criticism, and becomes the prominent element guiding the Formalists' later investigations into literary history and the changing of devices. They were well aware of the fact that 'art' and 'non-art' are not stable categories but vary according to time, culture, and perspective. As Jakobson emphasizes:

Of course, the marks disclosing the implementation of the aesthetic function are not unchangeable or always uniform. Each concrete poetic canon, every set of temporal poetic norms, however, comprises indispensable, distinctive elements without which the work cannot be identified as poetic. (Jakobson 1987 [1935], 43)

Similar to Mukařovský, Jakobson stresses the temporality of poetic norms as well as the dependence of literary language on the guidelines of the canon. According to him, a norm or tradition is defined by a certain dominant, it is the "shifting" (ibid., 44) of this dominant that is the stimulus of literary evolution or, more neutrally stated, change. The shifting of the dominant results in "a shift in [. . .] hierarchy" (ibid.) of the artistic devices. Artistic innovation emerges against an

established background, and art always stands in a dialectic relationship between a simultaneous preservation and breaking away from tradition (cf. *ibid.*, 46). The changing dominant also affects the relationship between the arts, making the boundaries porous. The reader (or listener or viewer) therefore needs to consider two things: “the traditional canon and the artistic novelty as a deviation from that canon” (*ibid.*). Attributes not regarded as valuable by a former tradition may be assigned value by new schools (cf. *ibid.*, 45).

Since literary language is connected to prosaic language as well as to other literary works, the allegation that Russian Formalism is an essentialist theory is baseless. Victor Erlich points out how many of the more radical statements that proclaim the autonomy of art must be viewed as strategic polemics of a young school of criticism rather than as claims that should be taken literally (cf. Erlich 1980, 77). During the early stages of Formalism, literariness was clearly marked as intrinsic, ruled by a literary artifact’s “immanent laws” (Jakobson 1973 [1935], 62), whereas later Formalism developed more nuanced arguments. Boris Tomashevsky, for example, points out that a “writer always considers the reader” (Tomashevsky 1965 [1925], 63) and that “the changing, day-to-day interests of the audience” (*ibid.*, 64) and “‘real’ themes” (*ibid.*) must be taken into account to produce relevant artworks. Shklovsky’s emphatic statement of art as the antidote for an automatization of perception that devours ‘everything, even the fear of war’ is also far from a proclamation on the aestheticist autonomy of art. Cristina Vatulescu strongly emphasizes the link of *ostranenie* to revolutionary politics and the conditions brought about by the police state of the Soviet era (cf. Vatulescu 2006). Though this political stance is not the specific focus of our study, it is important to counter still widely prevalent misunderstandings that have led to prejudices against the theory.

### ***The Palpability and Performativity of Poetic Language***

As noted with regard to Shklovsky’s turn of phrase, making the “stone *stony*,” linguistic deviations in literature are often accompanied by increased attention to the ‘material substance’ of the representation as well as to the performance of speech. If the reader or listener is made aware of the signs by stumbling over the roughened form of the text, the form is perceptible “not psychologically, but in a physically concrete sense” (Brokoff 2014, 489). To describe this perceived materiality, Jakobson coined the formula “palpability of signs” (Jakobson 1960, 356). This consists of two levels of meaning: the ‘tactile quality’ of signs and the sensory effects brought about in the viewer. Jakobson emphasizes the aural effects of poetry and refers primarily to oral language, contrary to most literary theory. This focus resonates in Roland Barthes’s notion of the ‘grain of the voice,’ which describes how the voice as material exceeds the sheer linguistic level of communication (cf. Barthes 1977 and Chapter 3, Section 1). Jakobson describes a physical response to the form of the poetic text: “Form exists for us only as long as it is difficult to perceive, as long as we sense the resistance of the material, as long as we waver as to whether what we read is prose or poetry, as long as our, cheekbones ache.” (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 59).

Difficult and at times even unpleasant, form is perceivable in media art both from the perspective of the viewer, who is often overburdened with myriad impressions of sound and images, and from the perspective of the performer, who is affected by ‘aching cheekbones,’ as in Vito Acconci’s video *Open Book*, in which the artist utters words with his jaws spread wide open (see Chapter 3, Section 1). Overall, poetic language can be perceived as such if it is ostentatious or if it intentionally creates deviations from norms, a heightened awareness of the materiality and structure of language (cf. Jannidis 2003, 326f)—an ‘aesthetic surplus’ that exceeds the communicative function.

The materiality of palpable signs often results in a self-referentiality of language by addressing its “own structural principles, the conditions of its production and reception, or its mediatedness” (Von Rosen 2003, 327). Self-referentiality is a dominant aesthetic device in media art, emphasizing the materiality of language as well as the properties of media technologies. Mukařovský explains this auto-referential dimension of poetic language with the process of foregrounding:

The function of poetic language consists in the maximum of foregrounding of the utterance. Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. [. . .] In poetic language foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background as the objective of expression and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. (Mukařovský 2007, 19)

The foregrounding of speech or script creates a heightened awareness of sound, syllables, letters, or the process of production itself. Mukařovský points out that there are different modes of deautomatization and, consequently, foregrounding, “carried out by lexical selection (the mutual interlarding of contrasting areas of the lexicon) [or] by the uncommon semantic relationship of words close together in the context” (ibid., 20). Helmstetter links self-referentiality to Jakobson’s concept of the poetic function:

Poetic language makes the linguistic features that are latent in language use [. . .] manifest, ‘palpable’ (Jakobson) and observable. Poetic speech makes an impact by way of its noticeable difference to the norms, habits and automatisms of everyday speech; it emphasizes what is being said—but simultaneously ties it to the means and possibilities of saying. (Helmstetter 1995, 30)

In this quote, Helmstetter refers to Jakobson’s formula as well as to his idea of the ‘poetic function’ of language. As noted earlier, Jakobson states that the supremacy of the poetic function establishes literariness. The main task of the poetic function is then to “focus on the message for its own sake” (Jakobson 1960, 356; cf. Hansen-Löve 1978, 119f; Helmstetter 1995, 31), that is, on the materiality of the signs in which “the word is felt as a word, and [is] not a mere representation of the object being named” (Jakobson 1987 [1934], 378). In other words, language loses its transparency. His central point is that poeticity “is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total re-evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever” (Jakobson 1960, 377). Shklovksy also emphasizes that “[p]oetic language differs from prosaic language in the perceptibility of its structure” (Shklovksy in Steiner 1984, 147). Through its focus on perception, the poetic function “deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” (Jakobson 1960, 356). Media art often thematizes this split. However, in some cases the poetic function may even destroy this dichotomy altogether, and the sign itself becomes the object.

Self-referentiality is thus a central feature of literariness. Analyzing Russian Futurism, Jakobson explores the notion of the self-sufficient, “self-developing, self-valuing” word, which makes “visible” the “verbal mass” of language (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 61f). He further states that this phenomenon is not restricted to the realm of literature only but also includes plastic arts with regard to a “shaping of self-sufficient visual impressions” (ibid., 62), or music and dance. This

notion of the self-sufficient expression is related to the special artistic device *obnazenie priëma*, the ‘laying bare’ of a device. A device is laid bare when “[t]he artistic form is presented simply as such, without any kind of motivation” (Shklovsky 1965 [1921], 27). In Formalism, each element in a work of art serves a specific function, has a motivation, and Tomashevsky outlines three types: the ‘compositional motivation,’ which describes the “economy and usefulness of the motifs” (Tomashevsky 1965 [1925], 78) and means that every element serves a purpose in a literary text; the ‘realistic motivation,’ which is an “element of ‘illusion’” (ibid., 80) but is also ‘real’ and has a certain “lifelikeness” (ibid., 81), allowing for “nonliterary materials” (ibid., 84) to enter the artwork; and the ‘artistic motivation,’ which includes defamiliarization, ensuring that the inclusion of extra-literal material is “justified artistically” (ibid., 85). The laying bare of devices is a special case of artistic motivation. As both Shklovsky and Jakobson explain, in a state of automatized recognition, objects are perceived as if “enveloped in a sack” (Shklovsky 1965 [1917], 11) or as if “covered by a veneer” (Jakobson 1973 [1921], 69). This is also the case with aesthetic devices: over time, recipients become so used to them that they lose their power. The artist must lay bare the devices to make them perceivable again. Kessler regards *obnazenie priëma* as a meta-device with which art reflects on its own conditions: “Art observes itself, becomes its own subject matter, without any need for any extra-artistic motivation” (Kessler 1996, 55).

In literary theory and aesthetics, this strategy is referred to as self-reference, auto-feedback, and self-mirroring. The most relevant—and often overlapping—terms are ‘potentialization,’ *mise-en-abyme*, and *metalepsis*. The term ‘potentialization’ signifies an iteration of aesthetic signs (Fricke 2007, 144). In the visual arts, this phenomenon is especially prominent in modernism and postmodernism; in literature, it was exemplified as a concept in German Romanticism as well as in experimental avant-garde and modernist works. Fricke distinguishes between two main forms and two subcategories of potentialization: first, ‘graded iteration,’ where a sign relation is repeated on a higher level (e.g. a singer plays a singer in a play or film)—subdivided into ‘infinite iteration,’ where the graded iteration cannot come to a close, (e.g. a circular song or poem) and ‘recursive iteration,’ which comes about by means of a technological feedback loop (e.g. a mirror in a mirror, the video image of the monitor)—and second, ‘paradoxical iteration,’ where a sign relation is projected back on a higher level, violating the logic or hierarchy (e.g. a painter is painted painting the person being painted or a fictive character that invents its author; cf. ibid.). Striking examples of different types of iteration in media art are discussed in Chapter 3, Section 1. Mona Hatoum’s *So Much I Want to Say* is, for instance, a case of paradoxical iteration: We hear the artist’s voice repeating the artwork’s title, which creates a tension between her proclaimed wish to provide information and the simultaneous withholding of information.

The figure of *mise-en-abyme* stands for a literary recursivity, where at least one element—be it of the content or a formal feature—appears analogously on a subordinate level (cf. Wolf 1998, 373). Every story within a story or every play within a play can be considered as *mise-en-abyme*. In any case, “a relation of homology or resemblance is required” (ibid.). *Mise-en-abyme* structures appear, for example, in the video installation *Moved Up Moved Down* by American artist Jill Scott in which the artist is depicted moving up and down a gigantic staircase (see Chapter 4, Section 1).

In narratology, *metalepsis* is understood as a shifting or transgressing between the diegetic and the non-diegetic world: “[A]ny intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) [. . .] produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [. . .] or fantastic” (Genette 1980, 234f; cf. Thon 2009, 86; Morsch 2012, 100). A strong case of *metalepsis* occurs in Dieter Froese’s video *The Piece in the*

*Country (Failure Piece #2)*, in which the artist appears as commentator who describes the process of making the video (see Chapter 4, Section 3).

On a more general level, self-referentiality is also relevant when it comes to literary genres, which we focus on in Chapter 4, “Literary Genres in Media Art.” The explicit reference to a genre, for instance in a paratext, prompts specific expectations. The conventions of the genre can be fulfilled or disappointed, and in any case the genre produces a frame that enables the perception of deviations that may be acknowledged and interpreted (cf. Krah 2005, 10).

Self-referentiality is also central to the theory of performativity. This theory considers linguistic utterances as either ‘constative’ or ‘performative’: For the former, the criterion is truth or falseness; for the latter, it is success or failure (cf. Bohle and König 2002, 13). A speech act is executive and features a reference to itself: It articulates exactly what it simultaneously performs through the articulation (for instance, the illocutionary act accompanying a baptism; cf. Austin 1962). Certain deeds are performative in that they are executed through language and in the act of speaking. According to John Austin, “explicit performative utterances” (ibid., 58) consist of specific grammatical features: a first-person subject, a second-person object, and a *verbum dicendi* in the aspectual neutral form of the present tense. Performativity occurs when speaking and acting coincide, which is especially evident in explicitly performative verbs that belong to the speech acts of declarations, as in the notorious ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’

‘Performative’ is an attribute of symbolic actions that are characterized by the fact that they perform what they are simultaneously naming. It is about a special form of constitutive activity, where a symbolic action transcends the borderline between sign/non-sign and thus receives a world-changing power—although this is not to be interpreted as a kind of magic. [. . .] Performative uses of signs always feed on the permeability between the symbolic and the non-symbolic. (Krämer and Stahlhut 2002, 57)

Such a self-reflexive performance of art is seen, for example, in John Baldessari’s video performance *I Am Making Art*, in which the artist recites the title sentence to ridicule and reflect on the conventions of making art (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

### ***Ambiguity and the Split Sign***

Another source of literariness are the ambiguities and polyvalences of signs. Helmstetter regards literary language as largely dedicated to unleashing the possibilities of signification, language’s richness of connotation (cf. Helmstetter 1995, 33). The literary production of ambiguity results in a diversification of meaning. Mukařovský also values the duality between the figurative and the basic meaning of a word as a moment that produces “semantic breaks” (Mukařovský 2007 [1932], 29). Ambiguity thus becomes a potential source of defamiliarization.

According to Jakobson, “[t]he supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous” (Jakobson 1960, 371). With his notion of the ‘split sign’ (cf. Simon 2009, 189), Simon is referring to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “internal dialogism” of the polyphonic word (Bakhtin 1981, 326) that is also reflected in Julia Kristeva’s concept of poetic language, with the poetic word being “polyvalent and multi-determined” (Kristeva 1986, 65). The ambiguity of poetic signs is grounded in the often indecisive tendency towards figural or literal signification. The power and dominance of the poetic function also leads to a re-modeling of Jakobson’s other five functions (cf. Simon

2009, 202): They also become “poeticized” (ibid.). Especially in poststructuralist positions, the generation of meaning is understood as an act of permanent suspension or deferral (cf. Winko 2009, 384), which has in this regard been compared to Russian Formalism (cf. Crawford 1984; Speck 1997).

*Ostranenie*, as one of the hallmarks of literary language, refers to the subversive potential of language, as it can disturb our perception or overthrow norms and traditions. The ambiguity of literary language also contains this potential. Closely related to the phenomena of linguistic estrangement and ambiguity are utterances that work with ‘heteroglossia,’ a term referring to the use of several languages or levels of language. The concept originates from Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, in which he focuses on the ideas of ‘dialogism,’ ‘double-voiced discourse,’ ‘hybridity,’ and ‘heteroglossia.’ The Bakhtin circle initially criticized Russian Formalism. However, Kristeva regards Formalist thought as its “starting point” (Kristeva 1973, 105) to then “shift the basis of the Formalist poetics” (ibid., 106). This shift is towards a strong emphasis on the historical background, the speakers and their contexts, and viewing literature and ideology as connected (cf. ibid., 105f). Bakhtin analyzed literary discourse as the “concept of a language which a speaker carries with him and/or of a speaker becoming himself within the language” (ibid., 108). Dialogism is then, in Kristeva’s words:

the term which indicates that the discourse belongs doubly to an ‘I’ and to the other, that *Spaltung* [split] of the speaker [...]. The dialogic sees in every word a word about the word, addressed to the word; and it is only on condition that it belongs to this polyphony—to this ‘intertextual’ space—that the word is a ‘full’ word. The dialogue of words/discourses is infinite [it] does not have a fixed meaning. (ibid., 109)

Bakhtin establishes the idea of an author being in dialog with his or her characters (cf. ibid., 110) as well as with other literary works and authors; the fundamental polyphony that results from these multidimensional dialogs makes a number of voices and connected ideologies heard (cf. ibid., 113). Kristeva highlights the subversive power of this understanding of text: “The (polyphonic) text has no ideology of its own. It is an apparatus for exposing and exhausting the ideologies in their confrontation” (ibid., 114). This idea is closely tied to Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and hybridization. Bakhtin uses the term ‘hybridization’ “to describe the ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance” (Young 2002, 20; cf. Benthien 2015, 289f). He characterizes this literary phenomenon of so-called “double-speech” as follows:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems. We repeat, there is no formal—compositional and syntactic—boundary between these utterances, styles, languages, belief systems; the division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence. (Bakhtin 1981, 304)

Bakhtin calls this form of hybridity “intentional.” Its counterpart is termed “organic hybridity,” a form of unconscious (or non-intentional) hybridity, which tends toward fusion: two or more cultural codes that merge into one, turning into a new linguistic code whose ‘deviation’ is no longer perceived. Organic hybridity is, in contrast to intentional hybridity, non-dialogical



(cf. Bakhtin 1981, 360). Robert Young has emphasized that Bakhtin's "doubled form of hybridity" gives a "model for cultural interaction" (Young 2002, 22) that corresponds to the idea of (literary) norm as deviation, as discussed earlier. He considers organic hybridity as being "in conflict with intentional hybridity, which enables a contestatory activity, a politicized setting of cultural differences against each other dialogically" (ibid.). Bakhtin emphasizes that intentional hybridity aims at presenting—and at the same time linguistically performing—cultural conflicts. Within a single discourse, one voice may unmask the other, which may destruct or undermine authority.

According to Bakhtin, dialogism is most prominent in the novel—but it can also be extended into the realm of (narrative) media art. He states that the writer or narrator can use language as a tool, not to "speak in a given language" but to speak "as it were, *through* language" (Bakhtin 1981, 299):

Thus a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of the work. He can make use of language without wholly giving himself up to it, he may treat it as semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions. (ibid.)

Bakhtin mainly refers to 19th-century novels and uses the language of ceremonial speeches, official banquets, or court language to parody specific, often old-fashioned or reactionary modes of speaking (cf. ibid., 303). Media artworks that deal with cultural and linguistic conflicts, such as Trace Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* (see Chapter 4, Section 3), demonstrate the critical potential of the concept.

The general term for these various forms of defamiliarized speech is the Grecism heteroglossia, which is defined as "*another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*" (ibid., 324). Andrew Robinson argues that "[i]n a situation of heteroglossia, the dominant perspective, or one's own perspective, is itself defamiliarised" (Robinson 2011, n.p.), through juxtaposition with other, competing perspectives. This effect of defamiliarization echoes the Russian Formalist's notion of estrangement. Furthermore, with regard to the notion of foregrounding the materiality of signs, heteroglossia may serve as a way of sharpening one's awareness of the utterance, as well as of the language material itself by making it strange. In media art, the phenomena of heteroglossia in the sense of using multiple languages within an artwork—raising the issue and concerns of translation—often play a central role. Several works analyzed later in this book employ both different languages and different modalities of language. They combine visual, acoustic, and iconic elements of these languages and address as well as demonstrate fundamental differences between them. The works use aesthetic means to reflect the complexities of translation and understanding in different languages and sign systems. In doing so, they commit to a strategy of conceptually overwhelming the viewer with the simultaneity of languages and modalities and foreground the fragility of translation and the question of translatability in itself.

Our final focus in this subsection is Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, which also offers a transition to the next subsection and its discussion of intermediality. Generally, Kristeva is seen as having developed intertextuality as an interpretation of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, and the concepts are often treated synonymously. Andrea Lešić-Thomas argues that even though Kristeva introduced Bakhtin to the academic world in the 1960s to establish her concept of intertextuality,

they in fact developed “very different concepts” belonging “to different conceptual worlds” (Lešić-Thomas 2005, 3). What is more, she astutely draws connections between Kristeva’s concepts and Formalist concepts in spite of Kristeva’s disparaging comment on Formalism as “a discourse on nothing or on something which does not matter” (Kristeva 1973, 104). She claims that “‘intertextuality’ probably owes as much (if not more) to the ideas of Shklovsky, Jakobson, and Tynyanov as to those of Bakhtin” (Lešić-Thomas 2005, 3). The reasons lie in Kristeva’s act of replacing Bakhtinian ‘intersubjectivity’ with ‘intertextuality’ (cf. *ibid.*, 5), a strategic omission according to Lešić-Thomas in the rise of poststructuralist thought and her own stance on it (cf. *ibid.*, 6). Kristeva’s consideration of “writers, readers, cultural contexts, history and society” as “‘texts’ and ‘textual surfaces’” (*ibid.*, 5) is problematic when presented as having a direct lineage to Bakhtin, since it removes the subject, agency, and intentionality—central to Bakhtin’s thought—from the theory. In addition, it moves her toward Russian Formalism, which did not focus on authorial intentionality or the voice of the author.

In a narrow understanding of text, intertextuality refers to the relationship between literary texts. From this perspective, Lešić-Thomas claims that “[i]t can hardly be argued that it was Bakhtin who invented ‘intertextuality,’ since the question of relations between texts was one of the main problems occupying the Russian Formalists since the mid-1920s” (*ibid.*, 7). By omitting Bakhtin, Lešić-Thomas puts Kristeva and Formalism in direct relationship to one another. The Formalist theory of the ‘background’ of other texts thus becomes an early version of a “theory of what we now term ‘intertextuality’” (*ibid.*, 8). Formalism was engaged in an early version of a “comparative, historical study of literature,” (*ibid.*, 10) and Kristeva’s ideas regarding intertextuality as “a mosaic of quotations” and considering “any text [a]s the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1986, 66) echo Formalist approaches to literary ‘evolution.’ As mentioned earlier, Formalism regarded literary development as the deviation from a given tradition or norm, and assumed that certain devices gained a different value and function at a certain time (cf. Tynyanov 1987 [1927], 155). The deviation from the norm as a main feature of literature, causing literary innovation, resembles several of Kristeva’s ideas:

We can see Kristeva’s concept in the Formalists’ idea that the changes in literature come about through parody and writers’ literary reaction to each other; in the idea that ‘differential quality’ determines the nature of literary phenomena and that the structure of a text cannot be understood if studied in isolation; in the idea that, as Kristeva puts it, a literary text is a structure which does not exist autonomously, but develops in relationship to another structure. (Lešić-Thomas 2005, 15)

Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality may therefore be linked to the Russian Formalist concept of the background, recalling both Bakhtin and Shklovsky. Strikingly, Lešić-Thomas regards Shklovsky’s theory of *ostranenie* as far more groundbreaking than Bakhtin’s and considers the connection between Kristeva and Formalism as stronger (cf. *ibid.*, 17). If a literary work can be examined only against the background of a norm, “[a] literary text is thus intertextual in its essence” (*ibid.*, 14). Moreover, the Formalist Tynyanov clearly alludes to the manifold ties between literary elements, and his argument is reminiscent of Kristeva’s intertextuality: “An element is on the one hand interrelated with similar elements in other works in other systems, and on the other hand it is interrelated with different elements within the same work” (Tynyanov 1987 [1927], 154). A work of literature—or art in general—is thus defined by internal as well as external connections. While the former create cohesion and density, the latter establish bonds with other artworks and extra literary elements—contemporary and past.

The interrelationship of these concepts is of great importance to an analysis of the literariness of media art, as it is a phenomenon situated at the intersection of the arts. Russian Formalism is a theory that aims at an understanding of interrelatedness, not only between literary texts themselves, but also—as the next subsection demonstrates—between literature and film. Together with Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality, this leads to the concept of intermediality, which is concerned with the relations between the arts. Intermediality, though a much later theory, may be viewed as having emerged from Formalism: This is a ‘bottom up’ approach rather than one that places intermediality uneasily on top of Formalism to prove a point. The theory of intertextuality is especially important to Chapter 5, “Works of Literality in Media Art,” which regards media artworks that overtly and covertly draw on literary texts.

## 2.2 Literariness Beyond Literature: Transdisciplinary Perspectives

### *Literariness and Ostranenie in Audiovisual Arts*

The aim of this study is to explore how language is made strange in works of media art and to account for how this defamiliarization affects the audience. The previous section introduced literariness as a concept that refers to the aesthetic qualities of literary texts and also established Russian Formalism as a theory dedicated to the development of a general aesthetics. The concept of literariness considers the aesthetic features of an artwork, such as the foregrounded use of speech or the inclusion of written texts. Other characteristics of media art, however, are involved in the process of defamiliarization: montage, camera perspective, sound and music, or a combination of multiple media that strains the viewer's perceptive capacities. Therefore, this section moves from the domain of literary theory to the field of audiovisual media theory. While recent film and media theory has focused on *ostranenie* as the prominent aesthetic feature described by Russian Formalism, we consider it as one of the manifold aspects of literariness. *Ostranenie* describes artistic techniques of 'making strange' that are not essentially tied to one medium or art form.

When considering the origins of the concept, it becomes clear that even though the Russian Formalists largely used literary texts to exemplify the aesthetic techniques of estrangement, they may very well have been influenced by the disruptive experience of early cinema. *Ostranenie* can thus be considered a theory concept, exploring the "perceptual potential of new technologies and techniques" (Van den Oever 2010b, 33). Early film had a tremendous impact, often creating shock or astonishment (cf. Gunning 1995, 119), and it also influenced literary writing (cf. Marcus 2007). That influence was reciprocal, as adaptations of literary works were prevalent in early film (cf. Phillips 2010; cf. Leitch 2007a, 22). Therefore, *ostranenie* may be considered a theoretical approach mediating between the arts. This study uses both concepts of literariness and *ostranenie* as go-betweens, as levers to shift perspectives between the literary and linguistic features of media art and the perceptual qualities derived from other audiovisual techniques of estrangement. This perspective allows an encompassing analysis of how devices of language, image, sound, or montage work together to shape an aesthetic experience.

The first part of this section considers Russian Formalist writings on film to illustrate their connection to the idea of 'making strange.' Furthermore, certain elements of the media art experience related to *ostranenie* are better explained by more recent film and media theories, which also often refer to Formalism. We link these to *ostranenie* as part of an ongoing reinvestigation of this notion in order to identify its "relevance for cinema and media studies" (Van den Oever 2010a, 11). This allows for a productive approach to questions related to intermediality, which are also discussed later on. As a transmedial concept that features in both linguistic and non-linguistic art forms, *ostranenie* demonstrates how different arts use different means to disrupt a transparent perception.

### *Russian Formalism and Film*

The emergence of the concept of *ostranenie* in 1917 was likely influenced by the advent of early film. Later, the Russian Formalists applied their literary poetics to the art form of cinema. A comprehensive collection of essays on film, edited by Boris Eikhenbaum, was notably titled *Poetika kino* (1927). By analyzing film in comparison to literature, or even by understanding film as a specific kind of language, the Formalists sought to make a case for an appreciation of film as art. Shklovsky—who authored numerous essays on film, a book on the film director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, and also worked as a screenwriter—refers to literary genres

when he differentiates between the ‘film of prose’ and ‘film of poetry’ (also see Chapter 4, Section 1):

They are distinguished one from the other not by rhythm, or rather, not by rhythm alone, but by the fact that in a poetic film the technical-formal features predominate over the semantic features. The composition is resolved by formal techniques rather than by semantic methods. Plotless film is poetic film. (Shklovsky 1973b [1927], 130)

In contrast to his writings in which he uses ‘prose’ in the sense of ‘prosaic’ practical language, Shklovsky here describes the different formal principles of two filmic genres in regard to literary genres. Whereas the dominant device in the film of prose is the restructuring of *fabula* into *sužet* (cf. *ibid.*; also see Chapter 4, Section 3), the film of poetry is dominated by formal devices: for instance parallelism or double exposure, which create ‘poetic images’ with “multi-faceted significance” and an “undefined aura” (*ibid.*). Prose and poetry are, according to Shklovsky, the two aesthetic poles between which any film is situated. If one wants to follow Shklovsky’s scheme, works of media art are broadly to be situated in the realm of poetry. In many works of media art, formal devices are foregrounded, whether it be with a focus on the use of written or spoken language or due to a defamiliarizing montage of images or sound. Moreover, multiple technologies are often involved in rendering the experience opaque, as in multi-channel or multimedia installations. Implied in this is a performative potential of the formal elements of the artwork to renew perception. Shklovsky’s aesthetic poles can be equated with two ends on a perceptual continuum that shifts between an automatized, transparent perceptual experience and a deautomatizing perceptual impact.

Eikhenbaum approaches the “Problems of Film Stylistics” by explicitly referring to Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, reminding readers:

Art draws on those aspects of everyday life which have no practical application. Everyday automatism of language use leaves masses of phonetic, semantic and syntactic nuances unexploited—and these find a place for themselves in verbal art (Viktor Shklovsky). (Eikhenbaum 1974 [1927], 8)

Two aspects of this quote stand out: First, Eikhenbaum also transfers a literary category—*zaum*’—to the realm of cinema. Second, he implies that film is a verbal art. The notion of *zaum*’ refers to the ‘transrational’ poetry of the Russian Futurists (see Chapter 3, Section 1), that is, to a form of poetry using the excess nuances of language—or any human expression for that matter. Liberated from the bondage of habitual everyday communication, the *zaum*’ elements constitute the material of literature and art, and may even be foregrounded, laid bare. Yet art brings these elements into a specific form threatened by conventionality: “The constant disparity between the ‘trans-sense’ and language—such is the internal antinomy of art, regulating its evolution” (*ibid.*, 9). Eikhenbaum calls the trans-sense essence of cinema ‘photogenic,’ to be observed whenever “method and style” render familiar objects unfamiliar on the screen, and thus enable the viewers to “see things anew” (*ibid.*). He links the concept of *zaum*’ to the idea of the filmic *photogénie*, brought forward by Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein (cf. Delluc 1920, Epstein 1988 [1924]), a concept that describes film’s ability to help us see familiar objects in a new light. Film was said to have become an art form when it evolved from a mere recording device into an artistic ‘language’ that defamiliarizes the natural perception of things. For Eikhenbaum, as for other Formalists, montage is the central device for achieving ‘seeing’ in contrast to mere ‘recognition,’ to pick up Shklovsky’s distinction from the previous section once more. In order to

analyze the specificity of the language of film, Eikhenbaum approaches the problems of cinema stylistics by relating montage to syntax and highlighting the importance of the viewer's internal speech:

For the study of the laws of film (especially of montage) it is most important to admit that perception and understanding of a motion-picture is inextricably bound up with the development of internal speech, which makes the connection between separate shots. Outside this process only the 'trans-sense' [*zäum*'] elements of film can be perceived. The film viewer must perform the complex mental labour of connecting the frames (construction of film-phrases and film-periods), a form of labour practically nonexistent in everyday life where the word covers and eliminates all other means of expression. He must continually form a chain of film-phrases, or else he will not understand anything. [. . .] Film viewing is accompanied by a continual process of internal speech. We have already grown accustomed to a whole series of typical patterns of film-language; the smallest innovation in this sphere strikes us no less forcibly than the appearance of a new word in language. To treat film as an absolutely non-verbal art is impossible. Those who defend cinema from the imitation of literature often forget that though the audible word is eliminated from film, the thought, ie, internal speech, is nevertheless present. The study of the particularities of this film-speech is one of the most important problems in cinematic theory. (Eikhenbaum 1974 [1927], 14)

Internal speech is an analogy for the cognitive processes in the viewer's mind needed to connect successive frames—a task inherently different from everyday experience. Eikhenbaum's formulation of cinema stylistics includes questions of the film phrase, the film period, but also the film metaphor (cf. *ibid.*, 70), which the viewer combines in order to understand what he or she sees. Once this mental connecting process is disrupted, the filmic medium is laid bare. Eikhenbaum's considerations anticipated subsequent semiotic theories of film, for instance those developed by Christian Metz or Raymond Bellour. As Kim Knowles correctly remarks, one needs to distinguish between "language *in* the cinema" and "language *of* cinema" (Knowles 2015, 46). While the latter constitutes a central topic of Structuralist semiotics, our investigation into the literariness of media art is primarily concerned with the first, that is, the occurrence of different forms of language use in the audiovisual arts.

Although semiotic theories have been highly influential in the field of film studies, their implications will not be further elaborated on, as this study is neither concerned with the development of an encompassing model of media art nor interested in perpetuating the notion of moving image art as language (for a detailed presentation and critique on the question of film language, cf. Elsaesser and Poppe 1994; Stam 2000, 107–122; Gaut 2010, 51–60). However, using film language as a metaphor for the perceptual qualities of film can be useful: If language has to be as transparent as possible for the purpose of communication, it becomes opaque once its features have been made unfamiliar or when some of its devices are highlighted. In comparison, once a film's immersive potential is disrupted by foregrounded elements or devices that have been made strange, its content—in the sense of a transparent illusion of a fictional world—retreats to the background. At the same time, viewers perceive the filmic material, cinematographic devices, or even the technological apparatus involved in the creation of moving image art.

The Formalists theorized film in a period when it transitioned from being 'silent' to including verbalized speech, and some of them regarded audible actors as an impurity of the cinematic art. They worked to analyze how a 'purely' visual albeit time-based art form could bear a resemblance to poetry and prose. They shared a focus on montage as a central cinematic device with

Soviet constructivist directors such as Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov, who explored montage under the hypothesis that it appeals to viewers and may influence them emotionally or somatically (cf. Bordwell 1972, 14; Sobchack 2004, 55). The idea behind this is that specific devices cue specific responses in the viewer, an idea adopted by cognitive film theory (cf. Bordwell 1985) and Neoformalism.

### ***Technology as Device***

Shklovsky's theory not only centered on the aesthetic devices of film, but also considered techniques in the sense of technology (cf. Van den Oever 2010b, 55). As Annie van den Oever points out, he also uses the term *prion*, which is translated as 'device' or 'technique,' to refer to the perceptual effects of the new technology of film. Thus, *ostranenie* does not apply to only the formal, aesthetic elements—the techniques—of an artwork, but also to the artwork's material base and to the technology involved in creating a perceptual effect. Technique and technology are consequently both involved in the creation of artistic effects. Based on this, technology itself can become a device of defamiliarization.

In the realm of media art, the historical context of an artwork's technology becomes an important factor in considering its defamiliarizing effects. Van den Oever attributes these to emerging technologies in particular, which bear a special "perceptual potential" (ibid., 33). As previously mentioned, she regards the concept of *ostranenie* as inherently linked to the experience of early cinema. This period can be considered as medium-specific, and it is marked by medium-sensitive viewers, who went to the cinema in order to experience the effects of the new medium rather than the content of the film itself (cf. Van den Oever 2011, 9). Tom Gunning describes new technology's defamiliarization of perception as follows: "A discourse of wonder draws our attention to new technology, not simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before" (Gunning 2003, 45). New technologies trigger a sense of wonder in the viewer, and artists often explore their perceptual impact. When we look at media art, it is often illuminating to consider which technology is employed at which point in history: Is the work situated within the emergence of early video technology or the rise of digital recording devices, or does the artwork make use of technologies that are considered old or 'obsolete' as device? As Gunning explains, the sense of wonder can diminish over time as the viewer's perception becomes automatized. However, just as "wonder can be worn down into habit; habit can suddenly, even catastrophically, transform back into a shock of recognition" (ibid., 46). In this way, the striking effect of old technologies may be renewed and employed from a new standpoint.

### ***The Poetics of Neoformalism***

An opponent of understanding cinematic art as language is film scholar Kristin Thompson, who states that the "Formalists' writings on cinema are of little use" for her study (Thompson 1981, 31). Instead, she draws heavily on their theory of literature, in particular Shklovsky's "Art as Device/Technique," and baptizes her new approach to the study of film 'Neoformalism': "Neoformalism as an approach does offer a series of broad assumptions about how artworks are constructed and how they operate in cueing audience response. But Neoformalism does not prescribe *how* these assumptions are embodied in individual films" (Thompson 1988, 6). By referring to the construction of artworks and the viewers' response, Thompson hints at the central passage in Shklovsky's essay (cf. Thompson 1981, 32; Thompson 1988, 10), referred to in the

previous section, where he claims that the central function of the arts is “to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known”; in the passage he also introduces the respective artistic techniques, “to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception”—the latter because he considers the process of perception as “an aesthetic end in itself” (Shklovsky 1965a [1917], 12). The key concept Thompson derives from Shklovsky is *ostranenie*, here translated as ‘defamiliarization.’ Neoformalism is of particular interest to our study because it shares the understanding of Russian Formalist poetics as general aesthetics: “[T]his view of the function of the artwork as a renewal of perception through defamiliarization can be applied to film, since it is basic to all artforms” (Thompson 1981, 33; cf. Thompson 1988, 11). However, Thompson focuses on feature film, not media art, which is why not all of her findings apply to our investigation.

According to her, the advantage of Formalist (and Neoformalist) thought is that the purpose of artworks is understood as a defamiliarization of habitualized perception. Consequently, the split between form and content that prevails in communicative models of art is avoided. A work of art is not simply a neutral messenger with the sole purpose of delivering specific content (cf. Thompson 1981, 33). Rather, meaning has to be understood as one formal component among others, as material, specifically as a “work’s systems of cues for denotations and connotations” (Thompson 1988, 12). Denotation can be referential or explicit, referring to either recognizable phenomena of the real world or more abstract notions that nevertheless explicitly pervade the film. Connotative cues form implicit or symptomatic meanings and therefore demand interpretation. Though meaning may be defamiliarized in a work of art, it can also add to the deautomatization of perception, as meaning is only one device among others (cf. *ibid.*, 15).

Thompson understands ‘device’ quite literally as any of the various elements that make up a film, such as editing, *mise-en-scène*, and framing, but also a theme or repeated word (cf. Thompson 1981, 26; Thompson 1988, 15). Defamiliarization is not an effect of one single device but “ultimately depends on their being combined to create a difficulty of perception” (Thompson 1981, 28). Neoformalism also adopts the notion of the dominant from Formalism:

The dominant determines which devices and functions will come forward as important defamiliarizing traits, and which will be less important. The dominant will pervade the work, governing and linking small-scale devices to large-scale ones; through the dominant, the stylistic, narrative, and thematic levels will relate to each other. [. . .] The work cues us as to its dominant by *foregrounding* certain devices and placing others less prominently. (Thompson 1988, 43f)

Consequently, in this interplay of devices, each has a specific motivation. Drawing and expanding on the concepts of Boris Tomashevsky, Thompson differentiates between four basic motivations: compositional motivation, realistic motivation, artistic motivation, and transtextual motivation (cf. *ibid.*, 16–21; the first three were introduced in Tomashevsky 1965 [1925], 78–87; also see Chapter 2, Section 1). Devices with compositional motivation ensure the unity of the work, for instance the narrative causality. The compositional motivation might even be regarded as a universal principle of structuring time-based arts, which is also embodied in the famous advice allegedly given by playwright Anton Chekhov: “If in Act 1 you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act” (Rayfield 1997, 203). Realistic motivation relates devices to one’s experience in the real world, whereas the recognition of transtextually motivated devices depends on one’s knowledge of other artworks, such as the conventions of literary and filmic genres. If a device lacks all of these motivations, then its inclusion is justified by artistic motivation. A special case of the artistic motivation that Thompson adopts from Shklovsky’s discussion



of Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* is the so-called barring of the device. The 'device' was established in the previous section as an effect that occurs when the aesthetic function of an element is foregrounded in a way that an artwork's form as such is made strange and thus becomes the center of the viewers' perception.

The original concept of literariness specifically delineates an aesthetic quality derived from the disturbance of the everyday use of language in literature and the violation of previous literary norms. The concept of *ostranenie* is particularly important in this regard, as it functions as an aesthetic strategy that affects a renewed perception, and is as such subject to historical change (cf. Kessler 1996, 55; Kessler 2010, 61). Russian Formalists and Neoformalists draw specific attention to the devices that form works of art while also considering the impact of the recipient's activity and the historio-poetic setting in the construction of art: "[T]he work's devices constitute a set of cues that can encourage us to perform certain viewing activities; the actual form those activities take, however, inevitably depends on the work's interaction with its and the viewer's historical contexts" (Thompson 1988, 25). In this perspective, an artwork is not a fixed entity with stable characteristics; it comes into being only in the act of perception. Perception is never neutral, never ideal, but relies on the mental operations of the viewers (cf. *ibid.*, 25–35). Consequently, the deviant aesthetics of artworks—their power to disturb habitualized recognition and effect a new sense of seeing—can unfold only in relation to the experience and knowledge of the viewers and against the background of specific artistic paradigms: Deviance depends on established norms.

Neoformalism refers to these established norms as "backgrounds" (Thompson 1981, 47; Thompson 1988, 21), corresponding to Formalism and Structuralism. Three basic backgrounds can be differentiated: the everyday world (which is especially important in reference to realistically motivated devices); the everyday use of language or, with regard to moving images, the practical use of film; and other artworks. For Neoformalism and the related approach of 'historical poetics' (cf. Bordwell 2008; Kessler 2010, 64), the style established by classical Hollywood cinema is the most important artistic background for film analysis, which is to some extent also important within the context of this study (see also Chapter 4, Section 3). Classical cinema (circa 1910–1950) has shaped the viewing skills and expectations of the audience, delivering a viewing experience with minimal disruptions—despite and because of its very sophisticated and heavy use of cinematic devices. From a simplified perspective, narrative mainstream films are works that simulate maximum transparency and aim to turn the screen into a window, and this effect of transparency is guaranteed by sustained conventions (cf. Elsaesser and Hagener 2008, 29).

As theorized from the perspective of *ostranenie*, the oscillation between transparency and opacity, familiarity and disruptive strangeness, is subject to the historicity, the "diachronic dimension" (Kessler 2010, 73) of aesthetic developments in artistic productions. This observation is also central to David Bordwell's historical poetics, a category of his *Poetics of Cinema* (cf. Bordwell 2008)—the title of which adopts the Russian Formalists' publication *Poetika kino*. Beginning with the meaning of *poiesis*—'active making'—the approach analyzes film with regard to the principles behind its construction: The emphasis is on how a film has been made as well as "its functions, effects, and uses" (*ibid.*, 12). That approach not only closely describes a work of art but also considers the conventions influencing its production and the historical context, with these categories all subject to change (cf. *ibid.*, 15). Historical poetics describes "the effort to understand how artworks assume certain forms within a period or across periods" (*ibid.*, 13) and may shed light on the question of why an artwork's defamiliarizing potential may weaken or even gain strength over time. However, as Bordwell explains, 'poetics' can and have been used as an approach toward other media, as in Igor Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music* (1942) or Tsvetan Todorov's *Poetics of Prose* (1971; cf. *ibid.*, 12), and therefore may well be transferred to works of media art. For example, the pace of a video from the 1980s, though perfectly in line with its contemporary

standards, may appear unnaturally slow to a 21st-century viewer. As Frank Kessler states: “Any defamiliarizing device is bound to turn into a habitualized one as time goes by, so to the readers or viewers of later generations, it may indeed appear as an utterly conventional feature” (Kessler 2010, 78). This illustrates how form “is an inherently historical category” (ibid., 63). Therefore, when looking at works of art and their defamiliarizing effects, the historical context must be taken into account (cf. Bordwell 2008, 22).

### ***Literariness Between Media***

The previous section on Russian Formalism discussed intertextuality as a concept already rooted in the Formalists’ writings that describe relationships between literary texts. In the context of this study, literariness itself needs to be considered from related perspectives, namely that of intermediality and transmediality. Literariness denotes the aesthetic of literature, the quality that renders the medium of language—transparent in its necessarily familiarized use in everyday life—opaque and perceptible. The examination of literariness in media art considers how literary and poetic forms are figured in media art and how the intermedial correlations between literature and media art affect the viewer’s perception. Considering strategies of estrangement from this perspective uncovers similarities between techniques employed in literary texts and works of media art. It may also demonstrate how similar effects are brought about by very different techniques to teach us about commonalities regarding the effects on the viewer. As such, *ostranenie* is a transmedial phenomenon. In general, ‘transmediality’ is a term for “phenomena that are non-specific to individual media,” that “appear in more than one medium,” and highlight “palpable similarities between heteromedial semiotic entities” (Wolf 2005, 253). Jens Schröter has named the phenomenon “formal or trans-medial intermediality” (Schröter 2012, 20–26) to refer to structures (e.g. narrative, rhythm, or seriality) that are not essential for a singular medium but are devices shaping a variety of arts and media. This understanding of intermediality is useful when it comes to concrete analyses, yet, as Schröter points out, it has its problems with the specifics of media and is subsequently highly paradoxical:

This becomes clear specifically in those types of analyses that on the one hand are based on transmedial common grounds of different media, while on the other, however, they presuppose a hierarchical relation between these media. This hierarchy is always implied when it is maintained that a certain procedure has been transferred from one medium to another—for example when talking of a ‘literarization of the cinema.’ (ibid., 24)

On one hand, a device or structure has to be media-unspecific enough to occur in the context of another art form. On the other hand, it also has to be specific enough to allow for recognition as ‘alien’ (cf. ibid., 24f). To navigate the wild waters of essentialism and hierarchy, Schröter proposes to tackle (not solve) this paradox by taking a historical stance. This is achieved by assuming a historically first emersion, without mistaking a chronological order for an inevitable genealogy.

If, however, literariness denotes the aesthetic use of language, its resurfacing in media art needs to be considered as a phenomenon of intermediality. Depending on the notion of ‘text’ and ‘media,’ the terms ‘intertextuality’ and ‘intermediality’ are sometimes used synonymously, as in the approach of Robert Stam, who uses ‘intertextuality’ as an inclusive term when investigating film adaptations (Stam 2000). Aage Hansen-Löve’s study on Russian modernist art was one of the first to differentiate between intertextuality and intermediality. With intertextuality, he refers to monomedial correlations within a single art form, for instance literature or silent film, whereas intermediality denotes correlations of artistic productions of different art forms (cf.

Hansen-Löve 1983, 291 and 294). With the expansion of investigations into the various phenomena of hybrid artistic productions that transcend traditionally distinct art forms, intermediality is more often used as an umbrella term that “designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media” (Rajewsky 2005, 46).

Irina Rajewsky fosters an understanding of intermediality “as a category for the concrete analysis of texts or other kinds of media products” (ibid., 51). For the purpose of investigations into ‘medial configurations,’ she proposes three subcategories: ‘medial transposition,’ ‘media combination,’ and ‘intermedial references.’ She refers to a popular example of medial transpositions—film adaptations of novels—in which the literary work is conceptualized as “the ‘source’ of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process” (ibid., 51f). Such medial transpositions are also encountered in the context of media art; however, their adaptation processes differ largely from mainstream film, for example with regard to the ‘fidelity’ to the source, so that a more varied vocabulary is required (which is developed in Chapter 5). Rajewsky explicates her second subcategory with regard to plurimedial art forms such as theater or opera: ‘media combination’ indicates that “at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation [. . .] are each present in their own materiality” (ibid., 52). In media art, we find media combinations in mixed-media works, for instance the installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* by the artist Nalini Malani, which combines video projections, rotating cylinders, and drawings (see Chapter 5). Rajewsky’s third subcategory, intermedial references, includes both mere thematic references—when a literary text refers to a piece of music or a painting, for example—as well as the structural adoption of media-specific aesthetic techniques: for instance, the application of filmic devices such as “zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing” in literature (ibid., 52). She emphasizes that in this case, in contrast to the second subgenre, it is “*by definition* just *one* medium—the referencing medium (as opposed to the medium referred to)—that is materially present” (ibid., 53).

This book considers a spectrum of such intermedial references, from short clues to literary genres to the overall thesis of the ‘literariness’ of media art, which denotes structural adoptions of literary techniques. Regardless of whether literariness is considered a case of intertextuality, intermediality, or transmediality, it implies crossing borders. Yet, speaking of borders comes with fundamental implications: It assumes a line being drawn where one medium ends and another begins, evoking aspects of medium specificity that, however, are simultaneously negated by the concept of intermediality. The term itself seems paradoxical: Approaching intermediality verbatim, Oleg Gelikman highlights the strange recursive identity of the term, as ‘inter’ and ‘media’ both denote ‘between-ness’ (cf. Gelikman 2011, 1).

To address relations between media, it is also useful to refer to the concept of ‘remediation,’ introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who consider media as interconnected, as forming a network structure “continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55). Remediation does not imply a teleological narrative of improvement but instead stands for a multi-directional exchange, in which “[a]ll currently active media (old and new, analog, and digital) honor, acknowledge, appropriate, and implicitly or explicitly attack one another” (ibid., 87). Bolter and Grusin define remediation as “the representation of one medium in another” (ibid., 45). Put in this way, media art can be considered as the remediation of literary aesthetics, or even of entire literary works (examined in Chapter 5).

With regard to our study, Bolter and Grusin’s notion of media operating according to a “double logic” of remediation is especially useful. It implies that media oscillate between ‘immediacy’ and ‘hypermediacy’—or transparency and opacity. Immediacy describes the state of a medium representing ‘as if through a window,’ thus evoking the impression of a

“transparent, perceptual immediacy, experience without mediation” (ibid., 22f), a simulacrum of “unmediated presentation” (ibid., 30). The contrasting strategy results in a state of ‘hypermediacy,’ which the authors consider to be the counter-pole of immediacy (cf. ibid., 34 and 37), when the material medium-as-technology is perceived: “In the logic of hypermediacy, the artist [. . .] strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement” (ibid., 41f). The viewer becomes aware of the medium itself, which consequently interrupts the seamless transparency of the representation. The terms of immediacy/transparency and hypermediacy/opacity align with some of the fundamental concepts of literariness and defamiliarization. As the perception of media constantly shifts between the two poles, media artworks oscillate between a state of foregrounded materiality and short impressions of transparency. Moreover, transparency may be linked to Eikhenbaum’s concept of inner speech: The effect occurs when the viewer connects the impressions of the screen in his or her mind, unaware of being mediated. The moment of disruption occurs when an element is foregrounded and the formation of inner speech is hindered, when a device is laid bare and renders the medium opaque.

Bolter and Grusin’s concepts can also be correlated with those of media theorist Ludwig Jäger, who introduces the idea of ‘transcription’—or ‘transcriptivity’—to describe a medial process quite similar to remediation. Unlike Bolter and Grusin, Jäger’s terminology is rooted in linguistic and semiotic terminology—legibility, language, script—but also aims at an encompassing media theory. According to him, significance is established “by way of different means of reference that in an epistemological sense do *not* antecedently take place between sign systems and the world but that mainly on the one hand are executed *between* diverse (mediated) sign systems and on the other also *within* the same sign-system” (Jäger 2010a, 78). Jäger understands transcriptions as being “in the mode of intra- and intermedial referentiality of signs to signs, or of media to media” and, consequently, “as the respective transition from *disruption* to *transparency*, of de- and recontextualization of the signs/media in focus” (ibid., 82).

The analyzed media artworks alternate on various levels between phases of transparency—“as that state in the process of media performance in which the respective sign/medium disappears, becoming transparent regarding the contents it mediates”—and phases of disruption, when “focusing on the sign/medium as the (disrupted) operator of meaning” (ibid.). A certain element—here, the aesthetics of literature—is isolated from its context, which hinders transparency and redirects the focus to the medium as disrupted operator. Jäger claims that disruption is not a defect of communication but “that aggregate communicative state in which the sign/medium as such becomes visible and can therefore be semanticized” (Jäger 2010b, 318). It thus becomes apparent that Jäger’s concept of disruption corresponds to several relevant concepts: Shklovsky’s device of *ostranenie*, Jakobson’s palpability of signs, and also Bolter and Grusin’s notion of hypermediacy.

### ***Overabundance, Excess Emptiness, and Retreat of Synthesis***

In media art, Shklovsky’s ‘roughened form’ may be directly linked to the language that is employed; yet it may also be created by non-linguistic elements, such as disharmonic sound and noise, the emphasis on duration, or the foregrounding of media technology. Viewers are often confronted with ‘too little’ or ‘too much’ input. They may observe, for instance, one phrase being repeated for minutes, as in Holger Mader’s video *Ich suche nichts, ich bin hier*, where a young man constantly shouts nothing but the two lines of the title (see Chapter 3, Section 1). In contrast, a multimedia installation that addresses several sensory channels simultaneously may cause information overload.

Such phenomena have been addressed in postdramatic theory, whose parameters as described by Hans-Thies Lehmann often apply to media art as well. Lehmann characterizes postdramatic theater as the conscious subversion “of the classical aesthetic ideal of an ‘organic’ connection of the elements in an artefact” (Lehmann 2006, 88). Both media art and postdramatic theater frequently aim at causing a “stimulus overload” (ibid., 95) through a “play with the density of signs” (ibid., 89). Postdramatic theater, like media art, violates conventionalized norms of ‘sign density,’ either by presenting an excessive, overabundant “plethora” of simultaneous signs or, on the contrary, a conceptual emptiness, as if nothing at all is happening (ibid.). Such aesthetic devices may result in a “retreat of synthesis” (ibid., 82) or experiences of “overwhelmment” (Rebentisch 2012, 184), characteristic of media art as well, especially for multi-channel installations.

Particularly with regard to interactive or multimedia installations, bodily perception is related to both space and action, since the audience needs to navigate through the artwork. The synchronicity of multiple levels of signification is an important feature, especially if the aesthetic signs are presented in a mode of “parataxis” and “non-hierarchy” (Lehmann 2006, 86). This implies that not one component of the artwork is set as dominant, but that the non-hierarchy of the elements in fact becomes the dominant guiding the artwork. With regard to literariness in media art—as briefly discussed in the previous section—it is, for instance, the plurality of languages in their different modalities or sign systems that may constitutively overwhelm recipients. The theory of postdramatic theater also takes into account the activity of the recipient and his or her bodily self-awareness. Lehmann speaks of an “irruption of the real” (ibid., 99) through a violation of the dramatic fiction or a breaking of the theatrical frame—for instance, if the recipient perceives the real passing of time or the actual physical presence of the actors. This corresponds to the disruption often experienced by the viewer of media art through its strategy of hypermediacy, opacity, or foregrounded materiality, which is perceived as confrontational and non-immersive.

### ***Medial Opacity and Perception***

According to film scholar Robin Curtis, immersion must be understood as a two-way process between an artwork and the viewer. On one hand, the aesthetic object demands that the viewer combines the signals that address multiple perceptual channels. On the other hand, the viewer needs to direct his or her perceptual and empathetic capacity towards the object (cf. Curtis 2008, 97). This echoes Eikhenbaum’s concept of inner speech as well as film theorist Vivian Sobchack, who insists on the activity of the viewer. Along with her observation on the perception of film, the media art experience can be considered a dialog and dialectic between viewer and artwork (cf. Sobchack 1992, 23). Immersion may be perceived as an immediate, direct experience. However, Sobchack stresses how this is primarily a case of transparency:

[D]irect experience is not so much direct as it is *transparent*—either because we are primarily intending toward the world and our projects and not toward our modes and processes of perception and expression or because we are historically and culturally habituated so that what is given to us in experience is taken for granted rather than taken up as a potentially open engagement with the world and others. (Sobchack 2004, 5)

Here, transparency arises from historical and cultural habituation. Therefore, it is always important to acknowledge both the artwork’s historical framework and the viewer’s cultural context. Media art playfully challenges viewing conventions, making the audience aware not

only of perception itself but—as the specific focus of literariness demonstrates—also of the mechanisms of language.

When investigating the phrasing that Russian Formalists use to describe the effects of literary language and defamiliarization, one cannot ignore the frequent use of metaphorical language, as in Jakobson's description of 'aching cheekbones' that result from the literary experience, as well as Shklovsky's phrase 'make the stone *stony*.' Strictly speaking, these are poetic descriptions of a literary or artistic experience. On closer examination, the terms that are used—'aching,' 'feeling'—hint at an experience that, when understood by the words' literal meanings, is geared towards the recipient's senses. In fact, as Sobchack and the cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue, metaphorical or figural language is often shaped by physical, bodily experience (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 206; Sobchack 2004, 68).

The viewer's sensorial dimension is a crucial factor in the experience of media art and especially important to consider when regarding media art's means of defamiliarization. The most vivid example is perhaps a multimedia installation that engages viewers visually and aurally, asking them to negotiate their position to the artwork spatially and maybe even featuring interactive surfaces that can be touched. In contrast to the cinema, the period of time spent at an installation is not predetermined. The viewer may enter and leave the installation as she or he pleases. Installations work with this structure of temporal candidness and thus reflect their own modes of presentation and reception (cf. Rebentisch 2012, 185). Similarly, visitors respond according to their proximity to the art objects and decide—in the case of an interactive installation—whether to participate actively in the work by touching screens or other elements.

While 'touch-based' interactivity in particular leaves no doubt about an artwork's sensorial address to the viewer, film critics like Sobchack or Laura Marks emphasize the sensorial experience of watching or listening alone and the "body's essential implication in making 'meaning' out of bodily 'sense'" (Sobchack 2004, 1). Informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Sobchack shifts the focus of film studies from psychoanalysis and Marxism—emphasizing either the inner or outer conditions of the viewer—to an "embodied" (ibid.; Sobchack 1992, 8f) viewing experience that may account for both "the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*" (Sobchack 2004, 1 and 4; cf. Sobchack 1992, 8f).

Media art can be regarded as related to the principle of phenomenological inquiry, which is aimed at encouraging the viewers to become aware of and reflect on the use of language. Sobchack claims that "this attentiveness to language is also aimed at really listening to and reanimating the rich but taken-for-granted expressions of vernacular language and of rediscovering the latter's intimate and extensive *incorporation* of experience" (ibid., 5). Media art contributes to a revitalization of language and awareness, and connects the linguistic and sensorial aspects of this experience. Sobchack describes how these two are often handled separately: "Too often, however, language [...] is used to banish and disavow experience. On the other side, experience would banish language as inadequate to it" (Sobchack 1992, xvii). Media art can be seen as making us aware of how the body and language "*in-form* each other in a fundamentally nonhierarchical and reversible relationship" (Sobchack 2004, 73). The concepts of literariness and *ostranenie* both enable a focus on the linguistic as well as audiovisual aspects, and are useful mediators and levers for shifting between perspectives.

Marks draws on Sobchack's ideas in her development of a theory of 'haptic visuality,' implying that "vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (Marks 2000, xi). Similar to theories of embodied vision, the concept considers the entire impact of the cinematic experience. Expanding on art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between optical and haptic visuality (cf. Riegl 1985 [1901]), Marks notes how the experience of audiovisual arts may

be embodied and geared towards sense perception, which is not only limited to optical vision and acoustics (cf. Marks 2000, xiii); it is embodied vision, meaning that the body is involved in the process of perception and in creating meaning (cf. *ibid.*, 145). Touch is a sense strongly addressed in Marks's theory of 'haptic images' that trigger the viewer's memory of touch by defamiliarizing the visual layer of perception:

Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. (*ibid.*, 162)

As Marks claims, optical visuality is stimulated by transparent images. Haptic visuality, in contrast, is caused by images that would be categorized as opaque, such as images with low, grainy resolution or extreme 'zooming in,' so that the object itself cannot be discerned. It is thus not a matter of technology but a characteristic of a certain kind of vision. In other words, "optical perception privileges the representational power of the image," whereas "haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image" (*ibid.*, 163). The viewer's vision may oscillate between both states, yet haptic images "encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks 2002, 3). Since media art oscillates between states of transparency and opacity, Marks's approach accounts for its enormous sensorial impact: "Haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is" (Marks 2000, 178). Opaque, haptic images (or sounds) have the defamiliarizing potential to refresh the viewer's perception. Although they do not provide an immersive experience, haptic images may possess a special kind of attractiveness and pull the viewer towards them to appreciate the experience of the image itself, which Marks links to desire (cf. *ibid.*, 184). This goes so far that the viewer engages with the artwork as object rather than buying into its illusionistic representation (cf. *ibid.*, 190).

Chapter 2 has brought together different perspectives from literary, film, and media theory to illuminate several aspects of literariness and *ostranenie*. Among the most important concepts introduced were Jakobson's notion of the poetic function of literature, creating density and self-reflexivity, and Shklovsky's understanding of literature as employing devices of 'making strange' and 'complicating of form' to renew perception, or the laying bare of a device. Our interdisciplinary expansion has demonstrated that literariness is a concept that goes beyond literary theory, discussing related ideas from other disciplines. Starting with an overview of the Russian Formalists' writings on film, we gave special consideration to the film studies approach of Neoformalism and its focus on the defamiliarization of backgrounds. We also discussed theories of intermediality, which was proposed as an artistic device that affects the viewer and fuels an aestheticized perception. We also introduced more recent concepts from media theory, such as remediation and transcription, which both address questions of medial exchange and transformation. Throughout this book, literariness and *ostranenie* serve as transmedial tools to examine media art's configurations of language along with its non-linguistic devices. This encompassing interdisciplinary theoretical foundation has established the art object as a strong, even obstinate counterpart to the viewer, perceived in its particular materiality and mediality.

# 3

## VOICE AND SCRIPT IN MEDIA ART

As established in Chapter 2, literariness—the aesthetic surplus of language—becomes palpable when the pragmatic function of speech or writing retreats in favor of the foregrounding of voice and script. In the media artworks discussed here in Chapter 3, language often oscillates between materiality and meaning, signifier and signified. The two sections in Chapter 3 analyze media artworks that use oral and written language as two distinct aesthetic strategies. The separation of these strategies is not intended to reinstate an ontological difference between orality and writtenness; rather, it is a pragmatic response to the fact that in many artworks either voice or script is the center of attention. Works that strategically use both oral and written language to explore the interplay of language and images are discussed in “Voice and Image, Voice and Script,” which immediately precedes Section 3.2.

Speech and writing are equally important for the analysis of literature and of works of media art that foreground language and question normative oppositions. However, the opposition of orality and writtenness has long dominated the discussion on language within cultural and literary studies. From a linguistic point of view, speech and writing condition divergent modalities of presentation: Oral language is usually considered “additive,” “aggregative,” “[r]edundant or ‘copious,’” “empathetic,” and “participatory,” whereas written language is “subordinative,” “analytic,” “objectively distanced,” and “abstract” (Ong 1982, 37–49). Even if the focus of literary studies—and the humanities in general—is still mostly on written texts, language has been analyzed from a ‘phonocentric’ perspective that considers speech, as opposed to writing, as authentic self-expression and a guarantor of meaning and presence (cf. Epping-Jäger and Linz 2003, 8). The exposure of this “metaphysical opposition between *speech* and *writing*” (Bradley 2008, 7) is the goal of Jacques Derrida’s *On Grammatology*, which presents the whole tradition of Western thought as based on a (latent) phonocentrism because it considers the immediacy of speech as closer to the presence of *logos* (cf. Derrida 1976 [1967], 11). Logocentrism is, according to Derrida, “also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (ibid., 11f). Derrida’s insistence that writing—even Latin script—might function other than phonetically and as more than a mere representative derivation of speech is particularly illuminating for the analysis of media artworks foregrounding script.

Media artworks that explore spoken and written language cause essentialist dichotomies between the two modalities to totter. When, for instance, a single word is repeated for several



minutes or different writing systems are juxtaposed, it becomes clear that “the transition, rich in nuance, from inarticulate sounds to phonetic units of meaning” is a “productive field for the study of *différance*, of that trace of materiality that precedes meaning but that becomes a signifier that produces meaning during the process of articulation, writing or speaking” (Weigel 2006, 18). Consequently, instead of insisting on ontological differences, it is more productive to describe the differences between verbal and written language as conceptual ones. Peter Koch and Wolf Oesterreicher proposed distinguishing between the medium in which language is realized—the “phonic code” of oral language versus the “graphic code” of written language (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 17; see also Krämer 2009, 159)—and developed the ideas of “conceptual orality” and “conceptual writtleness”: the former characterized by a “language of proximity” and the latter by a “language of distance” (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 23). These two concepts of language can be characterized by the following communicative situations, which are also featured in many works of media art: dialog versus monolog, face-to-face interaction versus spatial and temporal separation, expressivity and affectivity versus objectivity (cf. *ibid.*). While the demarcation between ‘phonic’ and ‘graphic code’ presupposes a “strict dichotomy,” the dimensions of the spoken and the written provide a wide spectrum of possible conceptualizations (*ibid.*, 17). Certain forms of oral language carry features that can be considered conceptually scriptural, and there is written language that is conceptually oral (cf. *ibid.*, 24).

Singling out specific features of the ‘language of proximity’ and the ‘language of distance’ highlights how media art often plays with such parameters, for instance when oral conversation and direct address seem to establish intimacy with the recipient even though the setting and mediation create a spatial and temporal distance, or when kinetic script emulates the fleetingness of speech. Dieter Mersch makes a similar argument when he asserts that:

[T]he writtleness of the spoken word [. . .] primarily relates to significance and duration, while the sound, the voice in its corporeal presence must be executed *performatively*, therein lies its *fugacity*. The presence of script is based on *repetition*, that of sound on *singularity*. The temporal mode of the former is, correspondingly, based on the *perfect tense*, belatedness, the temporal mode of the latter, in contrast, on the *present tense*, the *instant*. (Mersch 2002, 118)

Mersch hints at the important distinction between speech—spoken words as signifiers—and the sound of the voice as medium. Whereas Derrida criticizes phonocentrism because it privileges spoken language due to its supposedly inherent *logos*, Mersch underlines the antagonistic forces that inform speaking. For instance, recited literature and political speeches are in fact written, literally ‘scripted,’ as the implicit ‘presence of script’ suggests significance and downplays the temporality and volatility of the voice. As we demonstrate here in Chapter 3, the foregrounded use of spoken and written language in media art indeed holds antagonistic potential, as its deviations from presumptions or established norms revitalize how viewers perceive the modalities of language and the world they construct.

### 3.1 Voice and the Materiality of Sound

An enigmatic, incessant call reverberates through the staircases and the adjacent rooms of the Galerie der Gegenwart, the museum of contemporary art in Hamburg: “Feed me eat me anthropology!” “Help me hurt me sociology!” This is the intense acoustic signature of **Bruce Nauman**’s video installation *Anthro/Socio*. Disillusionment is one of Nauman’s aesthetic strategies, and he accordingly lays bare the array of technical equipment in this version of the installation that contains video projectors, the projector’s cardboard boxes, TV monitors, cables, and switches. Two versions of *Anthro/Socio* have been individually titled: *Rinde Facing Camera* (US 1991) was created for the Museum of Modern Art in New York and confronts the audience with videos showing the actor Rinde Eckert staring directly into the camera. The version discussed here is *Rinde Spinning* (US 1992), originally produced for Documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany, that shows the actor’s bald head spinning around its own axis (cf. Storr 1994, 60f) as well as upside down, enducing a vertigo effect in viewers as they enter the installation.

The brief phrases of the short libretto, repeated like a litany in a variety of tones, are strikingly dense in their content, ironically summing up an entire cultural theory—and two different academic disciplines. Their poetic form is also striking, building internal and external rhyme. Played over multiple speakers, both exclamations are partially heard at once as the soundtracks overlap. Adding to this already demanding soundscape, the register of Eckert’s voice creates an omniscient and hypnotic effect. The pleading words echo like a chorus from all directions, confusing viewers who enter the exhibition space. Nauman remarks: “All those messages have to do with making contact [. . .]. “Help me hurt me” communicates a personal appeal and “placate art”—my art—is a more general appeal to put art outside of yourself, where it becomes something you don’t have any control over” (Nauman in Cordes 2005, 367). Because multiple screens

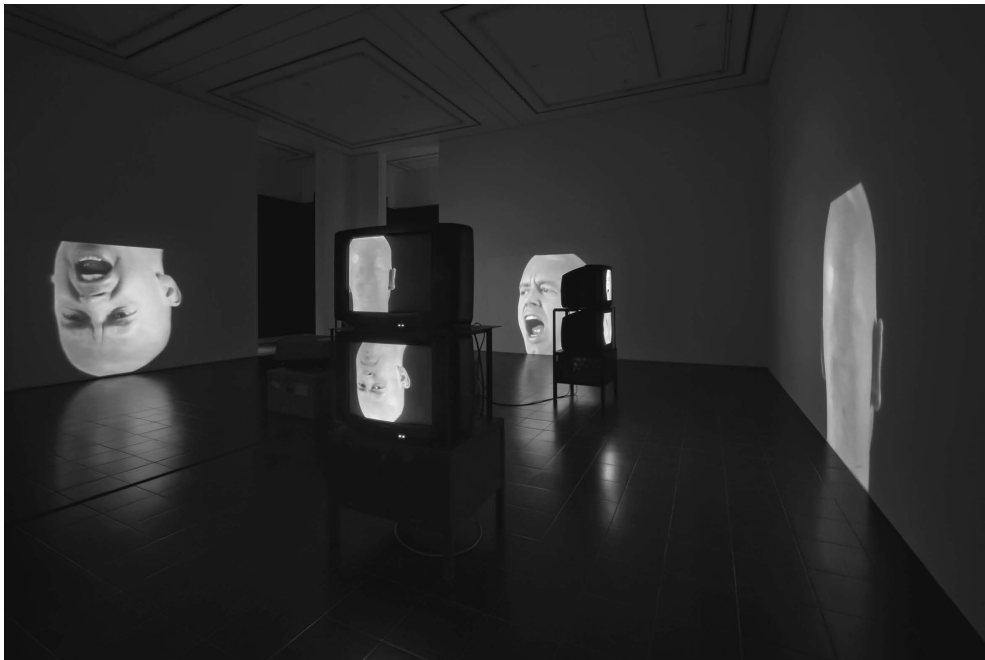


FIGURE 3.1.1 Bruce Nauman: *Anthro/Socio: Rinde Spinning*. 1992.

show the same person repeating identical phrases, voice and body are fundamentally separated. The artwork confronts viewers (and listeners) with a ‘split personality,’ desperately begging for something without the possibility of receiving an answer. The audience is left to wonder: Who is speaking here, and who is being addressed? Nauman’s installation is a prime example of the power of the human voice and spoken language as well as their ability to create the disrupting effects of literariness in media art.

### ***The Voice as Medium and the Mediatized Voice***

“The voice is elusive,” Michel Chion states in the opening of his study on the voice in cinema, and continues with a pivotal question: “Once you’ve eliminated everything that is not the voice itself—the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what’s left? What a strange object, what grist for poetic outpourings.” (Chion 1999, 1). Chion aptly points to the momentous mistake of confusing voice with speech—a mistake that has led to a neglect of the study of the materiality of voice, the voice as medium (cf. *ibid.*). Although he sarcastically criticizes theories of voice that get lost in bloomy imprecisions, his critique can also be converted: The voice is indeed a strange thing; it is precisely the grist that poets and media artists use to circumvent rational significations. The human voice is characterized by its intensity and specific ‘eventfulness.’ It is marked by features such as fleetingness and subjectivity and is considered the “index of the singularity of both a person and a culture” (Kolesch and Krämer 2006, 11). The voice is also “a paradigm of the event, because it comes to an end. All events must end; [written] texts can live on indefinitely” (Peters 2004, 99). As this quote by John Durham Peters demonstrates, assumptions about voice and orally performed language often depend on the idea of the stability of printed script as its counterpart. Again, it is important to note that this is a conceptual, not an essential, opposition. In media art, script is often as ephemeral as voice, and the written text comes into being only when it is performed.

Even if a voice is recorded and therefore potentially preserved for eternity—as in media artworks—the concepts of eventfulness and elusiveness continue to surround it conceptually. In theater studies, the voice is regarded as ‘performative,’ as it makes the *hic et nunc* and the fleeting physical co-presence of speaker and listener perceivable. The recorded, engineered voice is therefore only “supposedly disembodied” (Kolesch 2006, 49), as it maintains its phenomenality. Characteristics of an individual voice, such as its affective and atmospheric qualities, are not lost but rather de-situated and decontextualized. Technically realized voices are ‘bodily traces’—“residues that refer simultaneously to a presence *and* an absence of the performative process of vocal articulation” (Pinto 2012, 11). In media art

the recording medium does not function as a reproduction technology but as a production medium, with which its own aesthetics begin to take shape. This also means that the body only appears mediately through the medium and is explicitly staged in relation to the medial conditions of representation. At the same time, the way it relates to the viewer is altered, as the performances take place for the video camera alone and their delayed reception calls for new modes of addressing the audience. (Lehmann 2008, 43)

The voice is thus an essential element of the aesthetic conception of a media artwork: if and how a voice speaks, whom it addresses, whether it is represented by a visible body or not, whether it originates from an actual human being or is computer generated.

For the description of the acoustic (and audiovisual) dimensions in works of media art, theories, and parameters developed in regard to contemporary formats of orally performed literature,

such as readings or poetry slams (cf. Benthien and Prange 2019), are valuable. Building on the terminology by Charles Bernstein (cf. Bernstein 1998 12f), Julia Novak distinguishes between “nonverbal sounds” and five “articulatory parameters” (cf. Novak 2011, 75–144): rhythm, pitch, volume, articulation, and timbre (cf. *ibid.*, 85–125). These parameters can be understood as “paralinguistic features” (*ibid.*, 86) that give additional semantic signification to spoken language and may emphasize or, by producing ambiguities or contradictions, question the meaning of a textual unit. In contemporary spoken-word literature, most texts are spoken and presented by the artists themselves; only in a few cases are they presented by other persons. To mark this double role, Novak introduced the term “poet-performer” (*ibid.*, 62). Similarly, one can describe media artists who perform their own texts as ‘artist-performers’ (Rosalind Krauss refers to the central role of the artist’s body in early video art with similar vocabulary: “artist-practitioner”; Krauss 1976, 52).

Although the voice of the artist-performer is recorded, it nevertheless creates a specific form of *hic et nunc*: “These performative voices from media and media art speak an intensity and intimacy that is neither nostalgic nor essential, but that happens in the making and listening to the work” (Neumark 2010a, 114). In other words, the emphasis on the bodily co-presence of artist and audience that marks a live performance shifts in the case of media art to the experience of the reception. Crucial to the reception of poets or artists who perform their own texts is the authenticity attributed to the voice. This approach to the voice can be described by words such as ‘auratization’ and ‘embodiment’ and is closely related to the “myth of origin of language as both ‘original’ sound and original meaning, as well as authentic vivification through the author’s voice” (Bickenbach 2007, 193).

Paradoxically, the emergence of technical recording led to the concept of ‘original sound,’ which means that only a sound “that is long gone” is turned into the “original of a documentary function” (*ibid.*, 194). Several theorists share this skeptical view on originality and authenticity in regard to ‘media of presence,’ such as the theater. Philipp Auslander, for instance, considers the concept of ‘liveness’ as nothing more than an effect of mediatization: “In many instances, live performances are produced either as replications of mediatized representations or as raw materials for subsequent mediatization” (Auslander 1999, 162). It is therefore useful not to claim authenticity or originality for a given voice but to instead consider them as (aesthetic or ideological) strategies: “[W]e might focus not so much on the digital voice as somehow post-authentic, but rather ask how in digital media and art there is an *authenticity effect* through voice and in voice” (Neumark 2010a, 95). Yet, the way in which a voice affects listeners is not only or exclusively a result of the technologies involved, as Norie Neumark further claims:

[A]lthough electronic mediation and reproduction’s reconfiguring of ‘the body’ has had very significant effects, a focus on electronic mediation can risk masking other always/already present mediations, such as the way that the voice is mediated culturally, through techniques, for instance [. . .]. Culture colors the voice, contours its performative capacities, and leaves deep imprints on its character—it *mediates* the voice, in terms of its accent, intonation, timbre, cadence, and rhythm. And these mediations and their performances matter and are just as powerful as and underpin the electronic effect, be it analog or digital. (Neumark 2010b, xviii)

This means that the description of a voice or its effects must also always consider how culture shapes the voice of the speaker as well as its reception by the listener. A specific dialect, for instance, may be familiar to some listeners and thus remain unnoticed or produce a feeling of intimacy; to others it may sound strange and be perceived as alienating. Age, culture, class, gender, and race all leave their trace on a speaker’s voice, and its specific characteristics create different

effects to the ears of different individuals. The voice is a performance rather than the expression of an identity.

Many of the media artworks analyzed in this section explore the somewhat paradoxical phenomenon that recorded voices—voices that are traces of an absent body—can have the power to create a strong intimacy with listeners. Voice “as sound, is defined by and defining of the space in which it resonates” (ibid., xix) and, as such, connects subjects, even if they are spatially and temporally separated. In audiovisual arts that are usually dominated by the sense of sight, this special intimacy is established when the speaker’s body is not visible on-screen and the voice comes from an off-screen source, “in the scene’s ‘here and now,’ but outside the frame” (Chion 1999, 18). Chion called this off-screen voice—borrowing from Pierre Schaeffer—‘acousmatic’ voice; acousmatic designating a sound whose source is invisible (cf. ibid.). The acousmatic voice establishes a particularly powerful presence when it can be heard before it is visually connected to an on-screen character, and especially when the speaker remains entirely hidden. Chion termed this presence of the invisible voice *acousmètre*, a neologism combining the French *acousmatique* and *être*: the ‘acousmatic being’ (cf. ibid., 21). Unlike, for instance, a television commentator, the *acousmètre* is not detached from the images unfolding on screen; it is involved and therefore has specific powers: “ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, omnipotence” (ibid., 24). These terms accurately describe the aesthetic effects of media artworks in which the *acousmètre* as device creates an atmosphere of uncanniness, unease, and surveillance, as in *The Nuclear Football* by the artist duo Korpys/Löffler, which is discussed later.

Another central feature of the human voice is its continuous oscillation between the poles of materiality and meaning, a feature that media art explores frequently: “The voice [is] the medium with which transformations and transitions between signifier and signified, the corporeal and the intelligible, the creatural and the social are carried out and that, therefore, stands at the center of conflictual negotiations of these oppositions” (Weigel 2006, 18f). Transitions continually occur between the level of transmitting a message and the perceived materiality of the voice. In Roland Barthes’s terminology, which applies categories by Julia Kristeva to the voice, this is referred to as a continuous shift between the “phenotext” and the “genotext” (Barthes 1977, 181; Kristeva 1984 [1974], 86f). The first “covers all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language” spoken or sung. The latter “is the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and its very materiality;’ it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression” (Barthes 1977, 182). Media artworks generate literariness by foregrounding the materiality of speech and laying bare the complex and often arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified.

### ***Sound Poetry and Transrational Language***

As noted in Chapter 2, Section 1, the Russian Formalists and Prague School Structuralists responded to the literary experiments of the historical avant-gardes in the early 20th century by arguing that the concept of literariness as poetic deviation from standard language refers both to written and orally performed language (cf. Mukařovský 2007 [1932], 19f). The Russian Futurists—and the Dadaists in particular—pioneered the creation of ‘pure’ sound texts that dismantle the roles of meaning and traditional poetic structures. They foregrounded the materiality of (spoken) language and made palpable the “‘articulatory gestures’ that cut off phonetically discrete units from a previously amorphous vocal sequence” (Wilke 2013, 647 and 653). Their artistic practice directly influenced neo-avant-garde art movements after World War II as

well as early media artists such as Peter Weibel and Valie Export. As the ideas surrounding sound poetry connect to the concept of literariness as effected through the use of spoken language in media art, some key concepts and characteristics of orally performed experimental literature are presented here.

'Sound poetry' is an umbrella term for hybrid artistic forms that combine literary and musical compositions. It was explored in the early 20th century by the Italian and Russian Futurists (resp. Kubo-Futurists; cf. Ziegler 1984, 359) and the Swiss-German Dada Movement (cf. Scholz 1992, 64); it has also been theorized by Russian Formalist critics. Sound poetry is generally defined as the understanding of a "poetic work where the word as bearer of meaning is dispensed with" while acoustically performed "aesthetic structures [...] are created by methodically adding/composing sounds (series and groups of sounds) according to distinct rules and subjective intentions of expression" (ibid., 63). Sound poetry foregrounds the phonetic dimension of speech instead of its semantic and syntactic values (cf. Scheffer 2003, 383).

In Russian Futurism, sound poetry gained prominence in the poetic concept of *zaum'*. Some Formalists even equated 'poetic language' as such with *zaum'* (cf. Steiner 1984, 150). The neologism "is a contraction of '*zauunnyj jazyk*,' which may best be translated as 'transrational speech'" (Scobie 1974, 219) and was coined by the Russian poet Alexej Kručënych, who differentiates between two types of language: "rational *common language* governed by extra-linguistic requirements, a vehicle of meaning; and self-sufficient *transrational language* governed by its own rules, 'whose words do not have a definite meaning'" (Steiner 1984, 145). Transrational speech lays bare the acoustic dimension of language, liberating language from its everyday purpose of 'making sense' for the sake of communication. Aage Hansen-Löve explains, *zaum'*'s "half-comprehensibility and the complication and slowing down of perception accompanying it" results in a recipient who is "sensitized, i.e. concentrated on the sensual sensation of sound" (Hansen-Löve 1978, 106). One of the key translations of *zaum'* is 'trans-sense language,' as used in the English title of Viktor Shklovsky's essay "On Poetry and Trans-Sense Language" in which he describes poetic language as "a language which has no precise meaning (which is not ossified), which is trans-sensible, *zauunnyi*" (Shklovsky 1985 [1916], 4). By making the sound 'sound' again—to evoke Shklovsky's call to 'make the stone *stony*' (see Chapter 2, Section 1)—sound poetry does not speak to the rational mind that wants to decipher a message; instead, it seeks to affect the senses of the listeners. Exposing the materiality of sound provokes, on the one hand, the "primary A-effect [alienation effect] of seeing a mechanized set of linguistic instruments anew" and, on the other, the "secondary, i.e. semantically advanced A-effect of exposing the emotional experiential value of the sounds, their 'semiologization'" (Hansen-Löve 1978, 108).

As established in Chapter 2, Section 1, Russian Formalist and Prague School Structuralist scholars often used the opposition of 'standard' and 'poetic' language to explain the characteristics of literature. With this general perspective, Formalist Lev Jakubinsky specified the role of sound:

In *practical* language, the semantic aspect of the word (its meaning) is more prominent than its sound aspect [...]. Thus, [...] in *practical language sounds do not attract our attention*. It is the other way around in verse language. There, one can claim that sounds enter the bright field of consciousness and do attract our attention. (Jakubinsky in Steiner 1984, 149f)

What Jakubinsky argues with regard to poetry is principally valid for all literary genres, and especially for orally performed literary texts: they foreground the materiality of language and therefore deautomatize the listener's habitualized perception.

This may also be the case with the Dada poets of the early 20th century. Similar to *zaum*, the Dadaists' sound poetry fulfilled the programmatic functions of the renewal and deautomatization of poetic language. Dada, however, takes a less skeptical view of onomatopoeic and sound symbolism. In "Karawane," for instance, Hugo Ball re-creates the sounds of a caravan "to evoke images of heaving and stamping, of dust and desert, of animals (elephants) and their drovers" (Kemper 1979, 165) by using compositional techniques close to onomatopoeics, even though the concrete syllables and words are fully invented. The performance of texts before an audience is central to Dadaist aesthetics, whose articulatory dimension of the live performance was highly provocative. Programmatically, Ball's "Dada Manifesto" (1916) "stages, even in its written form, a successive foregrounding of the acoustic dimension of its 'object.' In doing so, it inscribes into the process of textual composition the primacy of the spoken word" (Wilke 2013, 642). In their stage performances, the Dadaists experimented with and developed subgenres of sound poetry—or 'phonetic poetry' (cf. Scheffer 1978, 224–239)—such as the 'Bruitist poem,' the 'simultaneous poem,' or the 'movement poem.' The Bruitist poem (originating from the French word *bruit*, meaning 'noise') was invented by the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck; it is a special kind of phonetic poem whose aesthetics are not so different from the Russian Futurists' *zaum*, although it is based on a different concept. Italian Futurism developed the avant-garde concept of Bruitism, in which conceptual and contingent 'noise art' holds the same value as sound produced through musical instruments. In contrast to *zaum*, Bruitist poems work with acoustic representation and the imitation of noises as well as sibilance and rhythmic syllable combinations that resemble exotic foreign languages (cf. Szymanska 2009, 45f).

Media art adapts the performative aesthetics of two or more soundtracks that are audible simultaneously, especially in multilingual pieces, such as those by Mona Hatoum and Danica Dakić (see Chapter 4, Section 3) that resemble the Dada subgenre of the simultaneous poem. The Dadaist 'movement poem' is a lyric text accompanied by the simple movements of the performer. Another invention of Dada is the lettristic poem, as developed by Raul Hausmann, which consists of single letters grouped like words into stanza and verse (cf. Scheffer 1978, 228). Lettristic poems are, however, not primarily sound poetry but rather visual poetry. They are discussed in this book, both here and in Section 3.2 ("Script: Between Visuality and Legibility"), because some media artists such as Martha Rosler and John Baldessari work explicitly with the alphabet in performative videos using oral language.

To summarize, sound poetry renders the acoustic dimension of language palpable. Sound poets dissect and attack common language by using devices such as cut-up, collage, and montage, either with a playful intention or with the utopian goal of renewing perception. The foregrounding of sound is a specific feature of literariness: it differentiates poetic speech from everyday language as it operates at the threshold between amorphous sounds and articulated meaning. In one of his later texts, Shklovsky speaks of the "sweetness of verse on our lips" (Shklovsky in Steiner 1984, 151) to describe the sensuous pleasure that can be felt when speech-producing organs are animated to produce unexpected phonic patterns. In media art, the artist-performer often creates this trans-sense or para-semantic literary language. Particularly when the voice is restrained or when close-ups of the artist's mouth amplify endless iterations, the articulatory gestures that aim to produce signifying syllables are not only exposed, but they are also palpable in the viewer's body. The following analyses of media artworks explore different aspects of the voice, the use of spoken language, and the articulatory situation. The first subsection focuses on iteration and the alphabet as aesthetic devices and is most explicitly related to experimental literature and Russian Formalist aesthetics; the second subsection discusses the forms and effects of media artworks with dominant acousmatic voices; the third analyzes forms of estrangement effected by technologically alienated voices; and the last investigates the particular interplay of 'voice and image' and 'voice and script' in media art.

### *Iteration and the Alphabet as Aesthetic Devices*

Most media artworks considered in this subsection share one specific characteristic: an on-screen speaker performs speech using the alphabet as a structuring principle. Other performers and artist-performers make use of excessive repetition, relentlessly iterating the same phrases over and over again, which empties the spoken words of meaning and creates peculiar forms of literariness.

In his highly self-referential video performance *I Am Making Art* (US 1971), **John Baldessari** indifferently iterates the title phrase in a deep, rather monotonous voice while making a variety of simple movements with his limbs. He holds up one arm or bends his body to the side, sits or lies down on the floor so that the fixed camera frame only captures his head or his arm. After a while he stands and leans against the white background wall. The aesthetic of his video performance is reminiscent of Dadaist ‘movement poems.’ Moreover, this conceptual minimalism is linked to postdramatic strategies of a constitutive deflation of meaning and a general “strategy of refusal” by emphasizing “a *formalism* that reduces the plethora of signs through repetition and duration” (Lehmann 2006, 90). The aesthetic focus of *I Am Making Art* is the concept behind the piece and not primarily the finished video as artifact; the process is more important than the marketable commodity. At the same time, the ‘uninspired’ movements ridicule the performative claim of making art, which is only effective within the specific context of a specific art world at a specific point in time. The literariness of *I Am Making Art* cannot be perceived outside of this context. As such, the video performance is a self-referential investigation of the art world’s mechanisms and value judgments.

In Baldessari’s video performance *Xylophone* (US 1972), he dissects the relationship between spoken word and image in such a way that sense—signification—is quickly transformed into trans-sense. The rather long performance of 20 minutes is structured according to the alphabet, the basic element of written language learning, and the dominant artistic device is repetition. The black-and-white video starts with the left hand of the artist entering the upper left corner of the screen, holding a painted image of an apple while he incessantly repeats the word ‘apple’ at a fast pace for about one minute. He follows the same pattern while holding up different images in front of the camera, iterating the corresponding English words: bird, clown, dinosaur, Easter egg, flower, giraffe, horse, Indian, jack-in-the-box, kangaroo, and so forth. Each object is presented for about the same amount of time. The last three image-word combinations are xylophone, yarn, and zebra. The speed of his speech causes the sound of the individual, spoken signifier to push away its signification, dissolving the word into *zaum*’ so it is as if one hears the



FIGURE 3.1.2 John Baldessari. *I Am Making Art*. 1971.

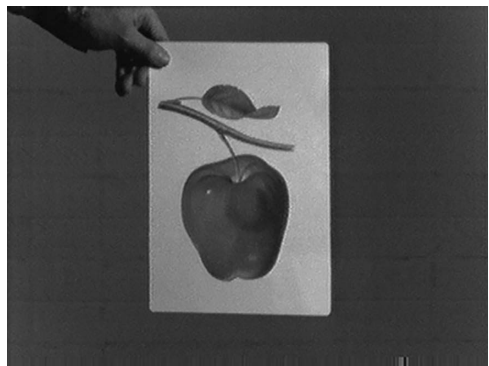


FIGURE 3.1.3 John Baldessari. *Xylophone*. 1972.



word for the first time. Moreover, combining word and image in alphabetical order simulates the way children are taught to read and write.

The recourse to the mundane follows the tradition of Dada artists who challenged the concept of art by exhibiting everyday objects. Dadaist Kurt Schwitters created numerous alphabet poems that “show what can be shown, whereby that which already existed is now presented in literature and as literature,” in the mode of an “elementary form of linguistic and literary activation and reinterpretation” (Scheffer 1978, 214). The performance exposes the arbitrariness of linguistic representation and ironically questions the ‘sense’ of teaching methods: neither word nor image ‘are’ an apple; an apple does not represent the letter ‘A’; and the order of the alphabet is based on an arbitrary convention. A principle that seems logical because it is so common is suddenly rendered ridiculous by the sense of boredom created by the repetition and the length of the video performance.

The alphabet is also the basic structural principle of **Martha Rosler’s** famous video performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (US 1975). In this black-and-white piece, the artist-performer stands in a kitchen behind a table, reproducing the stage design of television cooking shows. She puts on an apron and says the word “apron,” then picks up a bowl, a chopper, a dish, an egg-beater, a fork, a grater, and several other items, which she continues to name. Rosler presents these kitchen utensils to the camera as if they require explanation, mimicking the way television chefs teach ‘housewives’ to cook by following the ‘kitchen ABCs.’ Rosler does not attempt to prepare a meal, however. Instead, the artist-performer ‘misuses’ several of the utensils, forcefully grating a fork with the grater, for instance, producing a horrible sound. She is especially dedicated to demonstrating the letter ‘K’: With a knife in hand, she performs wild gestures as if to stab someone or something standing in front of her—the camera, or even the audience. Near the end of the alphabet, Rosler does not present kitchen utensils for the letters ‘U’ through ‘Z’ but reproduces their shapes with her arms and upper body while holding two large knives in her hands. She therefore undergoes a transformation during the video performance, “from the signifying to the signifier in order to remain within the semiotic terminology she uses ironically” (Graeve Ingelmann 2015, 201).

In contrast to Baldessari’s emotionally detached alphabet performance that foregrounds the sound of words and the arbitrariness of meaning, Rosler performs a feminist kitchen alphabet by displaying exaggerated emotions that shift between boredom and aggression, “hack[ing] out the inventory of women’s repetitive domestic slavery” (Elwes 2005, 42). The artist-performer uncovers the violent potential inherent in these kitchen tools as well as the sexism of television programming and thus forcefully decodes their semiotics. The performative correlation of ‘alphabet’ and ‘semiotics’ makes clear that the production of meaning, sign processes, and communication are not neutral. The presentation uses the alphabet as a “pseudo-scientific ordering” (Westgeest



FIGURE 3.1.4 Martha Rosler. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. 1975.

2016, 39), and thus emphasizes that the alphabet is not a natural given but a taxonomy based on habitualized and therefore unnoticed conventions.

Similarly, genres rely on the reiteration of specific formulas. The ‘cookery show’ genre is based on a set of rules that enforce and therefore produce gender norms; it is a site of gender performativity. “Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self,” Judith Butler noted: “It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms [. . .]. The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodiment of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production” (Butler 1993, 22). In this context, (re-)iteration is not simply an aesthetic device. Rosler is bound to perform gender according to a discourse that precedes her, yet her performance attempts to expose that discourse by rebelling within it.

Another work that combines extensive repetition with a critical examination of gender roles is **Mona Hatoum’s** single-channel video *So Much I Want to Say* (CA 1983). As the credits reveal, the video was recorded during Hatoum’s performance for the event *Wiencouver IV*, a “slowscan transmission between Vancouver and Vienna” in which slowscan technology was used to exchange still images between the two cities every eight seconds, while continuous sound was transmitted via telephone lines (cf. Manchester 2000).

*So Much I Want to Say* turns the technological premises of the slowscan transmission into an artistic device with political significance. The piece consists of a series of black-and-white close-ups of a woman’s face, her mouth covered by a man’s hands. The stills change every eight seconds, the new image filling the screen from top to bottom, causing each image to appear to be ‘wiped out’ by the next, as in a slow motion ‘video flip-book.’ Simultaneously, an off-screen female voice repeats the phrase “So much I want to say.” Both voice and face belong to the artist herself, so that speaking and the impossibility of speech form a paradox. As the piece unfolds, the artist’s hands try to remove the man’s hands from her mouth, resulting in a desperate struggle. The violence of the stills stands in strong contrast to the persistent, monotonous repetition of the same sentence. The images display a forceful silencing, while the voice is clearly audible: The work therefore produces a performative self-contradiction with regard to its proposition—or, in terms of literary theory, a paradoxical iteration. The interrupted image stream that only allows glimpses



FIGURE 3.1.5 Mona Hatoum. *So Much I Want to Say*. 1983.



FIGURE 3.1.6 Jochen Gerz. *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung*. 1972.

into what is happening underlines the spatiotemporal distance that a ‘live’ transmission aims to diminish. The voice’s implicit plea ‘help me to speak’ is an echo from the past, and the audience is forced to listen to and experience it from the position of a witness whose hands are tied.

The first video work by the German concept artist **Jochen Gerz**, entitled *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung* [Calling Until Exhaustion] (FR 1972), also exposes the “unreality of communication” (Gerz in Frieling 2006b, 128) that is established through technological media. The video performance is based on a minimalistic set-up, where the descriptive title is performed by the artist’s own body and voice. Standing in a dreary landscape, against the horizon of a stony pebble hill with a dramatic cloudy sky in the background and recorded in black and white, the artist-performer incessantly calls the word “Hallo” (‘hello’), captured in a single, extensive shot, until his voice becomes hoarse and finally breaks. The voice struggles against strong wind and the engine noise of passing automobiles. With this concept, Gerz picks up a central premise of contemporary performance art: working with real situations—in this case, the physical exertion of the artist, who performs an action to the point of complete exhaustion. Gerz’s voice is authenticated in the closing credits when the artist appears as a talking head, stating venue and date and further production details. Interestingly, his voice takes nearly 20 minutes to fade away, which corresponds to the maximum length of the videotape.

*Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung* emphasizes the muteness of the video camera as the artist-performer’s sole communication partner. The invocation to the audience—or rather, to a non-specified addressee—is carried out from a seemingly insurmountable distance between the artist and the recording device. Moreover, the ambient noise of strong wind moving across the microphone drowns out Gerz’s call. The distance inherent to the medium and intensified through the landscape-related echo effect is consciously exposed because the small figure of the artist is unmoving. Through acoustic means alone, the artist-performer tries in vain to overcome distance. The goal of the concept was to use the medium “in that specific way, which is about showing that it does not work” (ibid., 128). The distance, the failing mediation, is iterated through an aesthetic practice of layered media representations: The recording was first displayed on a television monitor, and that set-up was then videotaped. In the *mise-en-scène* of the final video version, the frame created by the TV is clearly visible, which creates a potentialization in the form of a graded iteration: a self-referential frame within a frame. This multiple framing not only underlines the inherent spatial and temporal distance to the beckoning body, undermining the notion of the *hic and nunc* of speech, but by ‘quoting’ video via television, it also reflects self-referentially onto the artistic medium itself.

Through constant iteration, the minimalistic text of this video performance comes to hold significance beyond the singular plea. Once it becomes clear that the call is not reaching anyone,



FIGURE 3.1.7 Holger Mader. *Ich suche nichts, ich bin hier*. 1993.

that there will not—or rather cannot—be a response, the denotations, connotations, and changing pronunciations of the word *Hallo* move to the foreground of perception; the salutation turns from a call into a scream, while despair, anger, frustration, and, of course, physical exertion become audible. Hansen-Löve refers to the Formalist Jakobson, who claims that a continuous, mechanistic iteration of a single word may create an effect of distancing, by which the word slowly becomes strange and artificial, and that this technique is closely related to the Formalist theory of the deautomatization of perception (cf. Hansen-Löve 1978, 108), which holds true for both Gerz's video performance and those by Baldessari discussed before. In the case of Gerz's lonesome call, the senseless iteration is also ambiguous: "Indeed, repetition always appears twice, once in the tragic destiny and once in the comic aspect" (Deleuze 1994, 15). Through expressive movements, such as the seemingly involuntary lifting of his arms or the convulsive bending of the torso, the body of the artist-performer intensifies his appellative invocation. Yet, even more so, Gerz's piece underlines like no other that the human voice—in contrast to an artificial voice—is embodied. The exhaustive iteration and the collapse of the artist's voice demonstrate the shift from phenotext to genotext and lays bare what Barthes termed 'the grain of the voice': "the 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (Barthes 1977, 188).

**Holger Mader's** *Ich suche nichts, ich bin hier* [I am not looking for anything, I am here] (DE 1993), differs from the previous 'repetition works' in two respects. First, it was not produced in the 1970s—a period in which performance and body art as well as reflections on the relatively 'new' medium video were prominent strategies—but two decades later. Second, the performer is not the artist. The video starts with the written lines "ich suche nichts. | ich bin hier." on a black screen. The quote is attributed to Jean Soupault but was in fact taken from the long poem "Westwego" (1922) by French Surrealist Phillipe Soupault ("je ne cherche rien | je suis ici"; Soupault 1922, n.p.). After this paratext, a young Asian-looking man is shown in a blurry close-up. He is dressed in a plain white shirt and positioned in front of an empty wall, his facial expression disturbed or even scared, and he seems to have tears in his eyes. The right side of his face is illuminated by harsh light, giving the scene a cold and clinical, eerie atmosphere.

The performer incessantly repeats the phrase "ich suche nichts, ich bin hier" with increasing intensity. The louder he shouts, the more his voice resonates, suggesting that he is standing in a large, empty space. His head and then his upper body start to move in a circular motion; shifting back and forth, he matches his speech with a steady bodily rhythm. When the performer finally covers his ears with his hands, it seems as if the volume of his voice pierces him—listening to himself has turned into torture. Erika Linz calls this phenomenon the 'reflexivity of voice,' which is "the processual characteristic of coupling speech and hearing in the act of voicing" (Linz 2010, 333).

The iteration of the phrase reaches its climax and terminates abruptly after three insistent exclamations of “Ich bin hier.” What exactly does the proposition ‘I am not looking for anything, I am here’ indicate? First, as a statement it insists on being present, which contradicts the spatial and temporal distance created by the video recording. Where and when is (or was) ‘here?’ In what space is the speaker situated? Why is the figure not in the center but at the periphery of the image? Does this, perhaps, refer to his precarious social status as a migrant within the (German) dominant culture? Second, the exclamation seems to answer a rhetorical question—*Was hast Du hier zu suchen?* (What are you doing here?), which implies that ‘You’ve got no business here, go away.’ The performance thus seems like a response to those (presumably German) people asking an Asian-looking man what he is looking for, as if he could not belong ‘here,’ in ‘their’ country. The paratactic structure links his insistence on ‘being here’ to the denial of search: as a performative declaration of arrival. Nonetheless, through the screaming and the resonance of the voice, the phrase slowly loses its declamatory function and turns involuntarily into a question. The speaker is affected by his own (technologically amplified) linguistic power, but also appalled; through the echo effect—itself a form of recursive iteration—he seems haunted by his own claim.

### *The Performative Power of the Acousmatic Voice*

The four media artworks analyzed in this subsection use the acousmatic voices of male speakers to strongly manipulate the audience, creating, and forcing a close and intimate bond with the recipient. Intonation, wordplay, or a specific manner of speaking produce uncanny semantic ambiguities. The spoken words penetrate the ears of the audience, creating a powerful intimacy because the act of speaking is hidden from the screen.

An impressive example of the power of the acousmatic voice in media art is **Bruce Nauman’s** early architectural sound installation, *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (US 1968). In this work, museum visitors enter an empty white room and a strong male voice loudly whispering the two imperative phrases of the title in a threatening manner attempts to pierce their bodies. The artist speaks in an extremely inspiratory tone, with continuous artificial shifts in pitch. Hidden loudspeakers transmit his voice through the white cube, giving the impression that a hidden person is there. The work produces a distracting semantic contradiction between the modes of whispering and loudness, of absence and presence. In describing the modulation of his voice in the piece, Nauman states: “I changed my voice and distorted it, I yelled it and growled it and grunted it” (Nauman in Simon et al. 1994, 223). The intensity of his choked voice and heavy breathing attract and assault the audience, simultaneously producing fascination and disgust.

Through his unseizable, uncanny voice, Nauman creates the unsettling atmosphere of ‘big brother’ invisibly observing the visitors, a ghostly power that is at once everywhere and nowhere. He thus exposes all four characteristics of the acousmatic voice: “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power” (Chion 1999, 24). As previously mentioned, the power of *acousmètre* is especially strong when the speaker’s body is not shown. Nauman exhibits the manipulation of language as a means to wield power in authoritative contexts (cf. Van Tuyl 1997, 72). *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* offers visitors an immersive experience that borders on claustrophobia. Since the two paratactic phrases that are iterated equate the present ‘room’ and the speaker’s ‘mind,’ the audience is made to enter not only a physical but also a mental space, and thus immediately made to feel like intruders confronted by the strong presence of a sinister psychopath. Conceptually, the work both invites and rejects the audience, which is consequently trapped in a double-bind (cf. Van Bruggen 1988, 19): When entering this public art space within a museum, visitors are immediately asked to leave. One feels directly addressed and receives conflicting information—an alienating strategy often found in Nauman’s work, especially with regard to the audience’s position.



FIGURE 3.1.8 Vito Acconci. *Full Circle*. 1973.

In **Vito Acconci's** video performance *Full Circle* (US 1973), viewers observe the performer for 30 minutes—the maximum length of a videotape in that period—as he moves nervously in front of a static camera while, paradoxically, his voice is projected from off-camera. *Full Circle* is one of the rare video pieces in which the articulatory act itself is not visualized, but the performer's body is constantly present on the screen. The fact that body and voice are split creates a strong effect of alienation. A recipient not familiar with Acconci's work might have no indication that the acousmatic voice and the body on display belong to the same person, and that the artist himself is performing. Chion speaks of a “cinematic I-voice” (Chion 1999, 50) that fulfills a paradigmatic (narrative) function in mainstream cinema. The two main criteria he mentions also apply to Acconci's acousmatic voice. First, “*close miking*, as close as possible, creates a feeling of intimacy with the voice, such that we sense no distance between it and our ear”—and, second, the criterion of “‘dryness’ or absence of reverb in the voice (for reverb situates the voice in a space)” (ibid., 51). Together, both features give the immersive impression that the voice is in the room with the recipient, almost as if it were the own (inner) voice of the listener, not another voice at all. In this regard the work applies strategies similar to Nauman's *Get Out of My Mind*, *Get Out of This Room*. In both works the voice creates a palpable discomfort, an articulated ‘acoustic abuse’—an impression that is amplified in *Full Circle*.

With a highly suggestive, manipulated mode of speaking created through stable pitch and dynamic, Acconci's sonorous, rough voice, “deep, gravely and seemingly infinitely modulable” (Linker 1994, 52), addresses an unspecified female counterpart, trying to initiate erotic interactions by exposing intimate feelings and experiences: “Acconci generates an intimate eye and body contact with the personified camera and conducts a ‘dialog’ with it as if the video camera were a real interlocutor and the medium's interface were permeable in both directions” (Spielmann 2010, 137). The voice-over renders the phantasy of a sexual encounter on an abandoned pier during a foggy night, using the grammatical mode of the subjunctive. The male voice appeals to the imagination of the addressee by using linguistic means to evoke seductive vocal timbre and concrete situations with specific bodily sensations—such as the feeling of naked skin in warm sand—atmosphere, and emotions. The speaker continuously beseeches a ‘we’—suggestive of unity, agreement, and intimacy—that is forced upon the conceptually mute communication ‘partner.’ Audience members are unwillingly put in the position of ‘acoustic voyeurs,’ or even become victims of verbal harassment. When considering the sheer length of the piece, the excessive audio track turns into an unbearable acoustic penetration.

The verbally created images contrast strongly with the images actually recorded on the video. In terms of Russian Futurist poetics, one may speak of an alienating effect caused by the rather brutal collision of orally evoked images and actual video pictures. The visual appearance of the

incessantly smoking, latently luring and at the same time distraught-looking performer moving in front of the camera and staring into it, functions as a disruption to the atmospheric situation that is created by the soundtrack. In fact, the work suggests that the visual is irrelevant, since Acconci sometimes even disappears from the camera frame, so that the emptiness of the dreary scenery—a blank wall, a deserted room, or a gray, dull city seen from a dirty balcony—strains the audience’s imagination. At other moments, the artist-performer looks nervously into the camera as if longing for actual contact.

The artist-performer’s voice carries a strong sense of eventfulness and liveness, not so much questioning video as a recording technology as displaying how eventfulness and liveness are effects of mediatization that result in an almost obscene co-present ‘mouth to ear’ communication. In *Full Circle*, the verbalized wishes intensify through paralinguistic features such as the expressiveness of the voice, its sonorous whispering tone, its unpleasantly intimate sounds of breathing and swallowing, and the hypnotic quality that this ceaseless address conveys. The literariness of Acconci’s monolog manifests numerous poetic devices such as alliterations, repetitions, parataxis, and metaphors that evoke a conceptual writtenness—and as such contradicts notions of a strict dichotomy between spoken and written language. This poetic use of language is supposed to stimulate the anonymous woman who is being addressed, to convince her that the male voice is formulating nothing but her desire and that his wishes fully correspond to hers. This strategy corresponds to a long tradition of male love poetry from the Renaissance onward, with its rhetorical gesture of convincing the female to agree to an erotic encounter. Here, Acconci uses this strategy in such a forceful manner that its effects backfire and repulse rather than charm.

The works by U.S. media artist **Gary Hill** often question the privileged position of images and the visual in contemporary culture. Hill’s works expose how spoken language and images may condition without necessarily corresponding to each other, as the discussion of his single-channel video *Around & About* in the last subsection (“Voice and Image, Voice and Script”) will demonstrate. Similar to several other artists of his generation, Hill seeks to ascertain the media specificity of video; his “primary reference medium” remains, however, human language, “against which he measures the processual possibilities of electronic writing, of combining and transforming elements, and of transcribing of imagery into text and voice” (Spielmann 2010, 192). Hill’s single-channel video with the self-reflexive title *Mediations (towards a remake of Soundings)* (US 1986) employs a synchronicity of spoken language and images in that the acts of ‘speaking’ and ‘doing’ merge completely (see also Chapter 4, Section 1, where this work is discussed from another angle). A male voice-over is heard speaking slowly and gravely, like a teller of fairy tales, broadcast through a loudspeaker lying on the ground and filmed from above in close-up. After a short while, a hand enters the picture, scattering sand onto the loudspeaker.

At first, the grains of sand jump up and down as the loudspeaker’s membrane vibrates with the voice’s sound waves. The sand falls steadily, making a circular pattern and briefly creating an allusion to an eye moving slightly to the rhythm of the speech. ‘Audio-visuality’ is not a mode of presentation but is presented self-reflexively through a ‘blink of an eye.’ Gradually, the sand covers the speaker and, due to its mass and weight, diminishes the volume of the voice until the voice projected through the speaker is buried both metaphorically and literally. Hill’s is a true speech act: The voice-over declares “voice burials” (Hill in Broeker 2002, 123) while the loudspeaker is covered by sand, alluding to the symbolic gesture of a funeral service.

Throughout the video, the descriptive and self-referential text states exactly what the images show, noting that “a hand enters the picture” or “a voice is losing ground.” The voice here turns into a medium in the double sense of the word. Amplified by the loudspeaker, it transmits a content message. At the same time, though, the loudspeaker functions as a visual placeholder for the absent body producing the vocal articulation, as well as—in the concrete movements



FIGURE 3.1.9 Gary Hill. *Mediations*. 1986.

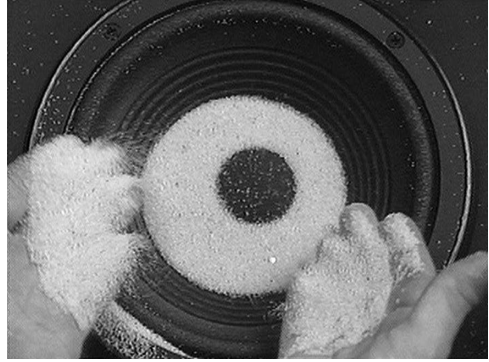


FIGURE 3.1.10 Gary Hill. *Mediations*. 1986.

of the membrane—a visual representation of the sound waves produced by a human body. The loudspeaker is transformed into a medial externalization, which the work accentuates: Through the ‘speaker,’ the off-voice becomes an ‘on-voice.’ The materiality of Hill’s voice functions as a third layer of signification, adding to the images and signifiers, emphasizing single words with relish, or ironically dissecting them into individual syllables. This technique is foregrounded with the correlative two-syllable words ‘picture’ and ‘speaker,’ spoken by Hill with an emphasis on the consonants, especially the plosives and fricatives. The artist-performer speaks the word ‘voice’ 30 times in this short video performance; the voice as dominant is laid bare.

The medial structure of Hill’s self-reflexive video was recently referenced and transformed by the French–Algerian artist **Kader Attia**. In his mixed-media installation *Narrative Vibrations* (FR 2017), presented at the 57th Venice Biennale, he places about a dozen loudspeakers on the floor of a black cube. A singing rather than a speaking voice is heard: soundtracks of films or concert recordings of divas from the Arab postcolonial golden age (among them the Algerian singers Meriem Fekkai, Warda al-Jazairia, and Reinette l’Oranaise or the Egyptian dancer and actress Samia Gamal). The work is part of Attia’s artistic research, focusing on the question of sound from traditional music in North Africa and the Middle East. Whenever the audience can see one of the singers’ performance on a monitor, the other screens turn black.

The passionate, even ecstatic chanting voice is mediated on both an acoustic and a tactile level: small golden grains, placed on textile trays similar to loudspeakers, move and produce various geometric patterns, agitated by the electromagnetic waves transmitted by those songs and their music. As in Hill’s performative piece, the grains—here covered with Plexiglas domes as if they were precious jewels—jump up and vibrate more strongly whenever the song increases in volume or intensity. The moving grains create a somewhat uncanny, irritating movement in a darkened space, instantly starting and stopping through the control of an invisible programming code, in a choreography of songs embodied by both the singers and the loudspeakers. While the grains look golden and thus symbolically refer to the ‘golden age’ when these melancholic and glamorous divas celebrated their music, they are in fact couscous semolina. To return once more to Barthes’s notion of the ‘grain of the voice’: Both Hill and Attia visualize human sound through grains moving on the vibrating surface of a loudspeaker that visualizes and materializes volatile vocal acts.

*The Nuclear Football* (DE 2004), created by the artist duo **Korpys/Löffler** (Andree Korpys and Markus Löffler), fathoms the uncanny nature and literariness of the acousmatic voice.





FIGURE 3.1.11 Kader Attia. *Narrative Vibrations*. 2017.

The video is part of a multimedia installation that includes drawings and other visual components. Accredited as journalists, Korpys/Löffler attended and taped the state visit of George W. Bush to Berlin in May 2002. The resulting video consists of three parts: the arrival of the president and the First Lady at Berlin's Tegel Airport; the presidential couple's visit to the residence of the German president, Bellevue Castle; and their departure from the airport on the same day. The 'star' of the piece, however, is the titular 'nuclear football,' the black leather satchel that contains a portable military communication unit that is carried wherever the U.S. president goes, allowing the commander in chief to authorize a nuclear strike 'on the go.'

The circumstances of the video's creation might suggest that *The Nuclear Football* is a broadcast documentary, yet several artistic devices undermine this conclusion and work against genre expectations. Instead of showing the political 'event' through the common image repertoire of official handshakes, the recording shows mainly 'down time': it is structured around waiting and observation. The first and third part are particularly uneventful, focusing on the large number of security and secret service staff who survey the venues while everyone who is present patiently waits for 'the most powerful man in the world.' The conspicuously unspectacular images simultaneously provoke a level of boredom along with a sense of almost uncomfortable, unfulfilled anticipation.

This irritating tension is acoustically matched as well as amplified by the soundtrack, which includes Brian Eno's ambient *Music for Airports* (1978) and an enigmatic, sonorously whispering male voice that comments on the video recordings from off-camera. The strange 'placelessness' of the voice creates an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion that was characteristic of the Bush



FIGURE 3.1.12 Korpys/Löffler. *The Nuclear Football*. 2004.



FIGURE 3.1.13 Korpys/Löffler. *The Nuclear Football*. 2004.

administration on the level of *realpolitik*. The voice is Löffler's, but its origin remains unclear within the structure of the artwork. Even though the credits refer to the voice as 'vocals,' it is in fact more of a legato *sprechgesang*, gaining its lyrical qualities from a steady rhythm that formally corresponds to the blank verse of a play or to free verse in poetry: constative clauses whispered in a paratactic order. "There is a tense contradiction between the suggestive, nearly image-evoking voice and the actual content of its words" (Schmidt 2006, 366). The speaker possesses comprehensive knowledge of the arrival ritual, and predicts concrete facts, such as that the president is stepping out of the airplane. By disclosing the hidden choreography that controls the movement of the military parade as well as the positioning of the politicians' bodies, this work by Korpys/Löffler displays "the aesthetic and formal representations of political [...] systems of power" (*ibid.*, 362). But this display is not neutral-informative. Analyzing early video art, Krauss highlights that

“configured within the parapsychological sense of the word ‘medium’ is the image of a human receiver (and sender) of communications arising from an invisible source” (Krauss 1976, 52). It is this sense of ‘medium’ that the whispering voice-over in *The Nuclear Football* evokes and that produces a sense of uncanniness. Moreover, the audience is made an involuntary accomplice to the speaker by the stereo projection of the acousmatic voice, as both the source of the voice and the audience are situated and thus united outside of the visible frame. This establishes a forced intimacy between the unidentified acousmatic voice and the recipients: They share an invisible ‘co-presence.’

### *Technical Alienation of the Voice*

This subsection deals with an alienation of the voice through physical or technological manipulation, an artistic technique often employed in media art. Generally, a highly defamiliarized voice leads to a focus on the signifier and its materiality, not on the signified. One may speak of these works as ‘sound poetry’ recalled verbatim or, more precisely, ‘phonetic poetry’ created through new media.

**Vito Acconci’s** video performance *Open Book* (US 1974) is an intricate reflection on both the act of speaking and on the medial difference between book and video. The work shows a close-up of the continuously opened mouth of the artist-performer as he articulates short declarative sentences and imperative clauses. On a linguistic level, this speaking technique creates a strong sense of alienation because one cannot pronounce consonants without closing the mouth, thus reducing the words to their vowels. The wide open mouth declares loudly, “I am not closed,” “I am open,” and “I am open to you;” it invites the listener to “come in” and claims “I let anyone in.” What the audience really hears, however, are the vowel combinations ‘i-a-o-o,’ ‘i-a-o-e,’ ‘i-a-o-e-o-u,’ or ‘o-i’ or ‘i-e-a-o-i.’ The deformed and disfigured language—the speech that literally makes ‘the cheekbones ache’ (see Chapter 2, Section 1)—rejects the dimension of meaning: the work confronts the recipient with rudimentary, largely inarticulate sounds, sounds that do not make sense, that are *zaum*. On a visual level, Acconci’s open mouth is presented as a giant maw, exposing the pink flesh of the lips and tongue, the teeth, and accumulating saliva. Though images of a mouth are not transgressive per se, the device of the close-up produces uncanny affection-images that trigger a feeling of repulsion or even disgust: The performance is ‘abject’ in the sense of Kristeva, literally focusing on a “place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2), and as such questioning the mouth as the producer of meaningful speech. This contradiction highlights the ambiguity of the work’s claim to be ‘open.’



FIGURE 3.1.14 Vito Acconci. *Open Book*. 1974.

Comparable to the strategy employed by Nauman in *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*, Acconci's gaping mouth draws the viewer in while simultaneously posing a threat. The title *Open Book* promises that the new medium of video is as 'legible' as the old medium of books, a claim that is at the same time performatively negated. Furthermore, the figurative phrase 'to be an open book' refers to someone who has no secrets and who can be easily 'read,' while Acconci's speech cannot be deciphered. Unlike the other works discussed in this subsection, Acconci's work does not modify the voice through technical means but through a radical 'body technique' of restrained vocalizations that exposes the articulatory gestures by using the close-up as device.

In the two single-channel videos discussed next, voices are technically modified to defamiliarize individual characteristics that are assumed to be transmitted through the human voice: gender and age. A prominent video in this regard is the Swiss media artist **Pipilotti Rist's** *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (CH 1986), which appropriates the first line "She's not a girl who misses much" from the Beatles song "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" (1968). In both their length and their aesthetics, Rist's videos are reminiscent of music video clips; her work "combines the ease of medial images with fundamental questions about sexuality, the female body and gender difference in contemporary society" (Martin 2006, 80). In *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, the lyrics sung by the artist-performer are heard in a highly distorted pitch. After about three minutes, an excerpt of the original recording with the smooth, familiar voice of John Lennon cuts in. The appropriated formula of being 'not a girl who misses much' is ambiguous, since it can refer to both a young woman who may be spoiled and wants for nothing and also to someone who is permissive. Rist appears in a wild black wig and black dress with a plunging neckline that completely exposes her breasts. She dances hectically, almost clumsily, in front of a white wall to her own *a cappella* song. The pace of the video is sped-up much of the time,



FIGURE 3.1.15 Pipilotti Rist. *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*. 1986.

resulting in a voice that sounds like a child or cartoon character and puppet-like movements that evoke associations of a Barbie doll gone wild.

The work reflects the dazzling postfeminist position that most critics have found in Rist's work (cf. Söll 2004, 30–44; Newman 2009, 110). The artist-performer plays with the stereotype of the 'cute girl.' At the same time, the exaggeration of the voice and the movements appear 'hyper-feminine'—hysterical, according to the discourse of 19th and early 20th century medicine and psychoanalysis, which considered hysteria a specifically female neurosis resulting from sexual frustration. Rist relates to this trope through the 'hysterical' voice and by throwing back her head while dancing. In addition to the dominant device of acceleration, Rist also applies the opposite strategy, deceleration. Suddenly, the images are presented in slow motion, so that it looks as if the artist is moving under water. Her voice also completely changes so it sounds like that of a depressed male character, and resonance is added. This manipulation of speed between fast and slow, with its clear impact on the sound, highlights that video as a medium is actually more 'related' to audio recording than to film because the material base is magnetic tape and the sound effect is familiar to anyone who has used the fast-forward button of a cassette deck (cf. Haustein 2003, 85).

In the context of Rist's aesthetics of distortion, another significant device, which appears in the middle of the video, is a kind of visual crossing out or erasure of the image from top to bottom, wiping out the figure (comparable to Hatoum's *So Much I Want to Say*, discussed earlier). Rist displays a hysteric and child-like woman being continually 'erased'—a reference to a device known from deconstructive writing, in which certain terms or concepts are crossed out but remain legible (cf. Menke 1992). The visually exposed and alienated female body—with its foregrounded and manipulated voice—is both available and withdrawn at the same time.

*Das Zauberglas* [The Magic Glass] (DE/NO 1991), a video by the German-Norwegian artist **Bjørn Melhus**, works with several similar strategies and also relates to pop culture. In the six-minute piece, two characters engage in a conversation: a man shaving himself talks to a strange character who is located in a television screen. Curiously, the artist embodies both figures, which results in an infinite iteration. This iteration is matched with an inversion: the man in front of the TV set is presented in anachronistic black and white, while the figure inside the television is in amplified bright colors. The person on TV is an androgynous-looking man wearing a feather headpiece who speaks in a dubbed female voice and talks about a magic glass, while the man who is shaving has a male voice. In the background a bird is continuously chirruping, creating a general atmosphere of kitsch.

The dialog is taken from a German-dubbed version of the Hollywood Western *Broken Arrow* (1950; cf. Mertin 2001). In that movie, a cowboy teaches a Native American girl who is fascinated by a mirror how to use that 'magic glass' and, ultimately, to learn how beautiful she is. In Melhus's transfiguration of this scene, the mirror referred to in the title is replaced by the television screen, which is curiously touched by the 'girl' from the 'inside' and no longer constitutes a barrier (as in Acconci's video performance, there is the pseudo-promise of openness and connection between medium and reality). The young man speaking from the TV set with the 'borrowed' dubbed voice of a (Native) American woman creates an especially strong alienation effect; the nonsense-dialog is further manipulated by continuous iterations of single sentences that are obviously recorded, so that the two figures appear artificial and burlesque. Furthermore, the articulation mode of the speakers ironically alludes to the movie culture of the 1950s that perpetuated the notion of women as childish and naïve and men as mature and wise by a 'gender-specific' coding and coloring of voices.

**Ursula Hodel's** short video piece *Speedo* (CH 1997) also plays ironically with symbols of gender representation. Literariness is found in the self-referentiality of the language, wordplay



FIGURE 3.1.16 Bjørn Melhus. *Das Zauberglas*. 1991.



FIGURE 3.1.17 Ursula Hodel. *Speedo*. 1997.

(“golden cap,” “golden cup”), and in a conceptual split between images and a self-reflexive voice-over that is not the voice of the artist. Dressed in a golden swimming suit, goggles, and a bathing cap, the artist sits on the ground of a studio on a shiny golden sheet, in front of the camera. As the piece begins, she gradually covers her cap with layers of melted chocolate she dips out of a golden cup with her finger. Later, she performs yoga poses, licks the interior and exterior of the cup, sips wine, and smokes a cigar while simultaneously the female voice-over is heard. The images are distorted through a fish-eye lens, alluding to the famous Renaissance painting *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (circa 1524), by Italian artist Parmigiano.

The title, *Speedo*, is not only a reference to the manufacturer whose name has become a synonym for swimwear itself but is also a self-referential description of the dominant formal principle organizing the video: both images and voice-over are rapidly sped-up, creating an alienation effect. The voice sounds puppet-like and mechanical; the movement seems fidgety, connoting the stereotype of the hysteric, hyperactive woman. True to the tradition of conceptual art, the English voice-over text points back to the idea that initiated the video:

I love chocolate. [. . .] Whatever I do, I do in excess. So also chocolate eating. I thought a chocolate video piece would be the answer. For the art it would be legitimate to eat mountains of chocolate. [. . .] I was cooking this video piece for weeks in my head.

The voice-over continues to describe the production process leading to this piece and a similar one whose title is taken from the chocolate manufacturer, *Godiva* (1997). Although Hodel performs directly to the camera without being 'bracketed' between a closed-circuit set-up (cf. Krauss 1976, 62), the video seems to be a prime example of the narcissism, the "[s]elf-encapsulation—the body or psyche as its own surround—[that] is everywhere to be found in the corpus of video art" (ibid., 53). Hodel looks into the camera as if using a mirror, and the spoken text refers exclusively to her and the video and, consequently, only to itself.

While Hodel's video mimics the narcissism of early video art, it is in fact the result of a collaboration, unmasking the self-encapsulation as an illusion. Although the artist has written the voice-over text, it is spoken by Tracy Leipold, whose voice is also heard in works by other video artists, such as Seunggho Cho (see Chapter 5). Thus, notions of the artist's voice as embodying and authenticating the spoken words are deconstructed. As in Melhus's video *Das Zauberglas* or Freya Hattenberger's video installation *Pretty Girl* (discussed later in this subsection), the body of the artist-performer in front of the camera is matched with an alien voice—a voice that is either too high or too low to represent the gender and age of the person on screen.

Gender ambiguity is further emphasized in *Speedo*. On one hand, the sped-up voice sounds artificial and 'girlie'—applying the same feminist strategy as in Rist's just discussed piece. On the other hand, Hodel ostentatiously performs masculine body language, in particular 'manspreading' her legs while smoking a fat cigar and looking provocatively into the camera. She opens and closes her legs while wearing only a skimpy swimsuit, imitating the ritualized movement of a female stripper. As such *Speedo* is highly ambiguous: It deconstructs gender roles as well as the use of video technology in art.

Perhaps the strongest example of the technical defamiliarization of the voice is *Sweet Heart* (DE 1996), a single-channel video by the artist collective **Granular≈Synthesis**—a pseudonym for joint projects by the Austrian artists Kurt Hentschläger and Ulf Langheinrich. They collaborated from 1991 to 2003, investigating the aesthetic potentials of audiovisual re-synthesizing. In their works, they anatomize and manipulate microsegments of sounds and images and subsequently reintegrate them into visual and acoustic 'symphonies.' They follow the method of 'granular synthesis,' which was originally devised for computer music, and treat visual and acoustic data equally; both modalities therefore correspond conceptually on a formal level. The soundtrack is based on the production of extremely dense and miniature acoustic signs—the so-called grains—that are only 10–30 milliseconds in length (too short to be audible by human beings as independent sounds); the same technique is applied to the visual material. Similar to a film that simulates fluidity through a succession of rapid images, granular synthesis simulates a continuous sound, although in fact a multitude of single segments creates the sound. One may speed up, slow down, or play an acoustic granular synthesis backward, without changing its pitch or other sound qualities.

For *Sweet Heart*, Granular≈Synthesis engaged the female Japanese performer Akemi Takeya. They produced the single-channel video for an experimental short film program on the Austrian television channel ORF. The video, which is intended to be projected onto a wall in a black box in a large format, uses a plain, neutral set-up: viewers see the face of the young performer, her hair austere pulled back, with bare shoulders, in front of a light monochrome background. At the beginning, her head moves to either side and, later, up and down, in a mechanical manner and at a very high pace.

The method of granular synthesis produces synthetic facial expressions on the performer that only seem to express emotions. The sterility of the setting and the abstractness of the digital manipulation destroy any intimacy and partnership that may be associated with the work's title. In addition, the words 'sweet heart' appear acoustically in a highly distorted manner; by reducing the performer's voice to its pitch, modulations are barely audible. In parts of the video only the vowels 'e' (sweet) and 'ea' (heart) are audible, sometimes in a serial pattern ('e-ea-e-ea-e-ea'), achieving an effect similar to Acconci's *Open Book* but by different means. This 15-minute long minimalistic and monotonous techno-litany is quite unpleasant to the ear and is, in this regard, closely related to early 20th century experiments with sound poetry.

The last work analyzed in this subsection on technically modified voices is **Freya Hattenberger's** video performance *Sirene* [Siren] (DE 2006). The setting of *Sirene* is simple. Hattenberger stands behind a microphone that is covered with a black condom and faces the camera head-on; in the background, technical equipment such as cables are visible. She wears a black turtleneck sweater, her long hair twisted into a knot. The title, *Sirene*, obviously refers to the fatal female creatures mentioned in the *Odyssey* and other myths, who live on an island and lure passing seamen with their seductive, deadly songs. As 'siren,' Hattenberger carefully but firmly uses her lips and mouth to attend to the microphone. She performs this fellatio-like act with utmost dedication, her eyes mostly closed but looking provocatively into the camera at the beginning and the very end of the piece. The physical action of touching the 'phallic' microphone both in front of and for the camera evokes pornographic images. At the same time, the sensual visual stimulus contrasts with the acoustic event, since every movement of the mouth produces



FIGURE 3.1.18 Granular≈Synthesis. *Sweet Heart*. 1996.





FIGURE 3.1.19 Freya Hattenberger. *Sirene*, 2006.

ear-piercing feedback. Her video performance is therefore a synthesis of body art—performing with one’s own body in a live setting—and media art, which consists mainly of recorded content. The feedback between microphone and loudspeaker produces the acoustic sensations, which are a reference to the specific form of interactive video installations that artists such as Nauman have established and that capture “the body of the responding viewer” (Krauss 1976, 52) in an instant video feedback.

The literariness of *Sirene* is an effect of contradictions arising from an intertwining of the title, the visual performance, and the sound. Though Hattenberger speaks of communication, communication is not accomplished through a ‘clear’ transmission of language-based content between sender and receiver. While the visual sensuality of Hattenberger’s physical performance might be alluring—embodying the attraction of the sirens—the accompanying sounds are appalling. In other words, her image has the power to draw in viewers while the acoustic dimension of the piece pushes them away. Audience members are therefore trapped in an uncomfortable situation of being seduced into looking at her while at the same time covering their ears or fighting the impulse to walk away. As such, *Sirene* also recalls the episode in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus is bound to a ship’s mast so he can experience the maddening sweetness of the sirens’ singing without being able to move towards them, while his sailors’ ears are plugged with wax so that they are immune to the sirens’ power. Without using language, this video performance scrutinizes the power of the voice.

### *Voice and Image, Voice and Script*

This last subsection investigates four video artworks that focus on both the interplay of ‘speech and image’ and of ‘speech and script’ by employing the two modes of language simultaneously.

**Gary Hill’s *Around & About*** (US 1980) is a prime example of the peculiar interplay of poetic voice and images. In this single-channel video, an off-camera male voice addresses a unidentified counterpart, seemingly dealing with a conflict in a personal relationship. Indirectly, however, the

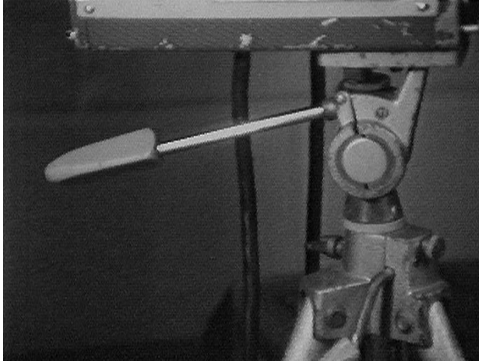


FIGURE 3.1.20 Gary Hill. *Around & About*. 1980.



FIGURE 3.1.21 Gary Hill. *Around & About*. 1980.

addressed ‘you’ could also be any recipient of the work. A first-person monolog by Hill reflects the communicative potential of language:

I mean you don’t have to listen, just hear me out. I don’t want you to be involved in deciphering anything but that’s your prerogative and I don’t want to get in your way. There’s something that can be said for that and I hear you but I don’t want to listen to it. I realize it’s easy for one to say that I’m being ambiguous but I don’t think so. I mean if you want to leave you can do that or you can just turn off. I’m not trying to say I’m indifferent. I just think there’s a way here. Maybe you really do hear me and I’m going on and on but we have to continue for some time. (Hill in Broecker 2002, 90)

The text is a form of self-reflexive communication in a rather penetrating ‘language of proximity’ that continuously broaches the issues of speaking, hearing, and understanding. Within the syllable rhythm of the monotonously pronounced words, unrelated stills change at a fast pace. The spoken language therefore ‘dictates’ the images, which, however, in no way illustrate the words being spoken. “Although the meaning of the mostly simple sentences seems obvious, their confrontation with the images produces confusing and contradictory meanings” (Lehmann 2008, 71). The artist remarks: “A kind of ‘organic automation’ is created when language makes the images disappear from the screen, reappear, and disappear again. This manipulates the viewer’s temporal perception in relation to images and languages to a high degree” (Hill in Broecker 2002, 89). Hill uses the same principle for other video works, such as *Primarily Speaking* (1981–1983; cf. *ibid.*, 105–110).

A foregrounding of the phonetic versus the grammatical and semantic dimensions of language characterize the structure of these works: In the first part of *Around & About*, the whole image changes with each syllable; later, only one vertical segment of the subsequent image becomes visible with each new syllable. On one hand, the voice seems to dominate the images, which change only when the voice is heard. On the other hand, this image-generating power is also undermined, as the relationship between spoken words and displayed images remains opaque. In this and other experimental works that combine fragments of spoken language with segments of images, Hill creates an “‘image alphabet,’” using “images like a language” and dissecting them into “elements of a picture language” (Belting 1994, 50). This means that Hill “speaks *in* images, but he does not speak *about* images,” and in so doing he challenges the idea that images exist in and of themselves (*ibid.*).

The arbitrary combination of speech and images in *Around & About* confronts viewers with the fact that meaning comes into being only through ephemeral constructions: the signification of the linguistic signs and the image segments remains vague and unstable. One could assume that aggression is embedded in this confrontation, that viewers are subjected to a stream of words and pictures they are forced to endure—and yet, this aggression is an invitation to actively participate in the work's construction. Hill uses language—spoken words—turning images into language, and at the same time these languages refuse to be exploited as vehicles of prefabricated meaning. Instead, they address the viewers' senses. The presence of the voice and the images is felt, they must be felt, and as such the viewers' bodily presence is required.

**Doug Hall's** video *The Speech* (US 1982) is a pointed remark on the empty rhetoric of political speeches. Dressed in a dark suit and polka-dot tie, Hall stands behind a lectern, flanked by the U.S. flag as well as a flag that seems to imitate the U.S. presidential flag. He looks straight into the camera and starts to speak with the demeanor of a media-savvy politician: "Honesty. Self-Reliance. Moral strength and courage. Modesty. Humor. Confidence. Human vulnerability or sensitivity. Respect for others, particularly those less fortunate. Friendliness and good health and virility." At first, it seems as if the 'politician' has an important message for the audience. Yet this is a misleading effect of Hall's serious, solemn intonation as the last word, 'virility,' creates a confusing contrast to rather universal values such as honesty. This defamiliarizing device of contrast is like a stumble stone; it forces the listeners to pay closer attention, resulting in a re-evaluation of the words spoken earlier. It becomes obvious that this address is nothing but an array of hollow buzzwords. The assumed relevance of the speech is contrasted by a jumpy montage showing close-ups of the artist-performer from various angles, always standing still and looking into the camera with a searching gaze. His facial expression seems serious yet bland and is hard to decipher.

The opening of the speech is followed by a sequence of ultramarine blue screens that disrupts the shots showing the 'politician' on stage. The sequence highlights buzzwords from the speech—"MORAL STRENGTH," "MODESTY," and "HONESTY"—shown in huge white capital letters and accompanied by Hall's technically distorted voice uttering the respective



FIGURE 3.1.22 Doug Hall. *The Speech*. 1982.

platitudes, now in a much deeper, fuller timbre (Figure 3.1.23). The written manifestation of these words suggests mistrust in the power of orality, or the words may be understood as keywords the speaker reads from a teleprompter, words normally hidden from sight. As disruptions, these blue inserts add to the effect of alienation. When the speech continues, the speaker curiously falls into using the third person: “He appears relaxed and in control,” the voice states, and another capitalized buzzword follows, “CONFIDENCE.” He again utters phrases about himself in the third person: “It allows him to avoid difficult questions while seeming to be a nice guy” (uttered twice), “and a final example,” and then, “is the ultimate victory of form over content” (uttered twice). The final statement can be interpreted as a criticism on art itself, in particular, if it adheres to the decadence tradition of *l’art pour l’art*.

The odd use of third person and the mode of speaking contradict the oratory genre of “speech” and the visual setting of a presidential address. Even though the four statements are presented and emphasized with long pauses and through repetition, their message is not transmitted: Who is speaking about whom and to whom? Only the last sentence reveals that the artist-performer is speaking about the character he embodies. This prototypical alienation device sums up the artist’s critique: The ‘perfect’ political speech is the ultimate victory of form over content. This twist sheds new light on the opening lines. The buzzwords are not only speech without content, but they are also a list of the ‘perfect’ politician’s character traits. As such, *The Speech* not only exposes the clichés with which politics operates in mass media, it also criticizes the audience, whose members are content to be lulled by these clichés.

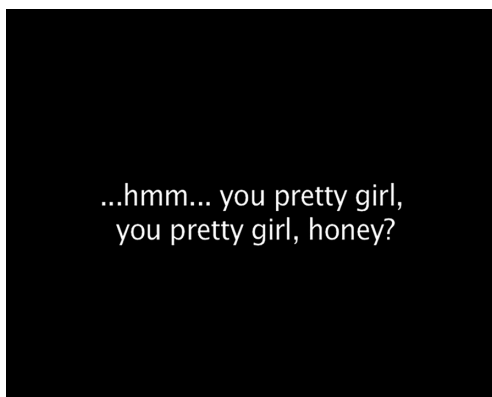
A video installation that illuminates the nexus of oral and scriptural language is **Freya Hattenberger’s *Pretty Girl*** (DE 2005), which combines a wall projection and, on a different floor of the exhibition space, a TV set with loudspeakers. The video installation simultaneously offers verbal and written linguistic information. The projection shows white script on black ground, while the TV monitor presents a young woman (the artist) in close-up. She is wearing red lipstick, sitting by a window, her hair tucked into the upturned collar of a dark jacket. Pedestrians pass; the location looks like an urban coffee shop. The woman is mirrored twofold: from behind in the windowpane as well as in a chrome doorframe, complicating the seemingly simple setting.



FIGURE 3.1.23 Doug Hall. *The Speech*. 1982.



**FIGURE 3.1.24** Freya Hattenberger. *Pretty Girl*. 2005.



**FIGURE 3.1.25** Freya Hattenberger. *Pretty Girl*. 2005.

This mirroring is, on one hand, a self-reflexive comment on the mediatedness of the situation, and, on the other hand, to the multiplication of the protagonist—a device employed throughout film history, as in Jean Epstein’s *La glace à trois fois* (1927), or Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Fontane Effi Briest* (1974).

The woman on the screen, whom one instantly associates with the ‘pretty girl’ of the title, forms words with her mouth. The deep voice that is heard, however, belongs to a man, whose speech the artist is lip synching—an alienating embodiment of *acousmètre*. The U.S.-accented male voice addresses a nameless ‘pretty girl,’ reassuring and calming her, praising her beauty and good behavior, but also demanding her to strike specific poses and talking about her to another person. The girl who is being addressed remains mute. She is in a subordinate position and seems to offer herself to the speaker. The voice-over was not produced specifically for the video but was recorded “in an Amsterdam boutique where a man encouraged Freya Hattenberger to film his girlfriend while prompting her to pose” (Wettengl 2012, 19)—information that makes the man’s speech even more repulsive.

Hattenberger performs both the role of the objectifying man and the objectified woman. This openness about the referents, as well as the multimodality of the language that is used, is one of the artist’s poetic strategies. Phrases such as “You see the response, | it’s funny—| | she knows you’re | taking a picture.”; “No, no, no, no, no, no, stay”; or “Stay where you are. | Stay where you are,” as well as in the transcription of the physical actions, such as clapping hands presented in brackets as nonverbal stage directions—“(Clap, Clap, Clap)” —give the impression that the man is talking to and about a dog. Through this disconcerting allusion, not only is the relationship between human and animal depicted as strangely sexualized, but the degrading effects of the man’s words are emphasized. Removed from the original situation, the video is less about the relationship of two individuals. Rather, it becomes a critique of misogynist men who consider themselves to be ‘masters by nature,’ entitled to reign over women and treat them like submissive pets.

The power dynamic displayed in Hattenberger’s installation through the aural and visual components is complex, insofar as the female speaker, through which a male acousmatic voice is articulated, is at the same time the object of the viewer’s gaze. One could think that this refers to the internalization of the master–subject relationship, yet such a conclusion is undermined through the facial expression of the artist, who often skeptically raises her eyebrows. It is further complicated because voice and text are split between two screens. Due to the linguistic representation of gestures (“Clap”) as well as the onomatopoeic sound transcription (“Heeah?”), the script, isolated on a black background, resembles the typography and language of comic books. The written phrases that gradually appear out of the black background, as if being typed, often

contain finite punctuation marks, mostly exclamation or question marks that function as indirect appeals. Through these appeals, the reader is performatively turned into the submissive girl. This process corresponds to Judith Butler's argument that verbal address constitutes the identity of subjects, even if this interpellation is offensive or defaming to the addressee (cf. Butler 1997). Adhering to speech act theory, Butler conceptualizes language as action and 'hate speech' as an illocutionary speech act, inasmuch as the subject is constituted in the very moment of hailing and thereby establishing inter-subjective hierarchies. The repetitive quoting of certain conventions in this way forms and regulates subjects into a subordinate position. *Pretty Girl* exposes such mechanisms and their physical appropriation; at the same time, it creates a fundamental disorientation and uncertainty concerning the positions of both speaker and addressee.

With regard to its literariness, this video installation is most interesting in its treatment of oral and written language. Since both appear simultaneously, the viewer must decide which to follow and position himself or herself in the gallery space accordingly. In the installation at the Marion Scharmann gallery in Cologne (2008), the two screens were positioned on different floors so that it was impossible to view them at the same time without moving about within the space. The recipient therefore fulfills the mediating role of translating and connecting; his or her physical movement relates the oral language on the screen to the silent wall projection containing the written phrases. Hattenberger thus presents language as multimodal, appearing in different formats as an "intermedium" (Jäger 2010b, 302). Her video installation addresses the act of literary transcription itself—the process of turning an everyday monolog into 'art.' *Pretty Girl* shows how an ostensibly neutral script—presented on the silent wall projection—is automatically interpreted by the speaker, the artist, and the recipients of the video installation. It is in this continuous dynamics of transcriptivity, between orality and script, that meaning is established, becoming a poetic signification due to its ambiguity and openness to interpretation.

**Shelly Silver's** experimental video essay *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown* (US 2010)—produced for the Chinatown Film Project of The Museum of Chinese in America—is a complex portrait of the artist's neighborhood: Chinatown in New York City. The work combines spoken and written Mandarin, Cantonese, and English with archival photographs, historic maps, 19th-century cartoons, and footage of contemporary Chinatown, mostly in exterior shots. Whereas Cantonese and Mandarin are spoken by actual persons, the English voices are computer generated. The video's collage-like editing displays the intricate layers that constitute the neighborhood beneath the visible surface of familiar shops and people spending time together in parks, revealing a history of settlements and demolitions, immigration, racism, and gentrification. The mix of languages, writing systems, and voices—at times combined into matching translations with or without transcriptions, at times assembled into multilingual and multimodal sentences—not only highlights the multilingualism, the many voices of Chinatown, but it also undermines the idea of a master narrative, a singular history or identity. *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown* jumps among languages, spoken words, and script; present, past, and future; and the general and the specific.

This formal principle is established right from the beginning. Silver's video uses modern high Chinese—Mandarin—as well as Cantonese, a dialect spoken mostly in southern China, which differs so much from high Chinese that it is considered a language on its own. Many inhabitants of U.S. Chinatowns originated in this region, home to the only harbor in which foreign ships were allowed to land during the reign of the emperor. Correspondingly, Silver's video employs two different Chinese script systems: the traditional 'long signs' that were used in China in an earlier era—and are still common in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore as well as North American Chinatowns, as the video emphasizes—and the 'short signs' that were introduced after the communist reformation of script and are now commonly used in mainland China.

The video opens with close-ups of a park in wintertime: a table with benches; a group of older men, laughing, and playing a game; and a birdcage covered with fabric. Next, very wide

shots present the park as situated in its urban setting. Simultaneously, the first English voice-overs are heard, led by a female with a male or a chorus responding: “Start with a view. | Start with a view, | Looking south. | Looking south. | We’re looking south. | Once, this wasn’t there. | This wasn’t there. | Something else was. | A hill, near a pond. | Pond.” The line “Once, this wasn’t there.” is illustrated by a black rectangle ‘erasing’ the view onto the park, and “Something else was.” is combined with the image of a historic map. After the English word “Pond,” two words in Mandarin, uttered by different speakers, can be heard, *chí*, (pond) and *jí* (to collect), followed by the English voice-over translation “collect pond.” To someone who does not understand Mandarin, the words sound similar, like a rhyme or a sharp and soft pronunciation of the same word. Following a principle reminiscent of sound poetry, this combination highlights ‘what a difference a sound makes,’ as well as the fact that a pond is also where water is ‘collected.’

In another sequence, Silver employs a specific kind of intellectual montage that deconstructs habitual language use. Referring to Jacob Riis’s famous book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a voice-over informs the audience: “Chapter eight is called Chinatown” (it is in fact Chapter 9 in the Riis book that bears this title). Simultaneously, the word “Chinatown” is shown against a black background. Next, the compound word is disassembled. First, the word ‘China’ is spoken and presented individually, followed by a shot of a porcelain plate that is then combined with the word ‘town’ (Figure 3.1.26). This defamiliarizing word-image sign highlights the arbitrariness of language, not unlike Baldessari’s video performances. The term ‘C/china’ not only denotes a country, but it is also used to denote porcelain dinnerware. ‘Chinatown’ is named, as another voice-over informs viewers, “like the country.” In contrast to “Jew Town” (Chapter 10 in the Riis’s book; presented in the video with the same principle as ‘Chinatown’), which is named, as the voice-over notes, “for a people, not a country.”

Following these politically charged introductory sequences, the video continues with five ‘lessons’—a rather ambiguous term, connoting both ‘language’ as well as ‘history lessons’: (1) “Neighbour || hood”; (2) “What was it like || 1886 || Before” (following the Chinese sign order from the simultaneous voice-over and thus creating a syntactic error in English); (3) “More history,” (4) “Change,” and (5) “Inside || Deanna’s House.” Each lesson is introduced by a short sequence of black screens with the word “lesson” as well as the Arabic and/or the Chinese number—a stylistic reference to the subtitle cards of the silent film era—accompanied by a Mandarin, Cantonese, and

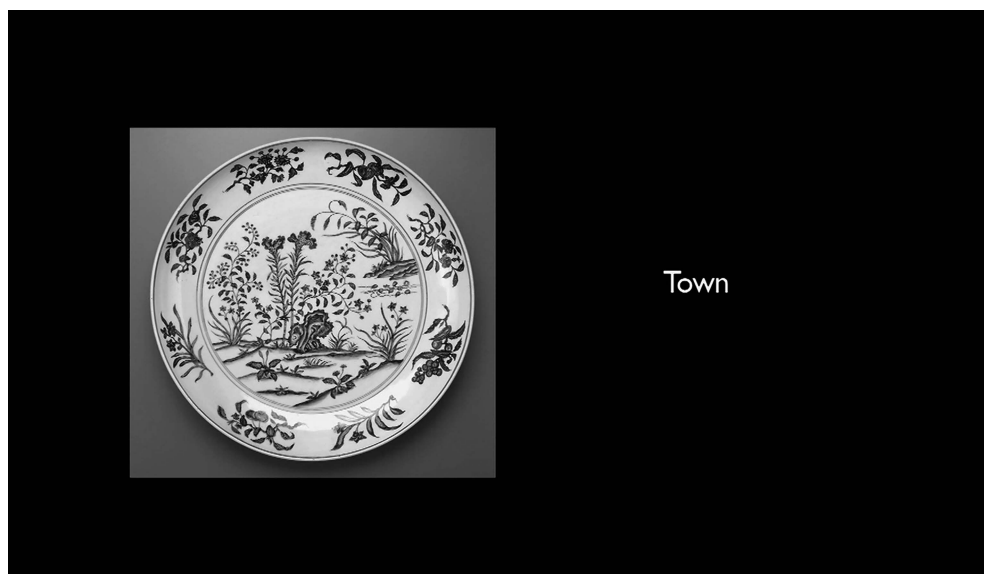


FIGURE 3.1.26 Shelly Silver. *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown*. 2010.

English voice-over choir announcing the number. Individual lessons cover different topics with different image types: Some use contemporary footage of Chinatown, whereas others use stills of historic documents. They are united by the formal principle of collage, which draws attention specifically to script or to the sounds of the different languages. Lesson 1, for instance, presents footage of different sites that constitute the neighborhood of an unidentified first-person narrator: “my bakery,” “my laundromat,” “my door,” “my grocery,” and “my fish store.” There is no voice-over, just the sound of the streets. The last image of the grocery is followed by a black screen showing only the ‘cut out’ store sign displaying Chinese script under which the English translation is presented in white script: “It’s dirt cheap if you do it yourself!” This screen specifically addresses an audience that cannot read Chinese script and on a walk through Chinatown would perceive it as exotic ornament (Figure 3.1.27). The revelation also has an almost comic effect arising from cultural differences, as the sign does not advertise, for example, fresh fruits as is customary in Western supermarkets. Here it is a making familiar that creates an eye-opening defamiliarization.

Lesson 2 shows the history of the deep-rooted xenophobia and racism against Chinese immigrants in the U.S. using the chromolithograph *Hobson’s Choice—You Can Go or Stay* (1886) and the lithograph *The Great Fear of the Period That Uncle Sam May Be Swallowed by Foreigners: The Problem Solved* (1860–1869). Both pictures are revealed only bit by bit in a sequence of inner-frame editing. Viewed in its entirety, *Hobson’s Choice* shows a Western man who stands close to a cliff, wearing a hat with the word “Oregon” written on the brim, his arms spread, a gun in each hand. To his left, Chinese men are jumping into the sea; to his right dead Chinese men lie on the ground. The title of the print is written under his feet. The chromolithograph, probably referring to the anti-Chinese violence in Oregon during the mid-1880s, illustrates the fatal ‘Hobson’s choice’ of the Chinese who can ‘go’ by jumping to death or ‘stay’ and be killed. *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown* draws attention to the brutal irony of the (death) sentence by dissecting it. An English voice-over speaks each word individually, and simultaneously only the spoken word can be seen, as if cut out. Only ‘stay’ is not spoken in English. Instead, a female voice-over articulates the Cantonese equivalent, *lau4*. This switch from English to Cantonese disrupts the rhythm of speech, and, more importantly, it articulates the persistence of Chinese Americans who stay. After the word *lau4* is spoken, only the hands holding guns can be seen,



FIGURE 3.1.27 Shelly Silver. *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown*. 2010.



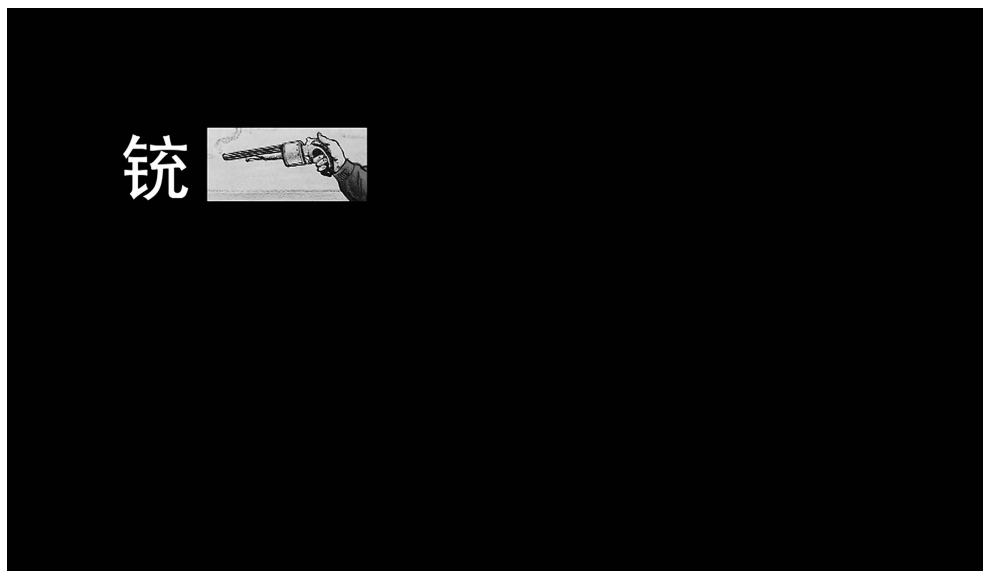


FIGURE 3.1.28 Shelly Silver. *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown*. 2010.

with the Mandarin sign 銃 next to them and a female speaker exclaiming “Chòng! Chòng!” (Figure 3.1.28). The sign 銃 is ‘blunderbuss,’ delineating the gun in the image, but also used onomatopoeically, a use underlined when the sequence is repeated, only this time with the English “Bang! Bang!” On the one hand, the dissecting editing animates the chromolithograph, literally turning a series of close-up stills into a sequence of moving images, an early film technique known from the famous ‘lion sequence’ in Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). On the other hand, the animation also creates an effect of ‘actualization.’ By foregrounding small details of the print, the depicted violence is amplified as it has no chance of retreating into the overall composition. It also has no chance of being dismissed as an unfortunate episode of history; rather, history is made present because xenophobia is a present problem.

The present is also emphasized at the end of the video, not only in the sense of the present of contemporary Chinatown but by directly addressing the present audience. Between Lesson 4 and Lesson 5, the titular nine questions are inserted as white script (English and Mandarin) on a black ground. The last one differs, presented without any voice-overs, as such introducing a very different atmosphere of heightened graveness:

Who belongs in a neighborhood? | 誰屬於一個鄰里? || Who controls a neighborhood? | 究竟是誰在控制我的鄰里? || Who should decide how a neighborhood changes? | 誰應該有權決定附近地區如何改變? || The people who own the buildings? | 是這些大廈的擁有者 | (many of whom don’t live here) | (他們當中很多人都不住在中國城) || Do they represent the community’s interests? | 他們有在幫我們的權益做打算嗎? | Or their own personal interests? | 還是為他們自己的權益著想? || Should the government control the neighborhood? | 政府應該控制地方上的事項嗎? || Do we vote? | 我們應該投票嗎? | Can we vote? | 我們可以投票嗎? || Who are we? | 我們是誰?

The bilingual questions are posed from different social and cultural perspectives, from general ethical concerns to that of a specific community. At the very end of the video, a series of Chinese signs is iterated, accompanied first by Cantonese, then by Mandarin and English voice-overs,

and finally all voices speak together. By introducing English last and not providing an English transcription of the Chinese signs, a non-Chinese speaking audience is initially excluded and thus made to feel like ‘the stranger,’ of not belonging, of not being part of the community. But then the English voice-over reveals: “You are a part of it.” This revelation is an invitation, but it also an appeal: You are a part of it—the history, the violence, the gentrification, the community of contemporary New Yorkers and Americans, the audience—you are a part of it, so you are responsible. There is no outside, no sense of detachment permitted, no detached contemplation of art. Here, aesthetics turn into ethics, calling for engagement.

The analyses in this section have shown how many media artworks use oral language as ‘quoted’ or ‘inauthentic speech.’ Minimalistic texts are excessively repeated and voices are technically manipulated so that the act of signification is laid bare and the materiality of sound is highlighted. Although repetition is a central characteristic of artistic conventions and therefore a marker of automatization, it can also be a device that effects literariness. If the iterative moment of a speech act is foregrounded, this iteration becomes a disturbance and results in deautomatization. Hypertrophied iteration is an aesthetic device for experiencing—or rather enduring—temporality, paradigmatically exemplified in Gerz’s excessive *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung*. In this work, but also in Hatoum’s *So Much I Want to Say*, the dialogical structure of speech—a conceptual marker of oral language, the language of proximity—trails off unanswered and is as such defamiliarized. In contrast to narrative cinema or theater plays, speech in media art is not predominantly part of a dialog between characters; on the contrary, it often refers only to itself. Self-referential articulations and speech acts obstruct an immersive reception and lay bare the existence of the artwork ‘as material,’ and as such highlight the dialogical relationship with the viewers. In media art, voices are less used as a transparent medium than made palpable as artistic material. When Gerz’s voice cracks or Accoñci speaks with his mouth wide open, elusive voices are not only bound back to a body, but also speech and voice are uncoupled. The voice is liberated into the realm of poetic *zaum*’ language.

### 3.2 Script: Between Visuality and Legibility

“ABUSE || OF || POWER || COMES || AS || NO || SURPRISE” is the first sentence to appear on the screen of **Jenny Holzer’s** single-channel video *Television Texts* (US 1990). The animated words rapidly flash up from different sides of the frame and vanish when they reach the center, as if sucked into the screen itself. Unlike the norm when reading, they are not presented all at once but one after the other, in bold red capital sans serif letters on a black ground. The words are simultaneously spoken by a computerized male voice, but the effect that sticks in the mind is the kinetic script and its instantaneous, irritating appearance and disappearance from sight. Before and after this ‘text performance’ of only three seconds, the screen is blank and emits white noise, like a TV set that receives no signal. Then, white word clusters in a slim script begin appearing, again against a black background, coming at a fast pace, one after the other, and directly addressing the viewer:

YOU SHOULD LIMIT || THE NUMBER || OF TIMES || YOU ACT AGAINST ||  
 YOUR NATURE || LIKE SLEEPING WITH || PEOPLE YOU HATE || IT’S  
 INTERESTING || TO TEST YOUR || CAPABILITIES || FOR A WHILE || BUT  
 TOO MUCH || WILL CAUSE DAMAGE

This written message, cut into 13 pieces and then doubled by the computerized voice, is presented without punctuation, which creates ambiguous meaning. The words’ status as ‘television texts’ also makes them deviant, because they are neither advertisements nor teletexts that present information on a TV program or news bulletins. The messages seem to be ‘sentences’ in the double meaning—in the sense of ‘phrase’ and ‘punishment’—something the recipient has to learn and to suffer at the same time. The ambiguity of Holzer’s seemingly simple statements lies in their appeal to reflect upon one’s own consumer habits, including the consumption of art. By foregrounding the words and letters as such and by intentionally withdrawing them from view, her *Television Texts* addresses not only ‘audiovisuality’ as such but also the literariness of script—as



FIGURE 3.2.1 Jenny Holzer. *Television Texts*. 1990.

materialized language that can both be ‘read’ cognitively, for its meaning, and ‘looked at’ from an aesthetic viewpoint. The iconic and kinetic qualities of script emphasize its materiality and mediality. Words and letters become perceivable, and through their withdrawal, invite reflection on how meaning is established. This work introduces the complex, interwoven connections among media technologies, culture, and script in media art that are explored in this section.

The investigation of the literariness of script in media art takes into account the growing research on various guises and functions of the written word in (audio)visual moving images. Previous studies have been concerned with phenomena such as intertitles in silent movies and avant-garde films (cf. Sitney 1979); advertisements; music videos; paratexts or credits (cf. Krautkrämer 2013); the diegetic and non-diegetic use of script in motion pictures (cf. Kaczmarek 2013), and script in film and video art (cf. Stenzer 2010). In this context, scholars, and curators have coined various terms for the phenomenon, ranging from “type in motion” (Woolman 2005) to “kinetic poetry” (Simanowski 2011), “typemotion” (Scheffer et al. 2015), or “kinetic typography” (Brownie 2015).

The entry point to this section’s theoretical reflections on the literariness of script are thoughts on the written word in Russian Formalism, followed by an overview of contemporary discussions in the field of linguistics and cultural studies, with a specific focus on the relationship between script and language. The combination of image and script, or the presentation of script as image, is not a novelty brought about by media art, so it is helpful to understand the history of text and image combinations in visual as well as in audiovisual arts. Without attempting to give an all-embracing history of the use of text in the moving image—Christine Stenzer provided such an overview of ‘script as main actor’ in film and video from 1895 until 2009 (cf. Stenzer 2010)—we will discuss some prominent examples of an aesthetically motivated integration of script into works of (audio)visual art to outline the artistic background and context. It is important to note that, contrary to purist notions of art, the combination of script and image is not a deviation per se. In Russian Formalism, reflections on written language aim to strengthen the idea of an intentionally deviant use of script in media art that results in a dominant aesthetic function.

### ***Russian Formalism and the Written Word***

As outlined in the previous section, a focus of Russian Formalist theory is language freed from the burden of meaning, or ‘trans-sense’ language. Quite interestingly, the Formalists related the idea of *zaum*’ mainly to sound (cf. Shklovsky 1985 [1916] ), despite the fact that Russian Futurist *zaum*’ poems were not only written poems, but also many of the poets—most famously Ilya Mikhailovich Zdanevich—heavily experimented with typography (cf. Drucker 1994). Although the poetic potential of script is scarcely analyzed in Russian Formalist writings, a few hints can be found. In *Literature and Cinematography*, for instance, Shklovsky describes words as material: “Words are not merely a means of saying something but the very material of a work of art. Literature is made out of words and comes into being by employing the laws of the word” (Shklovsky 2008 [1923], 17). Though this statement does not exclude the verbal dimension of the word—and throughout the text Shklovsky stresses sound as the driving force behind poetry and literature—the rejection of a merely pragmatic function of words as containers for meaning as well as the definitions of words as material can also be interpreted as referring to script. Moreover, this interpretation suggests the way in which Shklovsky refers to the writer and, implicitly, to the written word. In a letter written in the same year as the essay quoted earlier, Shklovsky’s recognition and appraisal of script as artistic material are more direct:

The typographic side of Zdanevich’s work is one of the most curious successes in contemporary art. Zdanevich uses typographic composition not merely as a means of noting the words, but as an artistic material. [...] Zdanevich gives typographic composition the power

of expression and calligraphic beauty of a manuscript of the Koran. The visual side of the page provides new sensations, and coming into contact with different meanings gives birth to new forms. (Shklovsky in Drucker 1994, 181)

Here, Shklovsky emphasizes that script—arranged in a typographic composition on a page—is more than a tool for recording, more than the notation of sounds, but is also material that can be creatively manipulated to resurrect deadened perception. Boris Tomashevsky also highlights the role of script by referring to Zdanevich. He notes that trans-sense poets make use of different fonts and *arabesques* of writing—that is, “graphic devices as an artistic end in itself” (Tomashevsky 1985 [1928], 113). According to him, stylistic devices have a twofold aim, an expressive as well as an ornamental function (cf. *ibid.*, 115). The expressive function describes a writer’s duty to select words that most effectively and accurately express a thought or emotion; it may also be dominant in practical communication (cf. *ibid.*). In a work of art, however, not only the choice of words but also their organization on the page—their composition (cf. *ibid.*, 112)—possess aesthetic value that reveals their “artistic construction” (*ibid.*, 115): “The beauty of the construction alone can, simply put, enthrall us” (*ibid.*). This is the ornamental function. It is also worth noting that both Shklovsky and Tomashevsky refer to Arabic calligraphy when describing the visual defamiliarization of script—either because they were unfamiliar with Arabic or familiar with the fact that Arabic script is not restricted by the dogma of legibility but valued for its sensuous aesthetic quality (cf. Frembgen 2010, 13).

### ***Script: Between Transparent Representation and Palpable Body***

To better understand how script is used as artistic material in media art, it is helpful to revisit some key considerations on script from linguistic theory. In contemporary theory, the spatiality of script is recognized as a crucial characteristic. As Sybille Krämer points out, the distinct spatiality of script is its “inter-spatiality” (Krämer 2009, 162): script is defined by gaps and blank spaces (cf. *ibid.*). As such, script cannot be described only with regard to its pictorial visuality but also in terms of its “syntax-visuality,” its “notational iconicity” (*ibid.*, 163). This notational iconicity is more than a form of representation of speech or thoughts: “[W]hat script represents in its medium of notational iconicity is also simultaneously constituted by this medium” (*ibid.*, 164). Krämer’s theoretical idea is artistically explored by Anna Gollwitzer in her video performance *Satzbau*, analyzed later in this section.

Since at least the 1960s, the investigation of script and writing systems has proliferated, whether in the form of explorations of the history of writing or with the goal of developing a universal theory of ‘the’ script (cf. Pfeiffer 1993, 9f.; Kiening 2008, 11). Despite this proliferation, orthodox philology continued to consider script—the graphic base of writing systems, one modality of the medium of language—as necessarily bound to language and, more specifically, even as secondary, subordinated to oral speech (cf. Grube and Kogge 2005, 11). This is a paradox because linguistics is “not just methodically a written discipline, its whole apparatus of categories has been developed out of writing and reconstructs the whole language system as if it were literal” (Stetter 2008, 117). Krämer critically sums up the dominant view: “[P]honic script in particular is considered to be written language and thus a medium that relates to oral language as its ‘message.’ [. . .] Script is both visualized and fixated language. Its order is thus of a discursive kind” (Krämer 2009, 158). According to her, the understanding of script and image as “disjunctive symbolic orders” (*ibid.*, 157) is a blind spot that results from a phonographic and logocentric definition of script. This blind spot disregards the fact that the relationship between speech and script is not an intramedial transfer but is in fact a case of intermediality (cf. *ibid.*, 159). As a consequence, the visual dimension of script is neutralized by the dogma of linearity: that is, the idea that script—and text—is the embodiment of a “linear, sequential symbolic order” (*ibid.*). Krämer rightly disagrees with this idea: “Not unlike images, texts constitute a two-dimensional visible order within a space” (*ibid.*).

In this light, questions of literariness in media art are not so much concerned with the intermediality between literature and moving images. Instead, one could say that the technical media of audiovisual moving image art bring to the fore the intermediality inherent in language itself.

Gernot Grube and Werner Kogge also point out the problems that result from previous approaches that chain written and spoken language together, which continues the long-standing “bifurcation of language and image”:

The assumption that writing is of a linguistic character distorts the view of its far-reaching iconic potential and leads to a constricted concept that completely disregards the performative and pragmatic aspects of writing that, in their variance, constitute precisely that which we find to be typical written phenomena. (Grube and Kogge 2005, 10)

Whereas the traditional question “What kind of speech does writing represent?” neglected “*non-glottic*” scripts, such as musical scores and mathematical calculations, these newer approaches challenge the intuitive, ubiquitous idea that script must necessarily be related to speech (Harris 2005, 67). In the same way that script has been studied as representative of speech, it has also been regarded as being in opposition to images.

From a media-theoretical as well as anthropological perspective, script is coded information, a technology of storage and distribution, administration, and power (cf. Pfeiffer 1993, 14; Kittler 2002, 19; Weibel 2015, 9). To those who have learned to master the writing system of a specific language, to those who are ‘literate,’ deciphering a particular script is an automatized process. Depending on a script’s cultural context and purpose, its shape, its texture and structure are not intended to be perceived. Typography may influence the message, but as a tool of communication script must not be a distraction. “Modern economies of script aimed at interference-free transmission” (Kiening 2008, 11), Christian Kiening states in reference to theories that respond to the snowballing mechanization of writing during the industrial revolution. Script is usually regarded as a medium that neutralizes itself into transparency rather than one that acknowledges the implications of its material presence. However, it is precisely the visibility of script that constitutes its “central paradox”:

A theory of the mediality of script has to be based on this double dynamic of *visibility* and *legibility*. The visibility of script becomes manifest through the body of the *graphia*. Whether it veils itself or, as in the avant-garde aesthetics of laying bare, displays its nudity, the script-body will always intrusively protrude into the act of reading. As the irreducible other of the sign, this visible, palpable body—that puts itself on display, presents itself to the gaze, threatens to divest itself of its referential function—provokes an aesthesis of the script. (Strätling and Witte 2006, 7)

By highlighting the inherent transparency as well as opacity of script, by underlining how the visible presence of script has the power to disturb the act of reading, Susanne Strätling’s and Georg Witte’s argument is reminiscent of the strands of literariness outlined in Chapter 2, Section 1, especially Jacobson’s notion of the palpability of signs. How does integrating written text in works of media art disturb the presumed transparency of script and affect an aesthetic perception? This is the central question here. Generally speaking, written text often does not serve the pragmatic function of communication in works of media art. Instead, devices such as exaggerated movement or enlarged letters can contribute to what Shklovsky, referring to Futurist poetry, calls the “Resurrection of the Word” (Shklovsky 1973 [1914]). The script, the signifier, often calls for more attention than the signified, and the viewer’s perception is constantly torn between reading and viewing, as “reading becomes seeing and seeing becomes reading” (Schneider 1998, 228f) and often both modes melt into each other.

Although it could seem as if the concept of literariness insists on a limited understanding of script as a form of language, Russian Formalism highlighted the level of language perception

that is liberated from pragmatic communication. The idea of trans-sense is illuminating for script studies as well as for analyses directed towards all three factors of the “triadic structural model” (Grube and Kogge 2005, 12) of script: its content or referential level, its operative functions, and, most obviously, its aesthetic presence. While all three are linked, literariness is an effect of a foregrounded aesthetic presence of script, including its spatial, typographic, iconic, and kinetic features. Theo van Leeuwen also calls for a closer investigation of the various shapes of script. To account for the complexity and diversity of writing, he defines the subcategories and different shapes of the aesthetic presence as multimodal:

[C]ontemporary typography creates meaning, not just with letter forms, but also with colour, three-dimensionality, material texture, and, in kinetic typography, movement. Increasingly many typefaces also incorporate iconic elements, and deliberately blur the boundaries between image and letterform, thus regaining a connection that has been lost in the course of the development of the alphabet. In other words, typography is no longer a ‘separate’ semiotic mode. Typographic communication is *multimodal*. (Van Leeuwen 2005, 141)

These various modalities of script are foregrounded in media art: They are artistic devices of defamiliarization that deautomatize viewing conventions and thus create effects of literariness. Script appears as both (moving) image and signifying reference, though its emphasis on one or the other constantly shifts.

Only an approach that opposes the strict dichotomy between word and image can adequately describe the peculiarities of script in media art. Even more, its ‘strange’ use has the capacity to lay bare the “iconicity of script” (Hamburger 2011, 251). The iconic potential of writing not only regards the signification of written language but also “the presence and persuasiveness of lettering, at times independent of its meaning” (ibid.). It might seem that ‘iconicity’ is just another term to delineate the visibility of the script body. Yet, Strätling and Witte’s analysis of this ambivalence of ‘script-visibility’ highlights its implications in regard to the violent wars between script and image in the past:

On the one hand, script—albeit always as visible script—becomes the favored medial alternative to the image. It is explicitly or implicitly iconoclastic, it trains us to over-look iconicity. On the other hand, there are the auto-subversive effects of (script incarnate) image skepticism. Script tends to turn its visual perceptibility into a factual disturbance of its own iconoclasm. (Strätling and Witte 2006, 9)

From this perspective, defamiliarized script is auto-disruptive and at the same time ‘auto-aesthetic.’ The defamiliarization of written text in media art does not initially interfere with the supposed telos of script—legibility—but must be regarded as the performance of its inherent auto-aesthetic potential. The literariness of script could then also be understood as ‘literality’ (cf. ibid., 11). Despite almost compulsive efforts “to define, compare, and distinguish pictorial and textual representation” (Gross 2010, 277), strict borders between them remain undefended. They “are challenged by artists; by theories of literature, art, and culture; and not least by subversive acts of reading” (ibid.). The fraying of the arts is not an exception; the call for purism is.

### ***Script as Image/Script in Images***

The artistic combination of written text and images, the integration of script into images, and the figuration of script as image are by no means new phenomena. It thus comes as no surprise that scholars frequently situate aesthetic occurrences of script in recent moving image art within a

genealogy of, for instance, figurative poems of antiquity and illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages (cf. Simanowski 2010, 159; Kiening 2008), concrete poetry (cf. Dencker 2009, 196; Scheffer 2015, 18; also see Chapter 4, Section 1), or the use of text in silent film (cf. Stenzer 2010, 35–39).

As most of the artworks analyzed in this study make use of Latin script and have been produced in a Western context, the following examples offered as glimpses into this tradition are limited to a few prominent examples from occidental history. The point is not to trace ancestry but to demonstrate that the strict separation between text and image is merely a construct:

And yet, attempts to assimilate image/picture and text to each other do less than justice to the phenomenal difference between the two codes, the different ways in which they appeal to readers of each visual code and arrangement, and they fail to capture the particular pleasure we feel as we cross and recross those boundaries and differences that are in evidence in experiential practice, even if theoretical sleight-of-hand can seem to make them disappear. This, then, is the appeal of writing in images: not as a matter of course, but as an eye-opening transposition, a transgression, a tease, a challenge. (Gross 2010, 278)

Eye-opening transposition, transgression, challenge, tease: Those words could also be used to define the experience of literariness in media art. The mobilization of script—and the foregrounding of its visual and spatial aspects—has the potential to be perceived as defamiliarization, a defamiliarization that ignites the desire to see and sense written words instead of simply recognizing their meaning in an automatized manner.

The relationship between text and image in artistic works of the Middle Ages is complex, because it reflects not only visual and textual representation as such but also involves issues regarding sacred texts, iconoclasm, literacy, institutional settings, and modes of reception (recitation, meditative reading) as well as technologies of production (handwriting, painting, mechanical printing). Jeffrey Hamburger starts his study *Script as Image* with the reminder that the specific iconicity of script in the Middle Ages cannot be understood without considering the role of writing in Christianity. “Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is a religion of the word, a phrase that, no matter how problematic, invests writing itself with divinity and identifies it as scripture” (Hamburger 2014, 6). Through the doctrine of incarnation, however, visibility is pivotal to Christian belief (cf. *ibid.*). Therefore, “the words of Christian scripture participated in the realm of divine exemplars and simultaneously possessed bodily presence. The decoration of scripture in medieval manuscripts was predicated on the conjunction of these two modes of meaning” (*ibid.*). Hamburger’s argument highlights that script in Christian traditions was more than a transparent medium of communication or ornamental structuring: In its (divine) overwhelming bodily presence, it was “[w]ord made flesh” (*ibid.*).

An extreme form of script as image is micrography, a calligraphic tradition that was adopted from Judaism and became a famous Christian art form around the end of the Early Middle Ages (cf. Rottau 2010, 159). Micrographies are texts composed of minute letters that often cannot be deciphered without a magnifying glass and are arranged into labyrinths (e.g. Urban Wyss’s *Schriftlabyrinth*, 1562; cf. *ibid.*, 162) or, during the Baroque period, even elaborate portraits of Christ, clergymen, or secular rulers (e.g. Johann Michael Püchler the Younger’s *Portrait Phillip Jacob Spener*, around 1700; cf. *ibid.*, 178). One could simply describe the effects of religious micrographies as forcing the reader to shift attention between reading and seeing. But more is at stake: Not only does the miniscule script demand heightened concentration aimed at fostering a state of cathartic meditation (cf. *ibid.*, 164), but also the intricate body of the text directly affects the bodies of the readers, who have to bend their necks, walk around the book, or turn the book in their hands (cf. Hamburger 2014, 45). Here, written words are not a medium that delivers immaterial thoughts between a sender and a receiver separated by time and space. On the contrary, a ‘script body’ bares its physical presence and, as such, specifically addresses another physical being. When Shklovsky



uses the metaphor of the resurrection of the word or Jakobson uses the notion of the palpability of signs, religious implications play no part. Yet, it is striking that the purpose of both medieval religious texts and secular art in the Russian Formalists' mindset is the deliverance from the mundane by using devices that impart the sensations of things (see Chapter 2, Section 1).

Rembrandt's painting *Belshazzar's Feast* (1635) depicts the biblical story of Belshazzar, who holds an opulent feast, serving wine from vessels that had been stolen during the destruction of the First Temple. A hand appears and writes on the wall: a warning from God that the end of Belshazzar and his kingdom has come. In Rembrandt's painting, the luminous writing takes up the upper right corner and seems almost blinding. Belshazzar, arms spread, fills the center of the painting, his body facing the viewer but his face turned to the wall behind him, his eyes open wide, horrified. The painting depicts the text as 'word made flesh,' word as flesh, and the power of script to ignite terror and awe—the visual, bodily script as eye-opening, terrifying transgression. More than a century later, magic lantern images projected on smoke in phantasmagoria filled viewing audiences with a similar horror. Illustrations of these shows depict the projected images of ghosts with brightness similar to that of the writing Rembrandt painted on the wall. A form of this awe and surprise—an 'attraction' in the sense of Tom Gunning's characterization of early cinema—might still be at work in animated script in media art.

The 20th century in particular saw an increased experimentation with and investigation of script in the visual arts (cf. Stooss 1993, 5). Scorning the idea of pure arts that was characteristic of one branch of modernism, "[a]rtists such as Paul Klee, Antoni Tàpies, Cy Twombly, and Jasper Johns scramble[d] pictures into script and confound[ed] pictoriality by bringing out its scriptural dimension at the same time as they turn[ed] letter-signs into quasi-images" (Gross 2010, 277). Others like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Marcel Broodthaers, Hanne Darboven, Barbara Kruger, Roy Lichtenstein, Francis Picabia, and Sigmar Polke, to name just a few, utilized written text as material in their work (cf. Louis and Stooss 1993, Hapkemeyer 2004; Ströbel 2013). Artists picked up on popular art (such as comics) or advertisements, or incorporated critical commentary (usually considered a paratext) into their works. Of particular interest for this study is the fact that quite a few artists whose media art is analyzed here also produced 'non-moving image art,' in which script plays a pivotal role or is the main actor. Lawrence Weiner's *Statement of Intent* (1969), for instance, greets visitors from the walls above the admissions desk at Dia Beacon. Jochen Gerz produced a series titled *Your Art* (1991), consisting of photographs arranged into a wall sculpture, combining abstract black-and-white shots of nature with photographed text typed in the style of telegrams (cf. Louis and Stooss 1993, 263f). Tracey Emin's installation *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995), destroyed by a warehouse fire in 2004, was a tent in which the artist stitched 102 names of persons she had slept with, though not always in a sexual sense, as the names also included her grandmother and an unborn child. To fully experience the installation, visitors had to crawl inside the tent, thus entering an intimate space. Names can be regarded as signifiers per se, as they are completely arbitrary yet a means of identification. In *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, the script body is a literal stand-in for the bodies of persons, a material presence that represents in the sense of making present what is not there.

### **Written Words in Film**

Throughout the history of the moving image, script has played various roles: on the title cards in silent film; as 'characters,' particularly in animated films; as subtitles in foreign language films; and, of course, on the credit roll. As an analytical toolbox, Sean Cubitt developed "Preliminaries for a Taxonomy and Rhetoric of On-Screen Writing" (Cubitt 1999) and Hans Wulff analyzed image-script-constellations under the perspective of filmic communication (cf. Wulff 2013). But because the inclusion of written text in films serves different functions and takes different forms, depending on the historical and institutional situation as well as the intended purpose, individual

films will always challenge general statements. The most basic category for the description of script in film is the differentiation between diegetic and non-diegetic writing:

Diegetic writing appears photographically, as letters, newspaper headlines, storefronts, advertisements, calendar pages, maps inspected by characters, or introduced in montage sequences. With the phrase ‘on-screen writing’ [. . .] those letters and words [are meant] which appear as if written or painted or printed onto the surface of the film directly, without the benefit of cameras. [. . .] But it is distinguishable from diegetic writing by the sense we have that on-screen writing is not just invisible to the characters in the story world: it occupies an entirely different universe. (Cubitt 1999, 61)

Cubitt devises his taxonomy mostly with regard to narrative feature film characterized by a more conventional use of script, yet he also highlights films in which on-screen writing appears to be rather ambiguous (*ibid.*). This ambiguity is prevalent in media art in which artists perform the act of writing or in which editing seems to heave diegetic script into the universe of on-screen writing.

A look back to the early days of film reveals that script was used in very different ways. At first, text and image were two entirely separate entities. The first film shows consisted of a program of several short films—often no longer than a minute—projected from individual reels, which resulted in a break between each film. The titles of the films were announced on posters or shouted out, before the use of a magic lantern to project slides showing the title of the next film became common practice (cf. Gaudreault 2013, 84). Only after 1900, when technological advancements enabled the projection of longer strips, did distributors join the autonomous films and attach leaders bearing the individual film’s title and the company’s logo (cf. *ibid.*, 85). This structure of alternating title and film remained the standard even for longer, narrative films, as the inserts between separate scenes first and foremost announced the title of the subsequent scenes, therefore becoming paratexts, subtitles in the sense of headings (cf. *ibid.*). Intertitles—in which a character’s speech or comments from a narrative are displayed—were only established later, and their function was not to separate scenes but to connect shots within scenes (cf. *ibid.*, 85 and 92).

The Lumière Brothers’ *Écriture à l’envers* (1896) is an example of an early cinema film presenting on-screen writing as spectacle or, perhaps more accurately, as a device to display the new medium of film as an attraction. The film was probably used to indicate the end of a program (cf. Wall-Romana 2013, 33) and shows Félicien Trewey—famous for his shadowgraphy, among other things—writing the words “Mesdames et Messieurs nos Remerciements” in two lines of perfect cursive lettering on a blackboard, thanking the ladies and gentlemen in the audience. (Christophe Wall-Romana erroneously transcribes the text as “Le Cinématographe vous remercie,” contradicting the actual film and its stills reproduced in his book.) Trewey stands behind the board and starts on the lower line with the letter ‘s’ of ‘Remerciments.’ As the formula *à l’envers* indicates, he writes at the same time from back to front and upside down. Trewey was a renowned vaudeville performer, and as such the film conforms to the early cinema standard of screening films of magic tricks; before film was institutionally screened in dedicated cinemas and adopted the rules of bourgeois theater, film programs were part of vaudeville shows. However, it is possible that *Écriture à l’envers* was screened in reverse—though the Lumière brothers started to advertise projections *à l’envers* as a cinematographic spectacle only in 1897 (cf. Tohline 2015, 39)—resulting in the truly astonishing effect of text that is ‘unwritten’ by charcoal. In this framework, the film can be considered as one of the earliest examples of a film’s ‘making strange’ of viewing and reading conventions. Though text has served a primarily communicative function in (narrative) silent film, elaborate typography could also turn text into a visual spectacle in itself, especially in the German Expressionist film of the first half of the 1920s.

Another art-historical connection to media art’s exploration of the relationship between poetic language and the moving image can be drawn to Lettrism, an avant-garde movement

founded in the mid-1940s by Jean Isidore Isou. Influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism, Lettrism sought to revolutionize language by exploring the letter as the purest and smallest poetic unit of language. The Lettrists aimed for the creation of “poetry reduced to letters, metagraphic narratives, cinema without images” (Wall-Romana 2013, 222). Lettrists like Maurice Lemaître, François Dufrière, and Gil Joseph Wolman strove to break down supposed boundaries between writing and the visual arts, for Lettrism was “prose, painting, sculpture, photography and script all at once” (Lentz 2002, 125). They explored not only the influence of poetry on film but also the other way around: “Cinema is not just a metaphor here, but an imaginary framework toward which lettrists would gradually turn in order to revive the ‘palpable flesh’ of words” (Wall-Romana 2013, 229). Lettrism returned to early cinema aesthetics and aestheticized film’s former imperfections, such as the jolty effect of 16 frames per second, flickering, or scratches on the film strip, artistic techniques that directly worked with and thus foregrounded the materiality of film (cf. Lentz 2002, 123). The “superimposing” of poetry on film created a form of “palimpsest-cinema,” termed hypergraphics or metagraphics (Wall-Romana 2013, 231 and 229). This form also used the principle of *montage dérépant*, a montage of desynchronizing sound and image (cf. *ibid.*, 230), which would continue as a strategy of later media art. In the 1960s, this tradition was taken up in another medium with the invention of video technology. Early video performances, as works by Peter Weibel and Valie Export will demonstrate, explored the relationship between language and perception and inserted written elements in the video images. Experimental film continued this tradition that increasingly evolves towards the performative by liberating image and language from their communicative functions (cf. Lehmann 2008, 75).

### **Recognition Versus Seeing**

The artworks discussed in this subsection are concerned with the occurrence of script in the public sphere, as they incorporate typographic elements of advertising, street signs, and graffiti, or project words onto the faces of buildings. In so doing, they explore the constant presence of writing that Cubitt describes as follows: “One of the beauties of writing is that it is, in a sense, invisible. We read all day long: we see street signs, hoardings, and the names of shops, registering what they say without being aware of the fact that we are reading. Words are embedded in the contemporary landscape” (Cubitt 1999, 60). The idea of an unaware registering of the objects closely resembles Shklovsky’s distinction between seeing and recognition; an object becomes quickly familiar and, therefore, invisible to perception: “We know it’s there but we do not see it, and, for that reason, we can say nothing about it” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6).

The works of the German artist **Ferdinand Kriwet**—which include experimental novels, site-specific script interventions, mixed-media installations, audio plays, and film—defy traditional distinctions among literature, music, and visual arts (cf. Weingart 2014, 519). Aware of the fact that script is by no means limited to the pages of print publications, Kriwet dissects the various occurrences of script in everyday life, especially in the public sphere:

[Written language] stands before us as a billboard or advertising column, as a wall or fence, it hangs above us as a sign or banner, it rides on furniture trucks and floats past us on ships; sometimes we walk over it on the street or even eat it as cookies, *Russisch Brot* [alphabet cookies] or pasta; when we don’t look at it, it flickers at us as a neon light. [. . .] We live in a written world of symbols and icons, numbers and emblems, allegories and pictographies, crossword puzzles and comic strips, and the writing of tallies has unmissably asserted its place on coasters. (Kriwet 1967, 14)

Characteristically, Kriwet uses written language as artistic material in a way that acknowledges the inherent potential of script to activate two different sensuous and cognitive modes of engagement: seeing and reading.

In line with this poetics, Kriwet's black-and-white experimental film *Teletext* (DE 1970) assembles footage of street signs and neon advertisements, photographs, newspaper, animated script inserts, and the occasional audio excerpt into a vibrant collage that demands a constant readjustment of perception. The fast-paced sequencing thwarts the formation of what Eikhenbaum termed 'inner speech' (see Chapter 2, Section 2), and in so doing highlights how narrative cinema has trained viewers to automatically decipher filmic codes. Moreover, reading is a cognitive reaction to a specific visual stimulus, and although the script elements of *Teletext* trigger a response of the intellect, the urge to construct meaning is simultaneously undermined for the sake of a more somatic experience. To put it another way: The work highlights how reading depends on seeing, how it is an act of translation, an act that is so internalized and quick that it is likely to remain unnoticed. Despite its pace, the film re-sensitizes viewers by slowing down, even inhibiting the automatized impulse to decipher written texts during the cognitive process of reading. Sensuous seeing and intellectual reading interfere with each other, and perhaps only after being bombarded with information does this habitualized reaction become conscious.

*Teletext* opens with two sequences of three white capital letters that change as fast as symbols in a slot machine (Figure 3.2.2). This association of a slot machine is supported by the fact that the movement of the letters stops for an instance whenever the letter combinations form a word or syllable (an effect that is highlighted when the word 'now' appears): "WHO || NOW || HOW || NOW || NEW || NET" and "PRO || FIT || CON || TRA || SUN || SET || SUN || SET || PRO || FIT." The two sequences are intercut by inserts of animated script, in which words are arranged in a circle that quickly fills with more words until it looks like a 'script disk' (Figure 3.2.3). This specific, circular arrangement of written text is a 'signature technique' of Kriwet's that he summarized and theorized under the self-coined term *Sehtext* (visual text) (cf. Weingart 2014, 521–523). In an interview, Kriwet described the concept behind his visual texts as an attempt "to use the specific characteristics of written language as a means of composition"

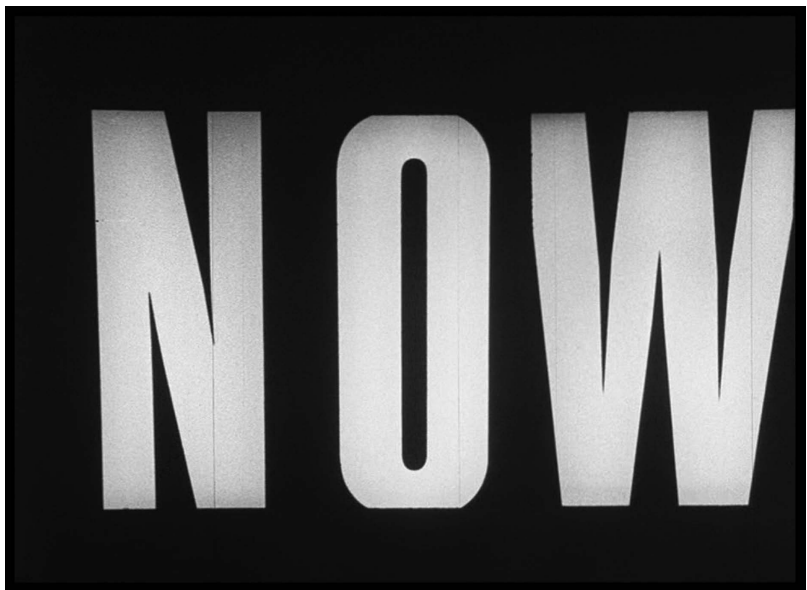


FIGURE 3.2.2 Ferdinand Kriwet. *Teletext*. 1963.

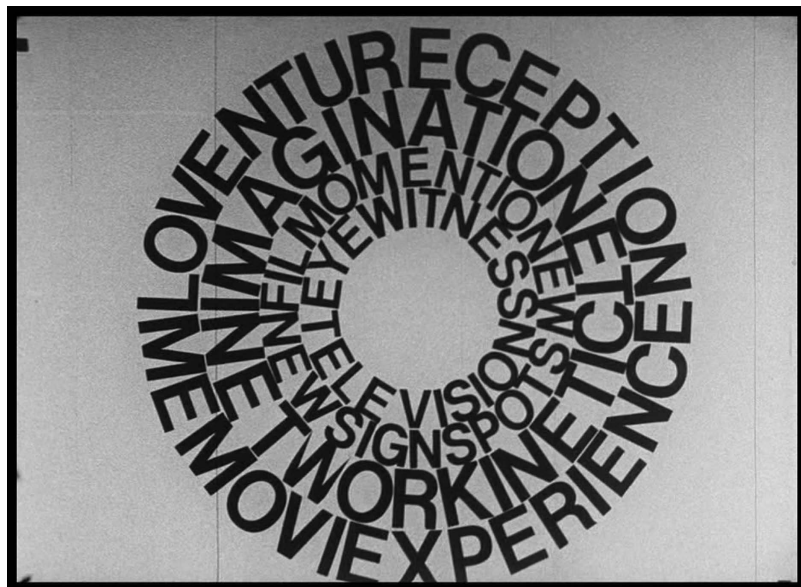


FIGURE 3.2.3 Ferdinand Kriwet. *Teletext*. 1963.

(Kriwet in Dienst 1970, 160), in order to “stimulate different processes of reading, between the extreme, purely sensory perception of language, of written language as graphic art, and the purely intellectual perception of written language as text” (Weingart 2014, 521). Although Kriwet speaks of different processes of reading, his argument is similar to Strätling and Witte’s idea of ‘the double dynamic’ of visibility and legibility. The way that writing oscillates between graphic art and text—between the script body and the sign’s representational function—is even more foregrounded in the animated script disk of *Teletext*. The disk is composed of four circles, each containing two sets of coalesced words that run in opposite directions. Transcribed from the outer circle to the inner, the text reads:

LOVENTURECEPTION MEMOVIEXPERIENCE  
 IMAGINATIONET NETWORKKINETIC  
 FILMOMENTIONEW NEWSIGNSSPOTS  
 EYEWITNESS TELEVISION

The insert lasts for only three seconds, and given the speed of the animation it is hardly possible for the viewers to discern individual words, let alone the entire text. Only the still shot renders it legible. This means that viewers experience the script as graphic art, which becomes palpable as script body. The kinetic text disk demonstrates one of Kriwet’s programmatic propositions: “*Seeing is a process of sensation, reading is the reaction to it*” (Kriwet 1975, 40; cf. Weingart 2014, 524). The words are defamiliarized because they are fused and arranged in circles. At the same time, only the deautomatization of the movie experience—the stoppage of the film—enables the reading. This stoppage is an interference, an infringement made possible only through the digitization and subsequent distribution of the film on DVD. The illegible kinetic text thus also highlights how different medial dispositifs facilitate and regulate specific modes of perception. When confronted with script that is fixed on a page (or a wall), readers have the power to determine the speed of the deciphering; they have all the time they need to react to what they are seeing. In the movie theater, the exhibition space, or even in front of the TV, viewers need

to surrender to the pace of the moving images. This surrender must not be equated with passivity. To the contrary, it demands active engagement that combines somatic experiences with intellectual perception.

The kinetic text disk offers an intertextual reference as it refers to Kriwet's other artworks. When it is brought to a halt, a certain self-referentiality is revealed as well. The words are assembled not only based on the potential to fuse them, but they also belong to a semantic field of vision and moving image reception. Their fusion highlights the automatic urge to decipher meaning, to unravel ambiguous signs into distinct units: love, venture, reception, memo, movie, experience, imagination, net, network, kinetic, film, moment, mention, new, signs, spots, eye, witness (or eyewitness), television. Kriwet's conceptual works are based on the understanding of words as signs or signals, as a visual presence that engages viewers even over a distance, without necessarily carrying a specific meaning (cf. Kriwet in Dienst 1970, 164):

The viewer will come to certain conclusions. Something will cross his mind that I have perhaps not thought of. [. . .] Misunderstanding is definitely a form of understanding as well, because these texts cannot demand to be understood unambiguously because they are not unambiguous. (ibid.)

Words are not vehicles for meaning but an invitation to the viewer to let the words resonate in the imagination, to enter a dialog, and to participate in a playful collaboration. The conceptual playfulness with which Kriwet activates the viewers' curiosity—or revitalizes the viewers' perception—is specifically expressed in the aforementioned inserts that emulate a slot machine, as well as in several other animated inserts reminiscent of word-search puzzles (Figure 3.2.4). Similar to the script disk, the capitalized letters of the puzzles are revealed in succeeding frames and consist of fused words and compounds; yet unlike the former, the full puzzles are displayed long enough for the viewers to transition from the sensation of seeing to the process of reading. The words are, moreover, exclusively arranged horizontally and from left to right, thus following the Western norm of writing and therefore easing the process of deciphering. Words found in



FIGURE 3.2.4 Ferdinand Kriwet. *Teletext*. 1963.

FIGURE 3.2.5 Ferdinand Kriwet. *Teletext*. 1963.FIGURE 3.2.6 Ferdinand Kriwet. *Teletext*. 1963.

the second puzzle are: slash, shock, outlaw, comeback, back, backfire, fire, act, showman, mankind, indulge, fighter, rebel, lover, she, man, sheman, and, androgynous, virgin, infatuate, teen, lust, luster, sterile, man, anger. Word puzzles are, based on Kriwet's statement quoted earlier, part of the script world we live in. In addition, the words of the puzzle are reminiscent of the sensationalist headlines with which tabloid newspapers catch the attention of their readership. This interpretation—which could also be a co-creative 'misunderstanding'—is suggested by several sequences in *Teletext* consisting of collages assembled with cutouts from the tabloid press. One collage, preceding the puzzle, shows a photo of a boxer, probably Muhammad Ali (Figures 3.2.5 and 3.2.6). The first words—"slash," "shock," "outlaw," "comeback"—could thus be understood not only as randomly referring to the world of boxing but as specifically referring to Ali, whose membership in the Nation of Islam and his refusal to fight in the Vietnam war made him an 'outlaw' (especially in the eyes of the white establishment) and who celebrated his 'comeback' in 1970.

In Stenzer's analysis of Kriwet's film, she states that "in *Teletext* new contexts arise [. . .] from decontextualized elements of (written) signs" whose "partial surrender of semantics" contributes to the film's special appeal (Stenzer 2010, 238). Although it is true that the script elements of the film stem from various sources and are taken out of their original context, this statement is a little misleading. Stills showing Civil Rights Movement protesters holding up placards (the diegetic texts reading, for instance, "END LUNCH COUNTER DISCRIMINATION," "FIGHT SEGREGATION"), a shop with the banner "FIDEL CASTRO OCCUPYING HAVANA," or images of Elvis Presley and Coca Cola advertisements, to name just a few cues, clearly situate *Teletext* in the 1960s U.S. They refer to icons of popular culture as well as to events that shaped (world) politics and culture of that decade.

One of these signifying events is the race to the moon between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, represented in *Teletext* through a longer sequence of assembled newspaper cutouts and highlighted by an audio excerpt of the iconic line from John F. Kennedy's address at Rice University on the nation's space effort (1962): "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard." In addition to this audio excerpt, other acoustic tidbits in *Teletext* include Frank Sinatra singing a line from his song "Only the Lonely" (1958) combined with a photo of a bridge with the words "NEW YORK CENTRAL" displayed on it—and a singular playblack of a line from The Rolling Stones' "Sing This All Together" (1967). While the former opens up the semantic field of 'New York City'—where Kriwet lived in 1969 and where he witnessed the Apollo 11 mission (cf. Albrecht 2014, 227)—and as such refutes Stenzer's observation, the latter again demonstrates how Kriwet turns audio excerpts into acoustic icons to condense a specific time and culture. At one point, a male voice-over, probably a recorded radio commercial, announces: "The New York Times: You don't

have to read it all, but it's nice to know it's all there." This ironic, self-reflexive slogan also perfectly describes *Teletext*. Viewed now, four decades after it was produced, Kriwet's film feels like a miniature archive, albeit a poetic one whose systematics can be sensed rather than rationally understood. *Teletext*: You don't need to decipher it all, but you know it is all there.

The video *Sign Language* (CA 1985), by Canadian poet and visual artist **Tom Konyves**, is composed of shots of graffiti, neon, and street signs recorded in the 1980s in the working class, multicultural neighborhood of East Vancouver set to a melancholic saxophone soundtrack of John Lurie's "You Haunt Me" (1981). *Sign Language* employs different strategies to create effects that can be described as poetic. The most obvious is incorporating shots of graffiti texts that show some characteristic features of literariness, such as iteration, rhyme, and parataxis:

I WANNA BE INSTAMATIC  
 I WANNA BE A FROZEN PEA  
 I WANNA BE DEHYDRATED  
 IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY

At first, the short stanzas—each of them presented on a new screen—seem to comprise a statement critical of consumer society's stupefaction (Figure 3.2.7). On closer investigation, they also relate to the aesthetic strategies of *Sign Language*. One strategy is implied by the word 'instamatic': The combination of 'instant' and 'automatic' is a term referring to photography, specifically to Kodak's inexpensive and highly popular line of Instamatic cameras (produced from 1963 until 1988) that allowed a quick and easy, hence 'instant,' insertion of a film cartridge. Konyves came up with the term 'videopoetry' in the early 1980s (cf. Konyves 1982) and later published a manifesto to describe its features (cf. Konyves 2011). Like 'instamatic,' Konyves's term 'videopoetry' is a neologism—the spelling of the word is already a defamiliarization in itself—composed of *video* (Latin formula for 'I see') and 'poetry' (Greek noun *poiesis*: 'making'), meaning "making poetry with *technological innovation*" (ibid., 2). The introduction of consumer video technology in the late 1960s was embraced by many artists. Sony's Portapak is often cited as the technology that had the most impact on the development of video art: It was, compared to analog film, relatively inexpensive, less heavy, and easy to operate. What was even more groundbreaking, video allows for instant viewing of the recorded images because it is not necessary to process the picture. The medium of video can therefore be seen as a true

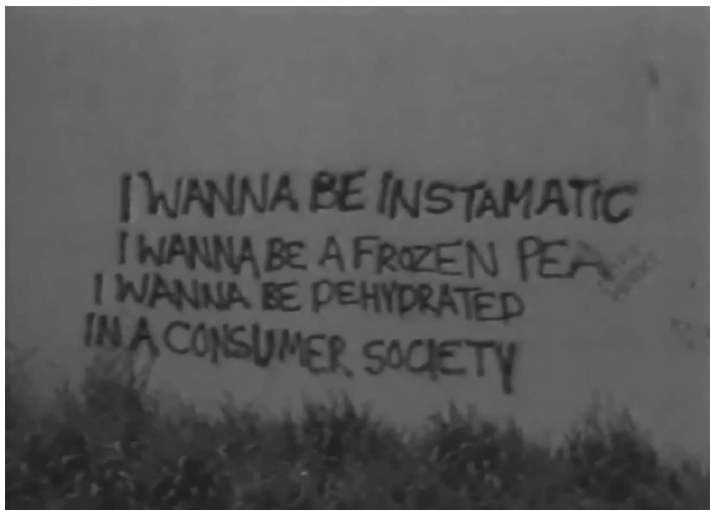


FIGURE 3.2.7 Tom Konyves. *Sign Language*. 1985.



‘consumer technology,’ a technology that provides instant gratification. In *Sign Language*, the video camera is used as a machine of automatic, instant poetry production comparable to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s poetry automaton, the *Landsberger Poesieautomat* (2000), which assembles poems automatically from a set of source words—in both works, technology itself is the ‘device.’ In his manifesto, Konyves defines videopoetry thus: “As one word [videopoetry] indicates that a fusion of the visual, the verbal and the audible has occurred, resulting in a new, different form of poetic experience. [...] Imagery in a videopoem—including on-screen text—does not illustrate the voiced text” (ibid., 2). *Sign Language* is sourced from actual texts randomly found in the city and, because they are recorded and not superimposed or inserted, they can be described as diegetic. However, the syntactical combination of the text elements by means of montage also cuts them loose from their diegetic context turning them into extradiegetic comments. They are foregrounded and infused with new meaning, based on a ‘poetic experience’ of script in everyday surroundings. Because the video includes neither verbal speech nor shots without text, the soundtrack provides an impression of continuity rather than juxtaposition. Although the continuity of the saxophone music contrasts with the arbitrariness of the found texts, it is this continuity that assists in the formation of inner speech. The technically created montage of individual words and sentences brings them into a dialog, evoking a narrative of protest, a criticism of consumer culture (“Shut up | + | Buy | and | Sell”) as well as power relations. The juxtaposition that Konyves considers a central device of videopoetry is not found among images, written text, and speech but among different types of text, such as graffiti, neon signs, and advertisements.

The somewhat tongue-in-cheek opening of the video makes this evident: A plastic bag is blowing across an empty parking lot, reminiscent of tumbleweed in Western movies. The camera then pans to capture a graffiti tag reading, “If You were | DEAD I’D | Be | Free,” and then the camera pans again to reveal a neon sign in the shop window of a Honda dealership that reads “Power,” suggesting political meaning. Other graffiti tags seem almost like a comment and thus play with the ambiguity of diegetic script and on-screen writing, as when women walk past a wall that reads “Working girl blues!” (Figure 3.2.8). The graffiti ‘dialog’ “BIG DADA | IS WATCHING | WHAT DOES | HE SEE?” further points in the direction of *Sign Language*’s myriad layers of meaning. The first phrase clearly alludes to Big Brother, the figurehead or dictator of George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* (1949). In the novel, the inhabitants of the fictional state of Oceania are under constant surveillance. As video is also a surveillance technology, the recordings of



FIGURE 3.2.8 Tom Konyves. *Sign Language*. 1985.

*Sign Language* suddenly seem uncanny, a sense intensified by the gloomy soundtrack. In addition, the graffiti line hints at a connection between Dadaist practice and the strategy behind *Sign Language*. Dada collages were made of everyday material (including newspapers or advertisements), and *Sign Language* follows that tradition with its composition of graffiti found in the city.

Graffiti and street signs are employed as site-specific *objets trouvés* that are de- and recontextualized through the use of video technology. In so doing, *Sign Language* opens a debate about the aesthetic value of everyday elements. By putting the images in a new context and matching them with a moody jazz soundtrack, the video aestheticizes these quotidian elements of the public sphere. The manner in which they are framed and combined is what ultimately marks them as artistic elements. More importantly, the video questions the boundaries of text and image. By capturing graffiti on videotape, the text obtains a hybrid double quality: both text and image. Thus, *Sign Language* visualizes the “gradual movement from the tenuous, anxious relationship of image and text to their rare but perceptible synthesis” (Konyves 2011, 4). Through this new context and the awareness of the text as aesthetic entity, vision is deautomatized. Other than the passersby in *Sign Language*, who ignore and are used to the text surrounding them, the viewers of the video see the signs (as if) for the first time. The video camera lends the viewer its eye, so that the viewer can see poetry instead of only recognizing signs. Although Konyves insists that videopoetry is one word, only the disassembly of the ‘deviant’ term reveals its full meaning: *Video poetry* translates into ‘I see poetry.’

Another example that investigates the relationship between written and iconic representation in the public sphere is Jeffrey Shaw’s pioneering interactive virtual reality installation *The Legible City* (DE 1989–1991), in the collection of ZKM | Karlsruhe, Germany. The work consists of a stationary bicycle placed in a darkened exhibition space where three-dimensional cityscapes of Manhattan, Amsterdam, and Karlsruhe are projected onto a screen in form of words or symbols, which the user navigates by riding the bike (cf. Dinkla 1997, 114–117). The text documenting the installation describes the premise:

The texts that the ‘letter buildings’ construct refer to the actual places. Some are fiction, and some are based on historic archive material. For example, the textual formations



FIGURE 3.2.9 Jeffrey Shaw. *The Legible City*. 1989–1991.

of Manhattan are on eight fictional story lines in the form of monologs by famous and unknown local people, including the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, the business tycoon Donald Trump, and a taxi driver. The different monologs are distinguished by different[ly] colored letters. [. . .] Through these texts, the virtual bicycle tour becomes a non-linear reading experience that alternates between different stories. (Lintermann et al. 2013, 491)

Several aspects are noteworthy regarding the use of script in this work. The title promises the experience of a ‘legible’ city, as such turning the typical touristic endeavor, a sightseeing tour, into a ‘sightreading’ ride. Instead of simply marveling at the architectural details of a (foreign) city, the user is forced to make the cognitive effort of reading, to decipher individual letters and assemble them into words and sentences, as such actively constructing the city through his own physical activity.

Following this line of thought, one could say that a city does not consist of the sum of its buildings but that its identity springs from a web of invisible fictional as well as factual narratives, including myths and histories. Yet, when the recipient is actually trying to navigate the ‘letter streets’ the title does not hold up to its promise. It is hardly possible to enter an immersive reading experience, because assembling large letters into words and sentences proves too challenging. Translating the movements of the cyclist into action on a virtual reality screen is not accomplished as seamlessly as it might be with contemporary video game consoles or VR-environments, resulting in the frustration of anticipation. *The Legible City* is in fact illegible. Manhattan, Amsterdam, and Karlsruhe remain closed off to the visitor who does not know their stories. The texts do not deliver knowledge; instead, the size of the individual letters—vanishing from sight as one cycles by—foregrounds the visuality of script.

**Jenny Holzer**, whose *Television Texts* opened this section, is an acclaimed international concept artist strongly associated with an aesthetic use of script in various materializations. She has displayed her xenon light projections—the name is derived from a specific type of projector lamp (cf. Lehmann 2002, 269)—throughout Europe, America, South America, and Asia since 1996. With the exception of a few works, such as her handwritten projection in Karlstad, Sweden (2005), all of her

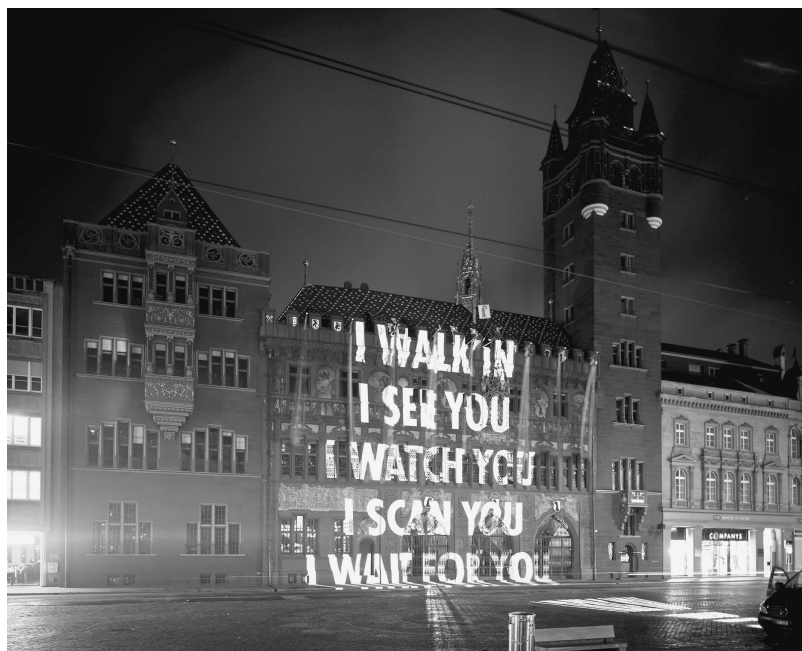


FIGURE 3.2.10 Jenny Holzer. *Xenon for Basel*. 2009.

projections follow a similar aesthetic, as they display texts written in simple white, bold, sans serif capital letters on buildings and landmarks. This discussion explores her xenon projection *Xenon for Basel* (CH 2009), exhibited at Fondation Beyeler (Basel). During the three-month exhibition, xenon light projections in German and English were installed in different Swiss locations in and around Basel and Zurich. During the opening days of the exhibition, Holzer's work could be 'read' on the facade of the Basel town hall in the city center. A later projection was set-up in the Zurich neighborhood of Lindenhof, illuminating the Limmat River, a water sports club, and part of the former city wall: The gigantic light script embraced different elements of the city, creating new performative meaning that was always in flux and perceivable only in the present tense.

Gordon Hughes describes two angles of the "artistic substance" (Hughes 2006, 421) of Holzer's work: Whereas some art critics, such as David Joselit, argue that the aesthetic core lies in the immaterial text, others, among them Hal Foster, emphasize the context in which her work is placed (cf. Foster 1985, 100 and 107–111; Joselit 1998, 54–70; Hughes 2006, 421). In fact, both positions are valid. In the late 1970s Holzer had already started to work with text in her self-written (or collected) *Truisms*, which she continues to exhibit in various contexts and media—in the museum space but mostly in the public realm. These short phrases or aphorisms present messages that shift between popular, even banal knowledge and deep, reflexive wisdom. Among the most famous of Holzer's *Truisms* are "RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY," for instance printed on the engine hood of a Florence taxi, or "PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT," presented on a scoreboard of Wembley Stadium in London (cf. Holzer in Joselit et al. 1998, 57 and 63). Often these short phrases are regarded as laying bare "the discursive structure of public signs, advertising and popular media" (Hughes 2006, 421f). The repeated projection of existing *Truisms* in different venues can be regarded a continuous iteration of the same work (cf. *ibid.*, 421), which adds another layer to their poeticity and creates an intertextual web of relations among artworks, geographic places, and authors.

For the Swiss xenon light installations, Holzer combines some of her *Truisms* as well as poetry by the Polish Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska. For instance, the Zurich piece projects Szymborska's poem "In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself" ("Pochwała złego o sobie mniemania," 1976). Both sorts of artistic texts precondition the artwork as potentially poetic even before it is realized. This effect might be less puzzling with regard to the use of a pre-existing poem by an acclaimed author that appears in verse form and makes use of rhyme. In the case of Holzer's *Truisms*, however, it is their inherent ambiguity that evokes a literary effect by making use of "a language that is by careful design, already unstable—[. . .] a language that is free-floating, polysemous and inherently ambiguous" (*ibid.*, 426). The phrases and aphorisms lend themselves to interpretation from various ideological positions. Ambiguity itself is a feature of poetic language. The poetic effect achieved by ambiguous language is increased when Szymborska's and Holzer's texts are amalgamated. The same font is used for both, so the projection does not visually distinguish between the artist's and the poet's words. Furthermore, Holzer's *Truisms* avoid using an identifiable authorial voice (cf. Joselit 1998, 45). This also applies to the projected poetry by Szymborska, although in a different way. While Holzer creates irritation and a perplexing 'personal appeal' through her frequent use of the first and second person singular, Szymborska's poetry creates the opposite effect through the author's studious avoidance of personal pronouns in favor of an anonymous 'they.'

When projected on parts of the cityscape, these texts aestheticize their surroundings, both commenting on and appropriating them. Whatever the light touches—buildings, flora, people—instantly becomes part of the public artwork, only to disappear from sight again when the projection moves to another surface. Projection and city enter into a mutual exchange, an interplay of the illuminated (and illuminating) script, the spatial surrounding, the situative context, the use of media and the performative reception processes (cf. Lehmann 2002, 265). Words are literally

projected on objects, exposing the arbitrary connection between signifiers and signified. Instead of ‘attaching’ meaning to things by naming them, the script itself is blurred and becomes difficult or even impossible to read when projected on uneven surfaces or, as in Zurich, on water.

The projections address viewers outside the museum: Viewers must read, or merely look at, the letters and words and need to linger long enough to read a full passage. This strategy of suspended meaning and prolonged reading is frequently employed as an element of disruption in media art. Because only one line is provided at a time, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the content of the truisms, making her or him aware of mechanisms of public discourse. At the same time, the projection sharpens the viewer’s awareness for his or her material surroundings: Because the projections are most powerful at night, their bright light partially reveals the colors of the illuminated objects, thus rendering visible what is usually invisible.

### *Framing as Aesthetic Device*

The films and videos discussed in this subsection appear almost minimalistic, consisting entirely of text on a monochrome background. However, their implied strategies are manifold and complex. The artworks investigate their own properties: Reminiscent of the debate about Holzer’s projections, they ask whether it is the text itself or rather the context or framing of the work that constitutes the artwork as such. In the process, they also explore and undermine reading habits, such as questioning the very nature of the linearity of literary and filmic experience. Moreover, they explore the possibilities and limitations of artworks that are automatically generated by technology.

**Michael Snow’s *So Is This*** (CA 1982) is a classic example of the insertion of text into moving image art. It is composed solely of light text on a dark background, but the simplicity is misleading. The deictic title hints at the film’s ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning: On one hand, it explores the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’—claiming that “This || belongs || to || everybody” and that “this || is || a || universe!” On the other hand, ‘this’ points to the film itself, presenting the viewer with a self-reflexive text about its own status, its aesthetic strategy, production, and structure. Snow is regarded as a prominent protagonist of the structural film movement (cf. Hillier 2014, 85). Usually, structural film is concerned with its own form; Snow’s



FIGURE 3.2.11 Michael Snow. *So Is This*. 1982.

*So Is This*, however, also refers to literature. The text constituting the film assumes a connection between the arts of film and literature by describing Snow as the author instead of the maker of the film. It also claims to create the effect of a genderless ‘voice’ due to its lack of sound. Snow’s film constantly alludes to literature by making use of literary terms, yet it deliberately undermines many of the expectations one might have of a literary text. Both film and literature are time-based arts, which *So Is This* playfully explores by presenting the viewer with one word at a time, providing one word per frame, and showing each frame for varying lengths of time. Snow’s film is concerned with the “different senses of time and continuity we expect when reading and viewing” (MacDonald 1995, 137). This way of presenting a text demands great focus from the viewer in order to follow the meaning of the words and put them together in sentences. The film thus subverts reading conventions of literature that put the reader in control.

From the beginning, *So Is This* activates the reader by pointing out that it is her or his task to generate meaning. However, as the film continues, it plays with pacing and alters the duration of how long the viewer is allowed to perceive a word; viewers cannot decide whether they want to read slowly, skim through pages, or even skip parts (cf. MacDonald 1985, 36). As the pace of the images is speeded up or slowed down, time becomes palpable. Quite interestingly, this seemingly ‘unliterary’ quality can be regarded as an effect of literariness created with filmic means. Snow’s strategy is one of “permanent suspension or deferral” (Winko 2009, 384) and employs impeding language that “hinders, slows down and problematizes the act of understanding” (Helmstetter 1995, 34). The viewer, or reader, is constantly activated and asked to “construct a meaning, then reconstruct it, as individual words are revealed” (MacDonald 1995, 137). This suspended reading leads to Shklovsky’s desired prolonged process of perception—particularly if the viewer perseveres for the entire 49 minutes of the film.

*So Is This* further undermines conventions of literature. It not only activates and engages the viewer but also renders reading a public event, quite contrary to the solitary reading of a book, as the film announces: “This || is || Communal reading! it’s || Group || Lit.” Reading Snow’s film becomes an event that can be shared (cf. MacDonald 1985, 36), and everyone seems to be welcome because it caters to different reading preferences: “[T]he text speculates about reading speeds and preferences and then offers, ‘in/ an/ attempt/ to/ please/ everybody’, the same sentence in four different speeds and rhythm patterns” (Hillier 2014, 81). This playing with speed and rhythm also results in a self-reflexive play with the perceptive ways of looking and seeing, which becomes most apparent when the word ‘length’ is displayed for almost a minute (cf. MacDonald 1995, 139). In this case, the word performs what it claims to signify, and the word’s resulting performative qualities are reminiscent of concrete poetry. Writing’s material dimension is suggested by slight irregularities in the shape of the font as well as minimal changes of color.

What is more, *So Is This* uses each word’s framing as a way to create irritation. The words are all set to the same margin, so short words appear in a larger font than long words. It seems as if the words ‘jump’ at the viewer. Moreover, seemingly unimportant words—auxiliaries, demonstrative adjectives, and pronouns—are emphasized while longer words seem to take a minor position. This causes a sense of irritation, an “overt and self-conscious frustration of our viewing strategies” (Peterson 1994, 124), because form is more valuable than content and the viewer’s focus is directed to the design of the type (cf. Hillier 2014, 80). Jim Hillier regards this shift of grammatical emphasis through font size as a filmic investigation into and defamiliarization of the syntactical sense and meaning of literary texts:

In reading the printed word on the page, syntactical sense is almost a given, more or less ‘invisible’ in the sense that it is expected, and is only problematic when absent. Once we can read and speak fluently, we take syntactical and grammatical rules for granted, but they remain crucial to comprehension. We expect written and spoken language to conform to

the rules—particularly written language. *So Is This* does not conform to syntactical and grammatical rules but, by making them strange, it foregrounds these rules and their essential functions by getting in the way of comprehension—the opposite of their usual function. Meaning then needs to be ‘struggled’ for—though ‘struggle’ need not imply a lack of pleasure. (ibid., 81)

Struggling for meaning is the opposite of the immersive strategy of fiction, and points toward what Shklovsky describes as literature’s device of complicating form. *So Is This* employs a similar impulse, a making visible or foregrounding of usually invisible rules that results in a deautomation of perception in line with the aesthetic effects of *ostranenie*. Finally, framing can also be considered the context into which a text is placed. Snow’s text for the film becomes aestheticized not only through the use of different font sizes or filmic means but also through its framing in an artistic context.

This strategy also plays a pivotal role in the media artworks **73 Suspect Words** (US 2000) and **Heaven’s Gate** (US 2000–2001) by the experimental filmmaker and video artist **Peggy Ahwesh**. About 20 years separate the works of Snow and Ahwesh, yet *73 Suspect Words* and *So Is This* share aesthetic features. As in Snow’s film, in *73 Suspect Words* white words appear on black backgrounds (Figure 3.2.12). Ahwesh’s work uses more recent digital technology, and it therefore lacks the irregularities, such as flickering, of Snow’s film. Up to three words or names appear at once; however, the words in Ahwesh’s video do not match up to create a cohesive narrative. Similar to Konyves works, *73 Suspect Words* puts a found object into a new context to alienate it. The words appearing on screen were extracted from Theodore John Kaczynski’s 1995 *Unabomber Manifesto*, subtitled *Industrial Society and Its Future*, a source that *73 Suspect Words* shares with other films and artworks: Lutz Dammbeck’s documentary *The Net—The Unabomber, LSD, and the Internet* (2003); Robert Kusmirowski’s installation *Unacabin* (2008); and James Benning’s two-channel video projection *Two Cabins* (2011) as well as his experimental film *Stemple Pass* (2012). The knowledge of the source reveals the ambiguity of the video’s title: The 73 words are the words of a domestic U.S. terrorist. *73 Suspect Words* incorporates and thus aestheticizes an originally nonliterary text with contextual framing. This points to Terry Eagleton’s notion of cultural and historical context



FIGURE 3.2.12 Peggy Ahwesh. *73 Suspect Words*, 2000.

as crucial to defining literature. The artwork uses literature's feature of being a "notably unstable affair" (Eagleton 1983, 12) and questions classifications of texts as canonic or non-canonic.

The title, *73 Suspect Words*, also points to the artwork's strategy of employing technology in the creation of art: The words that flash up were marked as suspect by a spell check on a word processing program. 'Suspect words' are words that are unfamiliar to computer software (e.g. 'crypto-leftist'), that are not regarded as part of common everyday language. They deviate from a convention set for the program. If literary language is characterized by its deviation from everyday language, then computer technology can be used to filter the poetic potential of any text. In addition, the words are arranged according to the frequency of their appearance in the *Unabomber Manifesto*. This creates effects of poetic iteration, enhanced by the constant rhythmic clicking of Richard Harrison's experimental music piece "DC.26.97a" (1999), which plays as the soundtrack.

Ahwesh's *Heaven's Gate* follows a logic similar to that of *73 Suspect Words*. Black words flash on a white background, presenting the meta-tags of the website of the religious group Heaven's Gate. On the website these words are invisible to the average user, because they are part of the website's source code. They give information about the website that can help and influence search engine results and categorizations. As the artwork reveals, the words chosen as meta-tags are very general (death, consciousness, freedom, virginity) in order to increase their chances of appearing, even arbitrarily, in as many search results as possible (Figure 3.2.13). By making the meta-tags visible, *Heaven's Gate* directs the viewer's awareness to the mechanisms behind the media we often use carelessly, and it also somehow ridicules the group by revealing, for instance, the tag "Virginity," in a slightly aestheticized font type. In sum, Ahwesh's artworks are a good example of the features of new media art that Mark Tribe and Reena Jana have defined as "projects that make use of emerging media technologies and are concerned with the cultural, political, and aesthetic possibilities of these tools" (Jana and Tribe 2006, 6).

The video *Corps à corps* [Body to Body] (FR 2015) by the France- and Algeria-based artists **Louisa Babari** and **Célio Paillard** shares a similar sensibility and reduced aesthetics: White

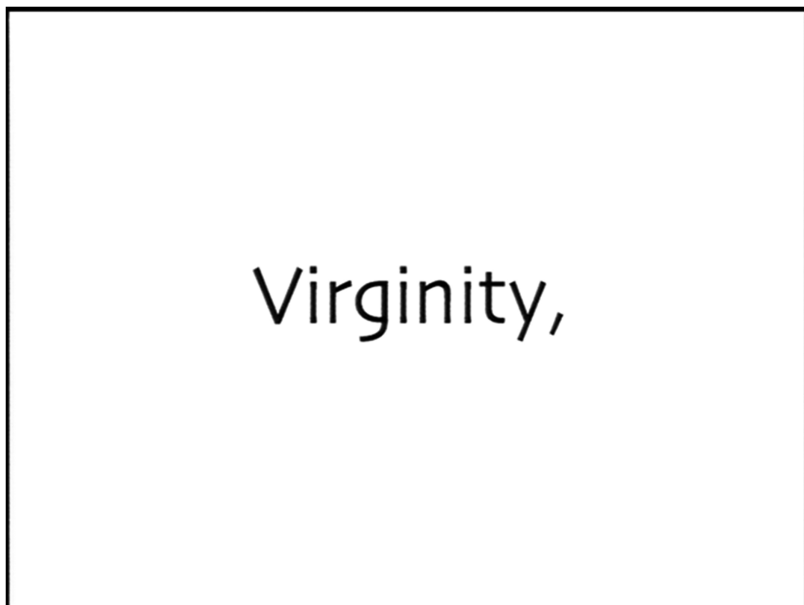


FIGURE 3.2.13 Peggy Ahwesh. *Heaven's Gate*, 2000–2001.



words, written in sans serif capitals, flash up in the center of the screen against a black background. A male voice-over (Paillard) reads the essay “Fanon, Le corps-à-corps colonial” (2014) by the French philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina in an increasingly agitated manner. The essay traces central insights of anti-colonial psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, especially his observations on how colonialism is inscribed into the bodies of the colonized—as described in his book *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961)—and his notion of ‘lactification,’ the symbolic and imaginary attempts to become white, developed in his famous work *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Masks, White Skin*, 1952). Boulbina’s essay also criticizes the colonial, sexist, and racist prejudices that persist in French academia, where Fanon, like Simone de Beauvoir, is not taken seriously as a philosopher but primarily regarded as a reader of Jean Paul Sartre, in contrast to the U.S. where both Fanon and de Beauvoir play a major role in postcolonial and gender studies. The essay ends with an appeal to turn to artists in whose works Fanon’s insights live on.

The words flashing up in the video are taken from the essay and match the voice-over, starting with “DANS LE CORPS DES COLONISÉS || SYMPTÔMES || RÉFLEXES DE MORT || RÉFLEXES DEVIE” (in the body of the colonized | symptoms | death reflexes | life reflexes). The words literally highlight key terms and phrases of the philosophical essay. A key term from the very beginning of the essay presented in the video is “MOI PEAU” (skin ego), as the corporeal envelope (“ENVELOPPE CORPORELLE”) but also the psychic envelope (“ENVELOPPE PSYCHIQUE”) of the self. The *moi peau* or ‘skin ego’ is a concept from the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, presented in a book of the same title. He defines it “as a containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces” (Anzieu 1989, 98). In colonial and postcolonial discourse, skin color is the master trope of difference. In particular, the constructs of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ have established a binary thought structure, an “epidermal hierarchy” that “equates the racial body with a perceptible blackness, while defining, in its absence, whiteness as whatever an African blackness is not” (Wiegman 1995, 8f). One can almost say that the individual body schema is replaced in the course of socialization by a “racial epidermal schema” (Fanon 1967, 112). Babari and Paillard’s work reflects this dichotomy, criticized by Boulbina from a postcolonial perspective, through their aesthetic use of black and white as the sole ‘colors’ of this work.

In the beginning of the piece, when the speaker’s voice is still calm and easy to follow, the script acts as a visualization of speech, adding emphasis or, rather, as ‘re-graphisation’ pointing back to the text’s original modality. At the same time, due to the fact that a theoretical text is being read, listening to and attempting to understand the text demands high concentration. The black screen facilitates this concentration, as all attention can be dedicated to the sense of hearing. When, suddenly, bright words flash up at irregular intervals, attention is drawn to vision, creating a distraction.

The ‘competition’ between audition and vision, sound and image, increases over the length of the video as the speed and agitation of the voice-over accelerates, so it becomes more difficult to grasp the meaning of the text simply by listening. The words on the screen become a form of emphasis that simultaneously adds a distraction, as they increasingly seem to be thrown at the viewers, amplifying the most important key terms even while making it more difficult to follow the details of the scholarly text’s highly theoretical argumentation. This device is reminiscent of Boris Eikhenbaum’s notion of ‘inner speech,’ the idea that the viewer of a film must actively construct meaning by combining images that on their own are beyond sense. Moreover, the selected words also bring out Boulbina’s rhetoric, particularly her use of parallelism and iteration, for instance when the same word flashes three times in a row: “LACTIFICATION || LACTIFICATION || LACTIFICATION” (Figure 3.2.14).

In an artist’s statement that is also referenced by Boulbina, Babari and Paillard quote a portrait of Fanon written by the Algerian psychoanalyst Alice Cherki, who worked with him in Algeria.



FIGURE 3.2.14 Louisa Babari and Célio Paillard. *Corps à corps*. 2015.

In this portrait, Cherki describes Fanon as not actually writing his books but, rather, dictating them to his wife, Josie. Cherki romanticizes this patriarchic way of working, claiming that Fanon wanted to transmit his thoughts from ‘body to body’ (*corps à corps*), enabling through a ‘sensual language’ a new mode of reflection not based solely on conceptual handling (cf. Cherki 2000, 46). Thus, *Corps à corps* also reflects on Fanon’s working method and the idea behind it. The materiality of language—spoken and written—is highlighted, as are the different ways in which phonetic and graphic signs affect the body. By using white script on a black ground, the video continues the aesthetic tradition established by text inserts in silent film (rather than the printed page). But in contrast to other media artworks that share the same aesthetic, this ‘look’ evokes additional connotations when set within the framework of postcolonial critique. White letters on a black background are a standard in moving images, and a standard is to a certain extent always ‘transparent’ or invisible, as it is not perceived per se. ‘Whiteness’ has likewise been established as a standard by racist colonial discourse and history, so that it is set as the dominant norm and ‘non-Whiteness’ as a deviation—ignored and/or perceived as a threat (cf. Benthien 2002, 153). Following this line of thought, it is as if *Corps à corps* visualizes how the ruling transparent discourse of the white colonizers is inscribed onto the black skin of the colonized. This dichotomy was exposed by the work’s presentation at RAW Material Company in the context of Dak’Art in 2016, the African biennale for contemporary art in Dakar, with its colonial history and postcolonial present.

### *Playing With Words*

The artworks in this subsection rather playfully engage with typography as elements of writing—letters, words, punctuation marks—become part of TV interventions, interactive installations, or video performances.

**Peter Weibel’s** tongue-in-cheek ‘text-action,’ *Das Recht mit Füßen treten* (AT 1968), activates the literal meaning of the titular German proverb, which can be translated as ‘kicking the law with the feet,’ meaning to consciously disobey the law. Originally created as a site-specific installation within a group show, the video captures the floor of an exhibition space covered with the



FIGURE 3.2.15 Peter Weibel. *Das Recht mit Füßen treten*. 1974.

German word *Recht* (law), written in white charcoal. It shows how visitors to the initial exhibition walked all over the script and as such ‘performed’ the proverb while simultaneously smudging it. Weibel describes the concept this way: “Only the pragmatic (communicative) aspect of an artwork realized the actual form and semantic of this piece. Without the viewer/user, there would have been no artwork. It was only produced through his or her participation” (Weibel 1982, 43). Interestingly, Weibel refers to the audience also as “performers of the poem” (ibid.) so that *Das Recht mit Füßen treten* could be described as concrete poetry, as ‘participative performance poem.’

Though the concept seems simple, it is in reality quite tricky. The piece points to the fact that language competence involves much more than simply literacy or the ability to understand, the literal comprehension of words. The transfer from literal to figurative meaning must be learned as well. Moreover, it is not ‘the law’ that the audience walked over. Law is an abstract discourse that materializes only when it is violated and the violation is punished. The audience did not walk over legal texts, only over the signifier *Recht*. The piece therefore also shows that there are signifiers that signify something immaterial, something that has no equivalence in the material world but is pure *logos*. As such, the action of the audience was without (legal) consequences—emphasized also by the close-up, which leaves the actors anonymous by depicting only their lower legs and feet. The literal and the figurative meaning of the proverb are juxtaposed and defamiliarized in a way that the arbitrariness of (everyday) language is laid bare.

The second work discussed in this subsection is *Sentences* (GB 1988–1993), which was produced as a TV intervention by **Stephen Partridge**. It consists of three short pieces that are visually related to Snow’s and Ahwesh’s works, since they feature white type on a black background. Yet unlike these artists, the sentences of Partridge’s intervention piece refer to nothing but themselves: Each of the three units presents up to three sentences and explores their self-reflexivity, their meaning, and what is necessary to tap their potential meaning. *Sentences* creates and lifts tension by making use of performative contradictions. As Martin Jay suggests with regard to the terminology used by John Austin, John Searle, and Jürgen Habermas, a performative contradiction “occurs when the locutionary dimension of a speech act is in conflict with its illocutionary

force, when what is said is undercut by how it is said” (Jay 1993, 29). This points to the difference between content and form that is employed in Partridge’s work.

In the first section of *Sentences*, tension builds as lines such as “All sentences end with a full stop” or “At the end of this sentence is a full stop” appear—but without the full stops. Withholding the finite punctuation mark elicits irritation as the sentences initially contradict the statements they make. Form and content stand in opposition to each other until the punctuation mark is added. Withholding the finite punctuation mark makes the script ‘felt’: It is turned into a kind of actor. In a slightly different approach, the second part of *Sentences* explores the importance of the letter position in creating meaning. Initially, letters arranged in groups move across the screen and can be recognized as such; after a while it is possible to make out their meaning. The letters of the sentences “These letters constitute these words.” and “These words constitute this sentence.” are jumbled on the screen. In so doing, the artwork questions the accuracy of the statements—it is not only the letters or the words that constitute the next, larger structural unit but also the underlying rules of letter position and word order.

The last piece of *Sentences* initially presents the sentence “The meaning of this sentence becomes clearer” with blurred typographic signs. At first, this seems to point to different levels of form and function. However, because the sentence does not carry any referential meaning, form is the content of the sentence, which, to the contrary, does not become any clearer at all (Figure 3.2.16). Only in the very last sentence of the piece does the self-referential loop seem to close as the blurred, kinetic type reads “This sentence is obscure.”—marking the first statement that is immediately true due to the opacity of script and rendering perceivable “how modes of perception have been transformed by innovations in media technology” (Scheffer et al. 2015, 235). Thus, the television intervention directs the viewer’s awareness to assumptions and implied rules that govern everyday language use.

The video performance *Satzbau* (DE 2004), by German artist **Anna Gollwitzer**, is the work in this subsection that most explicitly investigates not only the materiality but also the spatiality of script. The artist pushes large sculptures in the shape of punctuation marks—parentheses, commas,

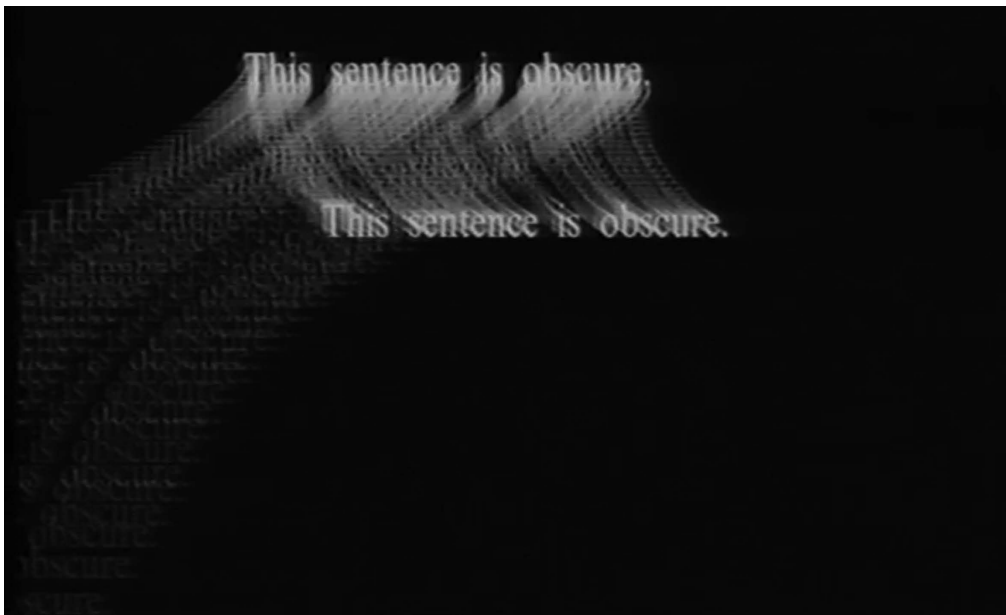


FIGURE 3.2.16 Stephen Partridge. *Sentences*. 1988.



FIGURE 3.2.17 Anna Gollwitzer. *Satzbau*. 2004.

full stops, and exclamation marks—through a large room, some of the marks taller than her. Similar to Snow's *So Is This*, the seemingly small units of written language are emphasized, blown up to enormous size, pointing out their materiality. This emphasizes not only the importance of punctuation for the clarification of meaning in written language but more significantly its importance to Krämer's notions of 'inter-spatiality' and 'notational iconicity.' *Satzbau* is thus a literal enactment of the video's title—a composite word that stands for 'sentence construction' although the most common English translation would be simply 'syntax'—and visualizes the idea of punctuation as an essential element of 'building' sentences. Moreover, the video is a performance of the play on the German word *Satzbau* itself, as the letters are also the *Bausatz*, the construction kit, of a sentence.

The theme of the double character of virtual and real materiality permeates Gollwitzer's play on and with words. The vantage points for this observation are both the opening and credit segments of the video: Both use the room in which the performance takes place as the background, and its three-dimensionality is seemingly erased so that the gray floor and white wall appear as horizontal color blocks. In the beginning of the video, viewers read the title, *Satzbau*, while the artist pushes a black cube into the image on the screen. In the closing credits, viewers see a reversed comma next to the copyright information that has been inserted into the recorded image by computer. In this image, 'real' and 'virtual' materiality merge into one as the work frays, disrupts, even breaks the (not so) rigid wall between the work and its framing.

*Satzbau* emphasizes that script is not only visual but also spatial, and thus frees written language from the dogma of linearity. The performance does not employ punctuation as flat characters on a sheet of paper but as three-dimensional elements. When watching the video, the viewer perceives the materiality in a double sense: While she or he notices that the artist is pushing three-dimensional objects through the room, the screen presents them two-dimensionally. In addition, the punctuation marks are spatially arranged, which is highlighted when the artist plays with perspective and seems to lean against punctuation marks in the front of the room even though she is standing in the back. Thus, when watching the video performance, the viewer's perception oscillates between recognizing the real materiality of the objects that were part of

the actual performance and the virtual materiality and two-dimensionality that the punctuation marks take on when they are mediatized.

### **Writing On and With Bodies**

The artworks discussed here center around the body: Artists either write on bodies or use corporal methods of writing, such as handwriting or sign language gestures. The artworks are concerned with the literariness of writing created by exploring the possibilities of rhythmic writing or by investigating the mediality of writing.

Weibel produced a series of *Video Texte* [Video Texts] (AT 1967–1975) in which he—at times collaborating with Valie Export—explored the poetic possibilities of the young medium of video by turning the TV set into a processual text object. Some of the ‘texts’ highlight the technological specificity of video, for instance when the TV set and video recorder are connected to create a feedback loop that allows the TV screen to instantly show what the camera records. In one video text, Weibel creates a *mise-en-abyme* by holding a book between the video camera and TV screen. The image of the book on the TV seems like a reflection on Marshall McLuhan’s proclaimed end of the age of the book brought about by electronic media. Yet by using video and the young mass medium of television as a site for ‘video-specific poems,’ Weibel’s *Video Texte* also appear to be an illustration of Jay David Bolter’s and Richard Grusin’s argument that a new medium always contains the old medium. Aesthetically, the *Video Texte* employ the dominant device of concrete poetry: the outer form is a direct expression of the content.

*Mundtext* [Mouth Text] (AT 1975), for instance, shows close-ups of the artist’s open mouth holding paper strips between the lips and teeth. Written on the strips are different words, such as “WORT” (word), “ZUNGE” (tongue), “GEDÄRME” (bowel), and “SCHEISSE” (shit) (Figure 3.2.18). On one hand, the words name steps on the route from the mouth to the alimentary tract; on the other, similar to *Das Recht mit Füßen treten*, this video text is a literal performance of a German phrase, one that is used to express which words are allowed to be spoken—taken into the mouth—and which are not. Children learn that one does not take (the word) ‘shit’ into the



FIGURE 3.2.18 Peter Weibel. *Mundtext*. 1975.

mouth, for instance. Again, the fundamental difference between literal and figurative meaning, between signifier and signified, as well as between speech and script is highlighted.

In several concrete video poems under the title *Selbstbeschreibung* [Self-Description] (AT 1974), Weibel, shown in a medium close-up shot, writes words on a glass pane placed between his body and the camera. The words can be read by the audience; that is, Weibel writes the words mirror-inverted, as such performing a ‘trick’ reminiscent of Trewey in the Lumière Brothers film mentioned earlier. The layout of the writing—that is, the body of the text—follows the contours of Weibel’s body, and so it seems as if the artist literally writes on himself (German: ‘sich selbst beschreiben’). The content of the words describe the artist, and in these concrete poems the description is also depiction, for instance:

gedanke  
Seele  
Sex  
gewalt  
eitelkeit gefühl

Moreover, these keywords allude to the process of ‘writing oneself’ in the literary genre of autobiography (see Chapter 4, Section 3) as well as using script to make visible the fourth wall—the usually invisible barrier between viewer and performer.

In Valie Export’s video performance *Sehtext: Fingergedicht* [Visual Text: Finger Poem] (AT 1968), the artist also appears herself. She faces the camera while fingerspelling, a gesture as a form of writing and speaking that does not leave a trace. Sign language sometimes occurs in media art, as in Bruce Nauman’s installation *World Peace (Projected)* (see Chapter 4, Section 2) or Nalini Malani’s installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* (see Chapter 5). Fingerspelling is used when words from an oral language do not have a sign language equivalent, and Export’s use of this becomes more comprehensible towards the end of the video. After Export fingerspells, viewers can read the text on



FIGURE 3.2.19 Valie Export. *Sehtext: Fingergedicht*. 1968.

a sheet of paper presented by the artist: “ICH SAGE DIE ZEIGE MIT || DEN ZEICHEN IM ZEIGEN || DER SAGE || FREI NACH HEIDEGGER.” In his essay “Der Weg zur Sprache” (“On the Way to Language” 1959), Martin Heidegger describes a way to language that “leaves behind the everyday and instrumental use of language and moves towards something more essential: towards the locale of the essence of language” (Suner 2006, 154). The essence of language is established as the *Sage* (“Saying”) that finds its expression only in the *Zeige* (“Showing”; Heidegger 1982, 123). Both Heideggerian neologisms—nominalizing verbs—are in a way synonymous. The essence of language cannot be expressed through speaking. According to Heidegger, “what language properly pursues is the essential unfolding of saying, because language speaks by saying, that is, by showing” (Chung 2012, 239). In short, saying means to show. It can be a response to what happens that may be poetic, artistic, or in the form of silence (cf. *ibid.*). Moreover, language is established as a self-referential system that ‘brings language as language to language’ (cf. *ibid.*, 239f), thus avoiding becoming representational. Export’s phrase embodies this self-referentiality. She shows the essence of language because it cannot be expressed verbally. The signs (*Zeichen*) that she uses are actually equal to showing. If showing is, according to Heidegger, a poetic response, the literariness of Export’s video lies in its use of gesture. What is more, sign language has been claimed to be the essence of language, yet at the same time it can itself be regarded as a linguistic system, which deems Export’s claim wrong.

*Automatic Writing* (ZA 2003), a short animation by the South African artist **William Kentridge**, is another artwork that uses a specific form of writing, namely handwriting. Handwriting has frequently been employed in media art, for example in the videos *Measures of Distance* by Mona Hatoum or *Auto-portrait* by Jochen Gerz (see Chapter 4, Section 3). *Automatic Writing* employs the same technique as Kentridge’s famous *Drawings for Projection*. What he terms ‘stone-age animation’ is a modified base technique of filming a charcoal drawing and altering it slightly frame by frame. As charcoal cannot be erased perfectly, the smudges and traces of previous drawings are visible in the final animated film. To the dreamy score by Philip Miller, viewers see lines of handwriting appear and disappear on the screen along with drawn images of abandoned public and private spaces from an earlier era where time seemed to stand still. As is typical of Kentridge’s elusive films, viewers are not presented with a linear narrative that is easy to understand.

Handwriting is the unique trace of a person who is writing or has written something down. Therefore, handwriting, like the human voice, bears a note of authenticity. *Automatic Writing* suggests early on that viewers may be faced with a (male) person’s “Maximum of | Anxiety” and “The longest | Route to his | Desire from A to B.” At the same time, while the handwriting appears and disappears, the hand of the writer is never visible. It is literally automatic writing, thus contradicting the usual association of handwriting as being the opposite of technological automatization (albeit handwriting also necessitates automatization). A common understanding of writing, however, is that it is deautomatized: Writing is depicted as process, as a gesture that is, counterintuitively, invisible. Writing here is at once a trace of a person as well as a sign of the writer’s absence.

Furthermore, *Automatic Writing* clearly alludes to the surrealist practice of stream of consciousness writing. The workings of the mind, especially of memory, have always been associated with Kentridge’s work and his technique in particular:

These physical marks that can be discerned on the paper, and on the projected images, are the preservations from the past; they are the material counterpart, in this process of making, of personal memory, of the collective memories that we call ‘culture,’ and of the political recollection and conscious construction that we call ‘history writing.’ (Hickey 2007, 22)



The drawings on paper materially visualize memory, as well as forgetting, when the drawing vanishes. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has described Kentridge's technique in analogy to forgetting and remembering as two overlapping entities (cf. Christov-Barkagiev 1999, 33). This palimpsestuous layering of past and present is also reminiscent of how Sigmund Freud described human perception in his essay "The Mystic Writing Pad." The appearing and disappearing handwriting in *Automatic Writing* seems to resemble "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception" (Freud 2001, 231). If the writing in automatic writing is an analogy to memory, we might conceive of *Automatic Writing* as a visualization of memory, of memory that comes inevitably, automatically, as a present that is haunted by the past.

In *Automatic Writing*, drawn images of a naked woman and a naked man merge into writing and back into image, the lines from the written words moving across the screen to trace the silhouette of the female body. The figures' nakedness suggests the intimacy attributed to the memories that are being written down. As the impressions merge into each other as associations in an ongoing metamorphosis (cf. Cameron 1999, 38), the writing and the images become more and more alike. Writing turns into image and vice versa, and writing is used as a device to change the scene, when it fills the whole screen. Often, the writing is illegible or only partially legible. It thus becomes ornamental and acquires pictorial qualities. Writing is depicted as something in flux, which contradicts the general assumption of writing as something that is fixed while spoken language is ephemeral. Moreover, writing is marked as something that has an aesthetic value beyond its mere referential function. As the writing in the film oscillates between legibility and illegibility, the viewer's focus shifts from regarding writing in terms of its signifying function to its materiality.

Script, put into motion by means of moving image technologies and kinetic letters, is presented as unstable while, at the same time, its iconicity and spatiality are emphasized. In this way viewers of media art are confronted with written texts that demand a constant readjustment of perception, oscillating between seeing and reading. Works such as Kentridge's *Automatic Writing* emphasize the ornamental function of script and explore the cultural connotations of particular writing techniques.

As we have seen in the works discussed in this chapter, media artists challenge the everyday transparency of the medium of language by making the materiality of its modalities, speech, and script palpable. Moreover, in media artworks the inherent time-based nature of language is emphasized, as speech and script are often presented either too quickly or too slowly compared to the everyday acts of listening or reading. In this way, widely assumed dichotomies, such as the fleetingness of spoken language versus the persistence of written language, are challenged or even abolished. Speech, made strange through technological manipulations or the subordination under categories of script—most prominently the alphabet—often verges on a breakdown of meaning. What is more, many works discussed throughout this chapter foreground the invisibility of the 'speaker' or 'writer.' In some of the works—such as Partridge's *Sentences*—abstract, non-living script obtains an ungraspable quasi-human agency. The obstreperousness of speech and script often go hand-in-hand with a playful investigation of the performative potential of the modalities of language. It lays bare the aesthetic obstinacy of language as both spoken and written words are defamiliarized on the level of their respective materials, sound, and sign. In this process, the human voice is frequently separated from the body and appears acousmatic, while script is shown in its physicality or—as in the quite different works of Weibel, Gollwitzer, or Babari and Paillard—intricately linked to the body. As speech without visible body or irruptive script body, language is 'made strange' to provoke new sensations. While the playful shifts between transparency and opacity may provide pleasure, they can also invoke a feeling of unease, a sense of uncanny defamiliarization.

# 4

## LITERARY GENRES IN MEDIA ART

Chapter 4 explores the influence of literary genres on media art by investigating their shared aesthetic structures. Many works of media art adapt elements of particular literary (sub)genres or even merge different literary conventions. As such, media art continues and revitalizes the aesthetic tradition of the genre triad of poetry, drama, and prose. Ulrike Rosenbach's video *Eine Scheibe berühren*, for instance, alludes to lyric poetry by foregrounding poetic devices such as parallelism, iteration, rhythm, or rhyme (Section 4.1). Other works employ elements of classical tragedy, such as versified and choral speech, teichoscopy, or a messenger's report as in Hajnal Németh's mixed-media installation *CRASH—Passive Interview* (Section 4.2). Still other artworks incorporate prose structures alluding to autobiography or the epistolary novel, such as Mona Hatoum's video *Measures of Distance* (Section 4.3). These appropriations of literary genres deviate from the expectations that a viewer familiar with literary conventions may have. For example, the video installation *Such a Morning* (2017) by the Indian artist Amar Kanwar, exhibited at Documenta 14 in Kassel, alludes to poetry by presenting written texts in single, left-aligned lines with white typewriter-style font, describing the sky, the sun, clouds, and light. Yet the language itself is not poetic, but that of a scientist. The work acquires poeticity through its framing, the literary presentation of script, and the combination of beautiful, elegiac images and music.

The media artworks analyzed in Chapter 4 allude to literary genres in ways that lay bare established conventions. In Section 4.3, these conventions are not only established by prose, but also by narrative cinema, which serves as a background against which deviations become palpable. Literariness is created, for instance, when the viewer's immersion into a work is disrupted via devices such as subtitled or voice-over meta-comments on the act of mediation, or the pluralization of communicative channels. Media art makes viewers aware of habitualized ways of engaging with art and media and sensitizes them to techniques and technology alike.

The "familiar tripartite division" (Duff 2000, 3) of lyric, drama, and epic (i.e. narrative) was first developed systematically within Italian Renaissance poetics and regained prominence in the late 18th century. In the early 19th century, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel further enhanced the classical genre distinction in *Lectures on Aesthetics*. He considers epic prose as the 'objective' form of literature, directed towards the totality of external phenomena; lyric poetry as the 'subjective' form, dealing with objects of the inner world and

the contemplative and sensitive mind; and drama as connecting the objective and the subjective sides to a “new whole” (Hegel 1998, 1038). Along with Hegel’s definition, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s rationale of the three literary natural genres, published in 1819, has been influential: “There are only three natural forms of poetry: the clearly narrated kind, the sort generated by enthusiasm, and the type that presents direct personal action: *epic*, *lyric*, and *drama*. These three modes of poetry can work together or separately” (Goethe 2010, 227). In particular, the classification of lyric poetry as the ‘enthusiastically excited’ genre still lingers. Albeit controversial, the connection of lyric poetry and subjectivity has had a great impact on discussions of the ‘poetic’ qualities of audiovisual art forms.

Hegel’s and Goethe’s considerations were paralleled with ambitions to eradicate the notion of genre altogether, Friedrich Schlegel being a prominent critic (cf. Garber and Brogan 1993, 458). In the early 20th century, one of the most rigorous critics was Benedetto Croce, who suggested abolishing all genre categories because they could not account for an individual text’s singular aesthetic features (cf. *ibid.*). Similar claims were made by Fredric Jameson, who regarded genre criticism as “discredited by modern literary theory and practice” (Jameson 2002, 91). Modernist and postmodernist art production has further challenged the validity of genre categories by defying genre definitions and crossing medial boundaries.

Nevertheless, the notion of genre continues to be used not only in literary studies and the marketing of literature, but also as a point of reference in artistic productions. Media art stands in this tradition, which is why in this discussion the genre triad serves as a background against which allusions to and deviations from norms can be understood. As established in Chapter 2, Section 1, the Russian Formalists considered genre “the central mechanism of literary history, and its proper object of study” (Duff 2000, 7) and claimed that genre is defined by (continuously evolving) functions and forms. Characteristics of a genre are not a timeless, fixed entity—a point also stressed by Viktor Shklovsky. According to him, “a new form makes appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness” (Shklovsky 1990 [1919], 20). This idea implies the automatization and deautomatization of perception, which is inherently tied to established norms of perception and the breaking of them.

Because a genre-specific approach can reveal the relevance of literary aesthetics to many experimental art forms, the genre triad functions as a structural guide for the following analyses. As Roberto Simanowski has argued, genre theory is “a valid analytical tool” (Simanowski 2011, 6) with which to analyze media art and digital literature. With regard to the concept of poetic rhyme, for instance, he claims that it may be extended beyond its literary use in the form of iterated sounds in language to other forms of repetition, such as visual or acoustic forms, “as a new way of creating paradigmatic relationships between the elements of a kinetic text” (*ibid.*). In other words, literary genre theory may sharpen one’s focus on the structure of an artwork, and on the interaction of its forms and the effects they create.

## 4.1 Elements of Poetry

“Rectangle, rectangle within a rectangle” are the opening words of **Gary Hill’s** video *Black/White/Text* (US 1980), spoken in a rigid dactylic meter. The artist repeats the same words over and over, his voice multiplying over the course of the video, forming a waltz-like rhythm. The different layers of his voice pile up into the thickened aural texture of a rondo, until the content of the spoken lines becomes nearly impossible to understand. Hill’s voice chants the following abstract text, starting from the end and then gradually moving to the beginning:

A texture is drawing a continuum from one voice to another differentiated by measuring the distance between sending and receiving messages voicing the following: rectilinear time enfolds the negative and positive spaces expanding the image that text occupies the space before and after the frame of reference within a rectangle. (Hill in Broeker 2002, 95)

This is broken into separate voice tracks that repeat only a small part of the text, so they overlap and thus create ambiguity about how the fragments relate to each other. Once the first sentence is spoken, it appears to be slightly out of synch with the other voices, disturbing the literally rectilinear rhythm. The sober, scientific sounding text self-reflexively refers back to the video itself, to its acoustic and its visual organization: As the multiplying voices pile up and individual words dissolve into indiscernible noise, they are matched with images of an increasing number of concentric black-and-white rectangles, visually creating layer after layer. The images not only illustrate the text; they are also the result of a self-reflexive process. The camera is directed at a monitor in a negative feedback loop, thus producing the black-and-white rectangles in a *mise-en-abyme* structure that finally dissolves into morphing patterns reminiscent of 1960s Op Art. Hill’s video alludes to spoken poetry and music, and it also explores the technological properties of video technology. In its emphasis of meter, exploration of assonances, and self-reflexivity, the aesthetic function is foregrounded, while the communicative function of both language and images retreats to the background. As such, it is the ideal example and entry point into the investigation of poetic language and structures in media art.

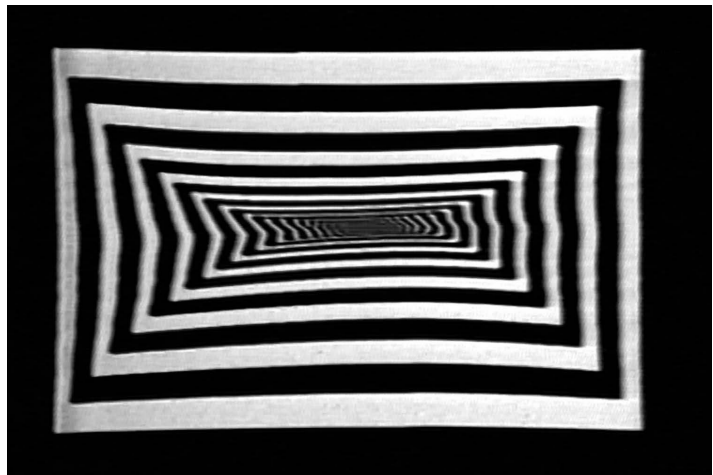


FIGURE 4.1.1 Gary Hill. *Black/White/Text*. 1980.

## Poetry as a Literary Genre

Though definitions of poetry as a literary genre are constantly renegotiated by poetic practices and academic research alike (cf. Culler 2015), it is useful to outline basic definitions that serve as a background for the analyses here. The leading German dictionary for literary scholarship, for instance, defines a poem as a text set in bound or free verse, either fully or just in parts. A poem may contain rhymes and may be organized in stanzas. However, not all poems are lyric and not all lyric texts are poems (cf. Lamping 2007, 669). Genre theory broadly distinguishes between ‘lyric poetry,’ ‘narrative poetry,’ and ‘dramatic poetry’ (cf. Gioia and Kennedy 2010, 9–14). Narrative poetry encompasses poetic subgenres containing a plot, such as ballads, while dramatic poetry is characterized by longer, monological passages in verse drama. When works of media art use poetic structures, they predominantly refer to lyric poetry, which constitutes the large majority of poems.

Dieter Burdorf defines a lyric poem as oral or written language in verse that contrasts with everyday language in terms of its written arrangement, and that uses textual representation in the form of additional pauses, line breaks, and accents that do not necessarily correspond to the rhythm of the phrase and its syntax (cf. Burdorf 1997, 20f). Beyond these general definitions, he highlights the following characteristics that pertain to the majority of existing poems, albeit not all: (1) “grammatical deviations from everyday language that go beyond the verse form, above all rhyme and meter, but also further tonal peculiarities (onomatopoeics), deformed word shapes, unusual word orders (inversion) and many more”; (2) “self-reflexivity of the text and its individual linguistic signs; the thematization of poetry in the poem itself”; (3) “addressing the reader directly; the directness of literary communication; the structural dominance of personal pronouns, especially those of first and second person”; (4) “a particularly condensed use of words due to repetition (leitmotifs) and deliberate variation, as well as the great relevance of figurativeness (metaphor, allegory, symbols)” (ibid., 21).

These characteristics of poetry can also be found in many experimental media artworks, and they correspond to Russian Formalism’s notion of literariness. By employing these different devices, poetry “conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness [. . .], i.e. a heightened form of discourse” (Brogan 1993, 938), which alludes to the Russian Formalist linking of habitualized recognition to everyday language and its disturbance by poetic language. Deviations from everyday discourse through rhyme, self-reflexivity, aesthetic density, and the immediate address of the recipient all contribute to the defamiliarization of perception.

Media art’s poetic features need to be considered in the context of speech and script (see Chapter 3). Poetry is a semi-oral genre situated between written text and song. The song, an oral presentation of words often accompanied by music, is the oldest form of lyric poetry. The word ‘lyric’ originates from the lyre (*lyra*), an ancient string music instrument, and resonates today in the term ‘lyrics,’ as used for popular music. Since the Early Modern period, though, poetry has primarily appeared in written form: as the graphic representation of words on a framing white ground, as printed poems distributed in books. This change from spoken to written text implies a different cultural practice as well as a shift in mentality away from the collective performance of a literary event towards an individual, silent contemplative reading of written texts. The modes of oral and written text “are not entirely congruent,” since “the visual text is not a mere transcript or notation-system for the oral text”; both are rather “two versions of the prior, originary, abstract entity called ‘the poem’” (ibid., 940). Tension created by this inherent ambiguity may be considered one of the causes of poeticity, of poetry’s aesthetic potential.

The electronic age has resulted in an increased use of oral communication, which Walter Ong refers to as the age of ‘secondary orality’ (cf. Ong 1982). As a consequence, the acoustic dimension of lyric poetry has regained relevance through recording and distribution technologies. Its aural dimension has been emphasized by the renewed popularity throughout the 20th century

of live performances of literature—from avant-garde happenings to contemporary spoken word poetry. Today, the internet plays a pivotal role in the distribution of both written and spoken poetry. As a result, poetry has increasingly become an audiovisual genre (cf. Benthien 2017a). There is also a growing spectrum of intermedial art forms, in which poems as well as lyric structures and elements appear without the works being classified as lyric poetry: ‘poetry clips,’ ‘poetry films,’ or ‘poem films,’ for example (cf. Orphal 2014). These observations are important with regard to media artworks that use technological advances and present poetic structures in audiovisual moving images. A certain type of media artwork, moreover, is often referred to as possessing ‘poetic’ qualities that are not necessarily language based.

### ***Excess Structuring: Language Use in Poetry***

The Formalists refer to ‘poetic’ language both in the general sense of ‘literary’ language and in reference to the specific genre of poetry. Therefore, Shklovsky’s general description of poetic language as “a difficult, ‘laborious,’ impeding language” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 13) constituted by the device of ‘complicating form’ accounts in particular for poetry and underlines its forceful impact on the readers’ (or listeners’) perception. In poetry, words continuously shift between sound and meaning. This characteristic is found in media art as well, as the iteration of single words often leads to the oscillation of awareness between the signifier and the signified.

Poetry’s complex structuring is often considered one of its striking features. Jan Mukařovský regards not only sound and meaning as connected to each other but describes how all elements within a poetic work are “intertwined” and linked to other components through “multiple interrelationships” (Mukařovský 2007, 21). The foregrounding of one element influences all other elements. As Rudolf Helmstetter implies, a lyric poem is defined by exactly these relationships:

*The specific technique of poetry is, in particular, activating primary and secondary linguistic forms (phonetic and rhythmic prosodic forms, grammar—that is, morphological and lexical semantic forms—as well as phraseology, tropes and figures of speech), uncovering them, making them productive, densifying them, reshaping and to exhibiting them. [...] The specific characteristic of a poetic text is that it significantly increases the number of structural levels of speech, which make it possible to establish complex relationships between those structural elements. (Helmstetter 1995, 30)*

Both literariness and poeticity in the narrow sense are created through the intensified and concentrated use of the linguistic material. The shaping of primary and secondary linguistic forms results in an increased density and complexity of their ‘interrelationships.’ Helmstetter implicitly refers to Jürgen Link’s idea of lyric poetry as the paradigm for excessively structured literary texts:

*That which seems to constitute the ‘tone’ [Stimmung] in poetry is based on the fact that the way poetic texts are constituted tends to layer plural levels of meaning on top of each other, i.e. multiple partial structures in the manner of a multi-vocal musical movement. In this way, a synthetic texture is created that we will call excess structuring. (Link 1977, 245)*

This notion of excess structuring blends in with Shklovsky’s device of complicating form and Roman Jakobson’s concept of the dominant and the poetic function (see Chapter 2, Section 1). Helmstetter remarks that the poem “establishes a communicative framework, within which the

poetic function can be set free to dominate” and that it is “the place where language is free to engage with itself” (Helmstetter 1995, 34f). When language refers to itself, it rebels against the ‘compulsive transparency’ of habitualized communication and reveals itself as artistic material.

The ‘impeding’ language of poetry is a result of the excess structuring on multiple levels. If the poetic function is the dominant, the succession and linearity of the syntagmatic flow is fundamentally obstructed and causes perception to be deferred or delayed by corresponding elements and by similarities on many different levels. As Ralf Simon states:

A horizontalization of the principles of equivalence takes place. For instance, the vertical dimension of a rhyme lexicon or a metrical order is laid upon the horizontal axis of time and achieves a structure maximization that forces the language that appears against its transitory moment into a permanent retardation, because its sequence becomes a repetition of equivalent paradigm principles. (Simon 2009, 183)

Poetic devices create relations of equivalence that structurally correspond to the syntactic relations ruled by grammar. These relations of equivalence exist on disparate levels; for instance, two words beginning with the same letter or consisting of the same number of letters in two separate lines may be presented one above the other in the poem’s layout. Poetry is also the genre that includes the most ‘non-linguistic’ visual features, the graphic composition of verse (cf. Fabb 2010). As stated in Chapter 3, Section 2, Russian Formalism considered layout a “graphic device” (Tomashevsky 1985 [1928], 113) in itself, which will be important to the allusions to concrete poetry in media art that are explored later. In resonance with Simon’s model, Harald Fricke distinguishes three dispositional effects created by the use of language in literature to build up relationships of either “similarity,” “opposition,” or “ordered sequence” (Fricke 1981, 93–98). Although he speaks of literature in general, these features occur primarily in poetry. Similarity is achieved by means of parallelism, repetition, and mirroring, among other things (cf. *ibid.*, 94f). Opposition is an effect of both semantic contrast and rhetorical figures such as antitheses, oxymora, contradictions, and dissonances. Ordered sequences are the result of morphological or semantic augmentation (cf. *ibid.*, 95).

In Russian Formalism and Prague School Structuralism, verse and rhythm are the features of poetry that receive the most attention. With regard to this, it must be stressed that the Formalists often speak of rhythm with regard to a rather strict phenomenon of meter, the specific emphatic structure of a given line or stanza, for instance. The Formalists’ approach to versification is based on the two assumptions. First, that verse creates the core “unity of poetic language,” which is, second, ruled by a “*dominanta*,” “the dominant or organizing property.” The dominant as the “constructive factor of versification” (Tynyanov 1981 [1924], 31) is its rhythmic pattern. It is the central device resulting in a “speech which has been made dynamic” (*ibid.*, 51) and also the technique “which modifies and deforms all other components and thus exerts an impact upon the semantic and morphological as well as the phonetic levels of poetic language” (Erich 1980, 212f).

In contrast to ordinary speech, in which rhythm—here usually termed ‘prosody’—is only “a secondary phenomenon,” in poetry it is “a primary and ‘self-valuable’ quality” (*ibid.*, 213). Formalism regards rhythm as shaping the elements of a verse, letting them “interact, overlap, crisscross” and bring to the fore hidden meaning, “new semantic nuances,” or “long-forgotten connotations” (*ibid.*, 225). Rhythm is consequently one key factor in creating the effects of deautomatization and literariness. It is the result of the interplay of automatization and deautomatization with regard to rhythmic patterns. Referring to Jakobson as well as to the literary theorists René Wellek (the Prague School Structuralists) and Austin Warren (New Criticism),

Victor Erlich explains: “[T]he rhythm of a poem hinges not so much on the actual distribution of the rhythmical accents as on our anticipation of their recurrence at certain intervals” (ibid., 213). A rhythmic pattern alone does not create the literariness of a poem. The use of a certain verse establishes an iterated rhythm as its own rule, but it is only through deviations from this rule that the rhythm becomes palpable (cf. Tynyanov 1981 [1924], 34). That is also the case with meter, especially in classical poem forms (e.g. the alexandrine sonnet or the romance stanza). That is, rhythm and meter can be considered automatisms that must be defamiliarized in order to remain felt. Jakobson refers to the effect of this strategic automatization and deautomatization as a “moment of frustrated expectation” (Jakobson 1960, 366): Readers (or listeners) become used to the norm and anticipate its structures so that each deviation results in a frustration—a frustration, however, that renews the perception.

### ***Vertical Compositions: Poetic Structures in the Audiovisual Arts***

In media art, the characteristics of poetry noted earlier are adapted on the level of written or spoken language. Creating effects of defamiliarization, they sharpen the viewers’ awareness of the ways in which language is usually used as a tool for smooth communication and the creation of straightforward meaning. However, media art also features many non-linguistic elements that contribute to the deautomatization of perception, predominantly manipulated images, excessive sound, or a complex montage. As introduced in Chapter 2, Section 2, Russian Formalism also engaged in developing a ‘poetics of cinema.’ The Formalists’ considerations regarding the art of early film are essential to the aesthetics and formal features of poetry in media art.

Throughout the 20th century, many critics have used poetry as an analogy to free film from the connotations of easy entertainment. Susan Sontag, for instance, equates the works of Louis Buñuel and Jean Cocteau to poets like “Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Lautréamont” (Sontag 1969, 247). P. Adams Sitney coined the term “lyrical film” and uses the term “film poem” to create an analogy between the relationship of experimental film “to the commercial narrative cinema” and the relationship “of poetry to fiction” (Sitney 1974, vii). As Alan Rees summarizes the debate: “In the widest perspective, the experimental cinema can be seen to expand the poetic art which the drama film subsumes in its drive to fiction” (Rees 1999, 34). The attempt to establish film as a serious art form is especially evident in film discourse from the 1940s through the 1960s:

By emphasizing the relationship of unusual cinematic forms to poetry (and also to painting, collage, and music), *Art in Cinema*, *Cinema 16*, and the network of film societies that imitated them were implicitly arguing for the kinds of attention and patience normally accorded to serious works of art. (MacDonald 2007, 7)

Implicit in these statements is a problematic ‘highbrow’ understanding of artistic film and the poetic, assigning a higher cultural value to experimental art than to ‘lowbrow’ entertainment. Instead of using the ‘poetic’ as an easy value judgment, it is much more fruitful to regard the term as a way to uncover specific characteristics. Aside from a poetic use of language, poetic elements in media art can be found in a certain kind of structuring of images and sound. When used metaphorically, the attribute ‘poetic’ can moreover refer to a certain kind of mood, intensity, or subjectivity expressed within an audiovisual artwork.

Russian Formalism paves the way for an understanding of poetic film as related to a specific way of structuring. To review briefly, Shklovsky distinguishes between “films of prose” and



“films of poetry.” Films of poetry are “verse-like” and lack a plot (cf. Shklovsky 1973 [1927], 130). Compositional means—parallelism, recurring images, or transforming images into symbols—dominate in a “poetic formal” resolution (cf. *ibid.*, 129). Double-exposure, for instance, is a “poetic device,” according to Shklovsky, of “formal rather than semantic derivation” (*ibid.*, 130). Shklovsky assumes that the distinction between the two literary genres, poetry, and prose, lies in the “greater range of geometric devices” (*ibid.*, 129) in poetry, which can be compared to corresponding features in film. His statements resonate with the ‘excess structuring’ of poetry, mentioned earlier, as a literary, linguistic quality that also applies to the non-linguistic elements and composition of the poetic film.

This approach to poetic structuring resurfaces among the theories and practices of various filmmakers. The avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren bases her understanding of poetic film on a media-transcending concept of poetry or, rather, poeticness (cf. Orphal 2014, 48). Poetry, also understood by Deren as a specific “way of structuring” (Deren in Maas and Vogel 2000 [1953], 185), creates a ‘vertical structure’ in literary texts as well as in films that confronts the horizontal, linear order typical of drama or prose:

The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by ‘a poetic structure’), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a ‘vertical’ investigation of a situation, in what probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means. (*ibid.*, 174)

In film, as in literature, poetry establishes what Deren calls a ‘vertical composition’: a “textual montage, one in which juxtaposition leads to impressionistically attained insight free from the linear strictures inherent in dramatic form” (Kane 2009, 15). Deren claims that short films are especially “comparable to lyric poems” because “it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time” and that these films are “completely a ‘vertical,’” or what she would call “a poetic construct” (Deren in Maas and Vogel 2000 [1953], 175). Scott MacDonald has explained “*horizontal* [as] the forms of meaning made clear through the developing narrative of the work” and “*vertical* [as] the multiple *layers* of meaning that accrue in forms of expression normally considered poetic” (MacDonald 2007, 8). Or to refer to Sitney’s summary: Deren “postulated two axes of temporality in cinema: the *horizontal* as the development of plot over sequential time and the *vertical*, or the exploration of the associations of a moment” (Sitney 2015, 108). Orphal has argued convincingly that there is a close similarity between Deren’s concept of vertical film and Jakobson’s poetic “principle of equivalence” (Jakobson 1960, 358; cf. Orphal 2014, 49). Furthermore, the concept of vertical film recalls Simon’s notion of the ‘horizontalization of the principles of equivalence’ in poetry (see Chapter 2, Section 1). Deren describes a structure where the ‘axis of combination’ in film follows, as in poetry, a non-linear, ‘vertical’ mode, so the poetic function dominates. Simon’s formula of a ‘horizontalization’ aims at the same dynamics, observed from the opposite viewpoint.

As mentioned earlier, this aesthetic debate on film as poetry ignores linguistic considerations. Instead, the concept of the ‘lyrical’ or the ‘poetic’ is mostly linked to the presentation of images and sound, not to spoken or written poetic texts (cf. Tyler 1970, 191f). The juxtaposition of the novel and poetry is frequently compared to that of narrative film and experimental film, focusing on aspects as plot, length, reception, or self-referentiality (cf. Orphal 2014, 51). Against the background of conventionalized viewing patterns created by the experience of narrative cinema, the experience of a ‘plotless’ film may strike viewers as defamiliarizing. The Neoformalist film scholars

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson use the term “poetic film” when claiming that films with such an “associational form” are “working somewhat as poetry does” (Bordwell and Thompson 2013, 378), and they argue that it is comparable to the use of tropes in poetry: “Here the metaphorical implications that poetry conveys through language are presented in images and sounds” (ibid.). The associational form is based on four main principles: (1) the “principle of grouping” images into distinct parts; (2) the principle of variation from part to part (by changing the pace, for instance); (3) the repetition of certain motifs, “to reinforce associations”; and (4) the fact that this form “strongly invites interpretation” and “the assigning of general meanings to the film” (ibid., 379). Bordwell and Thompson’s approach implies the interconnectedness of a film’s form and its function. The term “association” evokes notions of subjectivity that recall the tradition of interpreting lyric poetry as the ‘subjective’ genre. However, Bordwell and Thompson focus on the audience, while the theories of subjectivity in the next subsection relate to the subjectivity of the filmmaker alone.

### ***Lyric Subjectivity***

The comparison of poetry to experimental film is also often used rather metaphorically. In such instances, the terms ‘poetic’ or ‘lyrical’ are used in the sense of ‘expressive’ or ‘atmospheric.’ This may be rooted in the tradition of characterizing lyric poetry as the ‘subjective genre’ of emotions and sentiments. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, this understanding is a holdover from the sentimentalism of the late 18th century and the literary movements that followed, such as Romanticism. Two problems arise from this concept of poetry: First, the ‘lyrical subject’ and the factual author are often (implicitly or explicitly) equated, and second, it limits the genre to a ‘lyricism’ that is particularly associated with personal emotions or nature perceived as sublime. From this viewpoint, a poem is “an isolated poet-subject’s confrontation with an overpowering natural environment” that results in “the dissolution of the boundary between the subject and object in the ‘atmosphere’” (Burdorf 1997, 5).

Such a view of lyric poetry has been strongly influenced by Hegel, who claims that poetry does not represent “the thing itself” but its “*inner* vision and feeling”; that is, the dominant feature of a poem is the “*subjective* side of the poet’s spiritual work of creating and forming his material” (Hegel 1998, 1111). According to Hegel and other early 19th-century thinkers, the poet’s “individual subjective life” (ibid., 1114) constitutes the theme of the poem:

The principal condition for the lyric poet is [...] that he shall entirely assimilate and make his own the objective subject-matter. For the truly lyrical poet lives in himself, treats circumstances in accordance with his own poetic individual outlook, and now, however variously his inner life may be fused with the world confronting him and with its situations, complexities, and fates, what he nevertheless manifests in his portrayal of this material is only the inherent and independent life of his feelings and meditations. (ibid., 1118)

Hegel emphasizes the individuality and subjectivity of the poet and the dependence of the poetic work on the poet’s inner feelings and thoughts. With regard to English and American poetry, Virginia Jackson frames this “lyricization of poetry” as a “historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric” (Jackson 2008, 183). She argues that the majority of poems before and after the ‘long 19th century’ do not fit into this rather narrow segment: “The definition of a lyric as a short, nonnarrative poem depicting the subjective experience of a speaker became the normative definition also—thanks to lyricization—of poetry” (ibid.).

Though the category of the ‘self’ and the grammatical first-person singular are constitutive for the majority of lyric poems, it is problematic to attribute an essential subjectivity to the ‘lyric I.’ One has to distinguish between the empirical author and the lyric I, and to consider that the lyric I is nothing but a linguistic form for the first-person subject (cf. Burdorf 1997, 189f). The lyric I is an “empty deixis,” as Kaspar Spinner has suggested, relating Karl Bühler’s concept of deixis to the idea of ‘gaps’ or ‘blanks’ from reception aesthetics (cf. Spinner 1975, 17). The empty deixis gains its relevance through the reception process only, in which the reader fills in the gaps. Heinz Schlaffer has claimed that the ‘first person’ of a poem—if no factual names or identifying features are mentioned—is simply the person reading or speaking the poem in question (cf. Schlaffer 1995, 38):

Since the ‘I’ of the poem can be neither named nor described, it seems likely that the only ‘I’ present takes its place: that of the reader who reads the poem, aloud or silently, to him or herself or into him or herself. Therefore, whoever speaks or recites the poem, be it the poet him or herself, the singer, the reciter or the reader, bestows consistency and identity upon the grammatical person of the pronoun through his or her physical presence, which are admittedly themselves only fictive consistency and formal identity as well. (ibid., 41)

Therefore, the concept of an “anonymous” lyric I is available to various first-person speakers (cf. ibid., 47). The common English term ‘lyric persona’ avoids outdated notions of lyric subjectivity, with its “dominance of the emotive and the expressive” (Helmstetter 1995, 27). The term ‘persona’ is more open and, with its roots in ancient drama, refers to notions of role-playing, masks, and other temporary forms of embodiment.

However, when dealing with audiovisual arts, some critics and artists repeatedly refer to subjectivity as the allegedly main feature of lyric poetry when considering its attributed correspondence to avant-garde and experimental film (cf. Kane 2009, 2f; Sitney 2015, 5f). Apart from the various formal analogies between poetry and experimental film discussed previously, critics have argued for a comparison with regard to perceptive and articulatory levels, mostly on the side of the artist. For instance, Deren considers poetry, like avant-garde-film, as “an approach to experience” and argues, as demonstrated in an earlier quote, that both arts are not dealing “with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means” (Deren in Maas and Vogel 2000 [1953], 173f). Pier Paolo Pasolini, the controversial Italian filmmaker and writer, envisioned the ‘cinema of poetry’ as

the cinema which adopts a particular technique just as a poet adopts a particular technique when he writes verse. If you open a book of poetry, you can see the style immediately, the rhymes and all that: you see the language [*lingua*] as an instrument, or you count the syllables of a verse. The equivalent of what you see in a text of poetry you can also find in a cinema text, through the stylemes, i.e. through the camera movement and the montage. So to make films is to be a poet. (Pasolini in Stack 1969, 153f)

In his influential essay entitled “Il ‘cinema della poesia’” (“The ‘Cinema of Poetry,’” 1965/1976) Pasolini coined the neologism ‘im-signs’—*imsegni* in Italian, meaning ‘image-signs’—to describe “the world of memory and of dreams” (Pasolini 1976, 1). Artistic cinema is grounded in a specific cinematographic language that he calls a (visual) “language of poetry”:

[T]he linguistic archetypes of im-signs are the images of memory and dream, that is, the images of communication with oneself [. . .]. These archetypes consequently give an

immediate basi[s] of 'subjectivity' to the im-signs, the mark of belonging totally to the poetic. So that the tendency of the cinematic language should be expressly subjective and lyrical. (ibid., 4)

Alluding to the tradition of lyric subjectivity, Pasolini considers the cinematographic "language of poetry" as "extremely subjective" and contrasts it with a "language of narrative prose" more often found in the history of cinema, which he characterizes as "extremely objective" (ibid., 4).

Very much in line with Pasolini, the filmmaker Andrej Tarkovsky also refers to the concept of "poetic cinema" (Tarkovsky 1989, 69) and repeatedly integrates concrete poems into his films (cf. Orphal 2014, 53; Sitney 2015, 67–100). For him, the 'poetic' is a guiding aesthetic yet a subjective principle: "When I speak of poetry," he remarks, "I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality" (Tarkovsky 1989, 21). His theory is reminiscent of Shklovsky's differentiation between a 'film of prose' and a 'film of poetry,' in other words, "the necessity [. . .] to work not in the prosaic, plot-centered form, but in the 'compositional', poetic form" (ibid., 101). Tarkovsky links an understanding of poetic structuring not only to the subjectivity of the filmmaker but also to the effects of the poetic film on the viewer: "Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active," and it is this "associative linking, which allows for an affective as well as rational appraisal" (ibid., 20).

A critical point introduced by Pasolini and taken up extensively in Sitney's recent monograph *The Cinema of Poetry* (cf. Sitney 2015, 24–35) is the claim that a particular form of poetic cinema makes intense use of 'free indirect discourse.' According to Pasolini, the author "penetrates entirely into the spirit of his character, of whom he thus adopts not only the psychology but also the language" (Pasolini 1976, 5). In his view, the qualities of this "free indirect subjective" establish the "tradition of a 'technical language of poetry'" in cinema that is "not of a linguistic nature, but of a stylistic one" (ibid., 7). It can be characterized by the following adjectives: "oniric [dream-like], barbaric, irregular, aggressive, visionary" (ibid.). What is problematic about the category of free indirect discourse with regard to the poetic qualities of film is that it mixes a narratological category into the realm of theories of the lyric. Free indirect discourse is a form of transposed figural speech—be it spoken or thought—in the third-person singular preterit indicative (seldom in the first person) without an initiating *verbum dicendi* (cf. Martinez and Scheffel 1999, 51). Ambiguous sentences in third-person singular blur the voice of the narrator and the character. For this reason, free indirect discourse is also referred to as 'blended discourse,' a 'dual-voice phenomenon.' It is an intermediate narrative form, oscillating between direct and indirect speech. Contrary to the modes of stream of consciousness and inner monolog, there is a fusion of the different *loci* of speech and perception of the narrating subject and the experiencing character (cf. ibid., 187; Lahn and Meister 2008, 129).

Sitney rightly observes Pasolini's lack of differentiation between the modes of poetry and prose in this regard (cf. Sitney 2015, 15), and furthermore points to Pasolini's "compounding" of free indirect discourse with other, only partly related, narrative modes, namely "first person narration, interior monolog, indirect discourse, and even dialogue" (ibid., 17). Nevertheless, Sitney adopts Pasolini's idea of the 'free indirect subjective' as his guiding concept throughout his book, and in so doing he turns poetry into the epitome of subjectivity. He claims, for instance, that the filmic adaptation of the literary device of free indirect discourse fulfills several functions: it "accentuates the subjective point of view in 'objective' prose narratives" and it is "the site of the coalescence of autobiographical poetry with the perspective of [the] protagonists" (ibid., 5–7). Furthermore, "the disappearance of visible protagonists from the screen [. . .] displac[e]s the free indirect point of view to the creative persona of the filmmaker behind the photography and editing (and, in some cases, the voice-over)" (ibid., 12).

This indicates that Sitney adheres to an understanding of poetry as the subjective genre and identifies this subjectivity both on the levels of protagonists and director. Within this approach the filmmaker himself is considered as ‘first-person protagonist,’ which Sitney exemplifies with regard to American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage (cf. Sitney 1974, 174–210; Sitney 2015, 149–194). According to this ideology of the filmmaker as a self-expressing, creative genius, when watching a lyrical film the audience ‘sees the filmmaker’s experience of seeing’ (cf. Sitney 1974, 180). This foregrounding display of vision leads to heightened self-reflexivity and also to the opacity of the medium: “[T]he film-maker working in the lyrical mode affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting for the most part its traditional use as a window into illusion” (ibid). Or, as Pasolini puts it, the cinema of poetry is “making the camera felt” (Pasolini 1976, 10)—and not concealing its presence and thereby aspiring to transparency. These observations apparently resonate with the characteristics of lyric poetry, where linguistic deviations or deformations are often accompanied by an increased self-referentiality—an attention to the act of uttering as well as to the material substance of language.

When considering the category of the poetic with regard to the non-linguistic features of media art, notions of the artwork’s self-reflexivity become relevant. However, equating the filmmaker’s or artist’s perception with the perspective of the camera is debatable. Also, the majority of works that refer to lyric poetry on a structural level do not activate categories of subjectivity, sentiment, mood, or atmosphere. These categories are relevant only to a special segment of media artworks that are classified by artists, critics, or curators as ‘video poems’ or ‘lyrical fusions’ of images, music, and text. These artworks explore strategies of translating the aesthetics of poetry into audiovisual time-based art and play with the notion of poetry as a subjective genre. With regard to these artworks, one might attribute their audiovisual expressions, sentiments, moods, and perceptions to the single perceptive and articulatory instance of the artist. However, with regard to the artworks discussed in the final subsection, literariness as a result of strategies of defamiliarization becomes a helpful tool to rethink the notion of the poetic image: It allows the emphasis of the observations to shift from the subjectivity of the filmmaker to the experience of the viewer.

### **Visual Poetry and Media Art**

Allusions to visual poetry in media art come in many forms. Before we investigate audiovisual moving images, a contextualization is helpful. ‘Concrete poetry’ is an umbrella term for any kind of poetry that lays bare language as material. The Latin adjective *concretus* means, among other things, ‘compounded,’ ‘condensed,’ or ‘object-like.’ In general, concrete poetry abandons traditional forms of verse, meter, and rhyme in order to accentuate the vocal and visual ‘figurativeness’ of language and script. Though concrete poems can take on various forms, the aesthetic feature that defines this subgenre is the self-reflexive foregrounding of the linguistic structure:

[C]oncrete poetry takes the material of language (letters, syllables, words), often detached from their semantic and syntax, as a starting point for the artistic composition, in order to create diverse text types, where special typographical, acoustic or visual modes of presentation dominate. (Hartung 2007, 328)

In concrete poetry, the aesthetic function is dominant, so that language itself is the “general topic of concrete authors” (Schmitz-Emans 1997, 219), who negotiate its possibilities and limitations, its peculiarities and paradoxes. “Language itself is called ‘concrete’ where it becomes its own object” (ibid., 176). The materials and the subjects of concrete poems are the visual or the acoustic dimensions of language. One can further differentiate between visual poetry, including

calligrams or figural poems, and sound poetry (discussed extensively in Chapter 3, Section 1). In art theory, concreteness is related to but not synonymous with abstract art. Originally, the De Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg coined the term ‘concrete art,’ which artists such as Wassily Kandinsky further developed. Similar to concrete poetry, concrete art is characterized by “the ambition of overcoming the representational and surrogate character of signs [. . .]. Ultimately, it is about the utopia of a pure presence realized through the artwork” (ibid., 181).

In visual poetry, the design of the text—including its graphic appearance and figurative shape—is the core element of the artistic concept. An example is Eugen Gomringer’s famous poem “Silencio” (1954). The poem is set so the text is justified, and its content is the Portuguese word for ‘silence’ iterated 14 times and is distributed almost evenly over five lines. However, in the very middle of the poem, in line three, the word is missing. The meaning of the word is cast into a concrete shape: an empty space, a gap, or an absence of signifiers. Silence. In contrast to such forms of concrete poetry that generate poetic signification through the display of text elements, a calligram is based on a poetic and versified text, often in traditional meter and form. It receives additional meaning through the arrangement of the lines, which often represents a symbolic object, such as a cross, a tree, or a vessel. Similar to our observations in Chapter 3, Section 2, concrete visual texts possess “image qualities” in that they “do not only want to be read, but also seen” (ibid., 186), and as text-images they attempt to eliminate the difference between succession, linearity, and simultaneity (cf. ibid., 188). In visual poetry the distinction between time-based and space-based art forms is eliminated. This intermedial oscillation between pictorial symbolism and text-generated meaning results in poeticity.

The media artist **Bruce Nauman** continuously reflects on the properties of language. Many of his multifaceted pieces in particular refer to concrete poetry. As a self-described “‘sculptor’ of language” (Nauman in Labaume 1997, 36), he works with idioms, wordplay, homonyms, palindromes, anagrams, and other elements of poetry and rhetoric (cf. Storr 1994; Melcher 1999) while often referring to the aesthetic of advertisements and consumer culture. *One Hundred Live and Die* (US 1984) is a neon light installation that uses both technology and semantics to create complex, unsettling configurations of meaning. The installation performs its self-referential and descriptive title in four columns displayed on a large board with 100 short, profane, partly tautological verb pairs, some of them forming internal rhymes. The grammatical status of these propositions remains ambiguous: Are they messages, orders, or mere descriptive verb combinations? The first column starts with the pairs: “LIVE AND DIE | DIE AND DIE | SHIT AND DIE | PISS AND DIE | EAT AND DIE | SLEEP AND DIE | HEAR AND DIE | CRY AND DIE.” In the second column, the first words of these pairs are repeated, only this time combined with the word “live.” The third and fourth column repeat the same principle of repetition and mirroring structure, pairing more verbs and adjectives with the words ‘live’ and ‘die.’ Different combinations light up at random: At times whole columns flash brightly; at other times, only single-word combinations are emphasized. They appear phrase-like, as if specific thoughts or events are erratically becoming visible. At the end of a cycle, all 100 messages light up at once, overwhelming the viewer with information, presenting more to read than can be taken in at once. Nauman’s neon signs create a transitory, virtual state, activating a conceptual orality of script: “His ideas are embodied in neon signs, objects that, because they flash on and off, seem to have little material substance and instead turn into pure surface—writing in space, which is repeatedly erased and rewritten” (Van Bruggen 1988, 112). *One Hundred Live and Die* presents the existential question of life and death as a calculable and yet uncannily haphazard pattern. The ‘on’ and ‘off’ of the neon light script turns into a self-referential symbol for life—energy—and death (cf. Blume 2010, 39). In addition, contrary to Western conventions of text alignment, Nauman sets his short phrases aligned to the right. This suggests, on the one hand,

an emphasis on the end—on death—as an inevitable fate; on the other hand, the ‘die’ column appears before the ‘live’ column: Nauman not only defamiliarizes the Western viewer’s conventions of reading, but in the same step he estranges the chronology of life events.

**Peter Weibel’s** video *Augentexte* [Eye Texts] (AT 1975) also works with simple word combinations. The images show close-ups of a woman’s left eye or both of her eyes. When her eyes are closed, handwritten words become visible on her eyelids. The first word, “SEE,” has a double meaning as a noun in German of either ‘sea’ or ‘lake,’ as well as the verb ‘to see,’ its sole English meaning. The second word is “STEIN” (stone), the third “NACHT” (night). Subsequently, the syllables “HIM-MEL” (heaven) appear across both eyelids, followed by “LIEBE” and “LOVE,” and “FICK” and “FUCK.” Writing is depicted as something that is read off of, not with the eyes. Moreover, seeing and reading are juxtaposed: Viewers gaze at the open eye, while the closed eye is read. As the eye opens and closes, both forms of perception alternate and overrule each other. The order and combination of the words create a rudimentary poetic effect. This reductionism recalls the aesthetic principles of Expressionism as well as of the minimalism and abstraction of concrete poetry. Furthermore, the writing is animated by blinking, so it becomes rhythmic. At first, the words change with every blink of the eye. Later, the word ‘fuck’ remains visible on one eyelid. The eye opens and closes in an increasingly faster rhythm, so that the movement holds obscene connotations. This might be a pun, or even a nod towards Georges Bataille’s sexually explicit narrative *L’histoire de l’œil* (*Story of the Eye*, 1928). In Weibel’s video, signifier and body movement intermingle: The eyes perform what they seem to be ‘talking’ about. *Augentexte* realizes the media-specific passing of time in the constant sequence of a blink of an eye. With regard to the human body, the blink of an eye, the pulse, and the rhythm of the breath represent the smallest automatic units of time. Thus, the time-based medium of video is taken over by the anthropological rhythm of performed concrete poetry.

More recent adoptions of the aesthetics of concrete poetry can be found in the later videos of the American concept artist **Lawrence Weiner**, whose works are often text based, whether he turns script into self-referential sculptures or includes written texts in films and videos. *Deep Blue Sky* (US 2002) is a silent video that playfully combines lines, color fields, and elements of moving script, evoking the geometric forms of Constructivist painting, such as the black bars and geometric color fields of Piet Mondrian. Epigrams such as “A NASTY WAY || TO START THE DAY,” “WHEN IN DOUBT | THROW IT OUT” float across the screen and create



FIGURE 4.1.2 Peter Weibel. *Augentexte*. 1975.

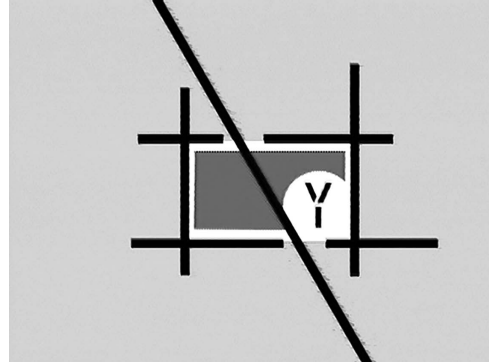


FIGURE 4.1.3 Lawrence Weiner. *Deep Blue Sky*. 2002.

linguistic wordplay and rhyme, as do aphorisms similar to those of Jenny Holzer. Those short texts demand thorough reflection from the viewer but disappear quickly: “TO CHANGE IT NOT TO MAKE IT DIFFERENT”; “AESTHETICS EQUALLING ETHICS IS A NASTY WAY TO START THE DAY” (the latter picking up the rhyme established earlier). Moreover, poetic verses arranged in stanzas (each represented in a new screen) ascribe a personification to the geometric shapes that float across the screen:

CHEERS HAVE BEEN HEARD  
 IN THE STREETS  
 AS THE OVAL BEATS THE TRIANGLE  
 &  
 THE TIDE BEGINS TO TURN

The agency attributed to the triangle and the oval alludes to the Russian Supremacist El Lissitzky’s lithographic poster *Beat the Whites With the Red Wedge* (1919), in which a red triangle pierces a white circle. In Weiner’s work, the text elements are integrated into the visual composition in many different ways: as whole words, as developing sequences of letters, seemingly typed with a typewriter, scrolling across the screen or appearing as whole blocks. *Deep Blue Sky* thematizes their presence as well as their absence and, consequently, the role and task of the recipients as both viewers and readers.

**Christian Keinstar**’s 17-minute video performance installation *Ohne Titel* [Untitled] (DE 2005) employs devices from concrete poetry and kinetic script in unexpected ways. The work is intended to be presented in a black cube in which the audience is confronted with a large screen and the piercing sound of helicopter blades. The video projection shows a huge, circular, rotating neon sign, which is suspended from a helicopter hovering in the air in the dark. The neon sign’s diabolical slogan, “DEVIL IS MY MOTOR,” is straightforward and brief. In the tradition of Nauman’s neon works, the letters appear in bright flashes to reveal various messages. The ‘satanic’ statement of being driven by the devil could be referring to the artist’s self-fashioning, claiming that he is forced by dark powers to act as the presumed mouthpiece of evil. On a closer examination, the phrase is an advertising slogan that foils nothing less than the much-trumpeted autonomy of art. As they are lit up in varying order and at varying speeds, the spinning letters create anagrammatic word ensembles and mutations.

Instead of “DEVIL,” suddenly only “EVIL” is visible and other phrases can be made out, such as “LIFE IS MY MOTOR,” “VIDEO IS EVIL,” “ORDER ME,” or “SOLD ME.” The gaze that





FIGURE 4.1.4 Christian Keinstar. *Ohne Titel*. 2005.

follows the writing is thrown into a tailspin, swirling with a rush of cognition, forcing viewers to engage more intensely with the artwork as the linearity of reading becomes circular. The claims and demands are repeated like a liturgical pop-mantra until meaning and movement fuse. Meanwhile, the noisy yet monotonous techno-rhythm of the rotating blades creates a buzzing tension, a latent threat. This contrasts oddly with the almost cheerful swaying of the iridescent neon advertising, which evokes a merry carousel.

The helicopter's acoustic force attests to the physical energy that is expended, contrasting with the vehicle's hovering motionlessness: Since it will never leave the airfield, the advertising slogan reaches no one. It is an entirely 'uneconomical' spectacle, an absurd performance, put on solely for the video camera and spectators in the gallery. Neon as a device taken from advertising moves from the public space into the gallery, where it takes on the quality of a commercial. Oscillating against the black background, the neon sign is situated in a bleak, interstitial world devoid of meaning. Yet this conceptual void sheds light on the blurred line that separates art and commerce and at times seems barely perceptible. The almost total invisibility of the helicopter, the literal 'sign bearer,' points to the disappearance of this separation as well. The notions that art is the promise of truth and that consumption promises the fulfillment of desires become indistinguishable, or so Keinstar's circular message seems to state in a truly diabolical fashion.

A final example of how media art reflects and transforms concrete poetry is **Cia Rinne's** *archives zaroum* (DK 2008), an internet project that the Finnish-Swedish poet developed with the Danish visual artist Christian Yde Frostholm. The work is presented on the Danish platform Afsnit P, a virtual exhibition space for visual poetry and intermedia art. The interactive animation is based on Rinne's book of poetry, *zaroum* (2001), its poetic language visually and conceptually influenced by Fluxus, Dada, and Wittgensteinian language play. In *archives zaroum*, users click through different units of content that are organized by the device of folder cards. Each folder card has both a dominant vertical and a dominant horizontal dimension: The (horizontal) linearity is most strongly characterized by lines, boxes, or text elements, which at times move in



FIGURE 4.1.5 Cia Rinne. *archives zaroum*. 2001.

the opposite direction to the right-to-left of conventional reading—or when the German word *rückwärts* (backwards) is presented as if reflected in a mirror. On a vertical level, the user scrolls down to complete a section of the artwork and move to the next.

Similar to concrete poetry, Rinne exposes the materiality of written signs—or, rather, the correspondences and tensions between materiality and meaning. Unlike a book, the digital version adds animated signs. It is a transformation from “script as *typogramm*” to “script as *typocinetogramm*” (Schaudig 2002, 173f). For instance, when clicking on the words “turn | ON,” the second word, written in capitals and set into a small square, revolves, and only the word “turn” remains stable; it literally ‘turns’ into both a verb and a noun (Figure 4.1.5). Similar to the principle of concrete poetry, the word describes what is happening in real time: a performative action. Click on “ON” as it turns, and it stops when it is upside down, turning the word into ‘NO.’ ‘No’ is not ‘off,’ the logical opposite of ‘on,’ but another form of inversion or negation: The relationship between ‘on’ and ‘no’ is a correspondence only on the level of signifiers. Such relationships of similarity are the dominant poetic device of Rinne’s language use: Click the neologism “zaroum”—with its acoustic proximity to *zäum*—and it suddenly transforms into the rhyming words “varoum” and “daroum.” The spelling of the German words *warum* (why) and *darum* (therefore) is defamiliarized, stressing the phonetic dimension of the word and creating an arbitrary ‘French’ connotation. Click on the phrase “to get her,” and it collapses when two brackets move, pushing in from both sides, so the three words literally appear “(together)” and are transformed into syllables. Such linguistic relationships of equivalence are mirrored, even amplified, by the visual layout. Similarity here refers to proximity in a very physical sense; the words ‘nestle’ up against each other. It is Jakobson’s notion of the ‘palpability of signs’—or, more precisely, the action of becoming palpable—that Rinne’s digital poetry explores. The dominance of the poetic function, a “focus on the message for its own sake” (Jakobson 1960, 356), creates literariness.

The multiplication of structural layers is created both by linguistic means (through correspondences or contradictions of the phonetic, rhythmic prosodic, or grammatical forms; cf.

Helmstetter 1995, 30) and through the visual design, the movement and layout of script. Rinne uses devices such as a sudden exchange that eliminates or adds letters; simulated ‘typing’ or words moving across the screen—horizontally, to the left, to the right, to the middle; and black-and-red ‘typewriter ribbon’ to highlight certain words, thus emphasizing the writing and reading processes. She also employs typewriter script or handwriting, using capital or lowercase letters, and combines script with drawings. The artwork constantly shifts between engaging viewers by requiring them to take certain actions—such as clicking on textual elements—and enforcing their passivity by presenting a surprising and unexpected series of moving words, which continue to move on their own after the viewer activates them.

The transformation of concrete poetry is motivated by the dominant of this work: its multilingualism as it shifts among English, French, and German. Very often the same word could be pronounced differently, depending on the choice of language, creating ambiguity and alienation that is fundamentally confusing to the recipient. On the second folder card, for instance, titled “1,2,3 soleil,” a wordplay slowly unfolds, reminiscent of nonsense poetry: “i am what i am what i ami | a mia mi ami a miami amen.” Some of these words exist in more than one language—they are not clearly German, English, or French—and, because they are non-verbalized and appear all at once, are polyseme. The visual layout and the lowercase letters prompt the always-open question: Where are we? What language is spoken or written? In contrast to verbal speech, in which decisions are made while speaking, script does not dissolve ambiguity. And contrary to the simultaneous poems of the Dadaists—where different people simultaneously recite one text in different languages to create an obscure, dissonant cacophony—polyphony cannot be heard here, only seen.

### **Poetical Practices and Lyrical Speech in Media Art**

A number of media artworks include references to poetical practices and lyrical speech. Media art often features verbalized language that is deployed in a poetic manner through rhythm, repetition, and rhyme, or by creating ‘refrains’ or other acoustic resonances. The artworks discussed in this subsection go beyond the aesthetic effects created by the voice alone and include additional poetic devices or references to poetry as a genre.

Elements of sound poetry frequently appear in works that feature acousmatic voices, as in **Ulrike Rosenbach’s** video performance *Eine Scheibe berühren* [To Touch a Windowpane] (DE 1971). The first part of the piece highlights the assonance of the German words *Scheibe* (glass, windowpane, screen, disk) and *Scheide* (vagina, sheath, borderline), which are chanted simultaneously by two voices (the longer, second part is more or less silent). Captured in blurry black-and-white images is a young woman with her eyes closed, wearing a strange feather construction mounted on her forehead. She tilts her head, as if touching the camera with the feather (Figure 4.1.6). The acousmatic voices of a woman (the artist-performer) and a child (the artist’s daughter) synchronically chant the title phrase, iterating it in a highly rhythmic manner and in a rather low and restrained tone. After a short while, the artist-performer breaks the rhythmic pattern and starts to alternate the German nouns. They differ by only one letter, and these letters, ‘b’ and ‘d,’ even correspond on a graphic level as reversed horizontal ‘mirror reflections.’ The rhythm continues, and both sentences, “Eine Scheibe berühren” and “Eine Scheide berühren” are spoken simultaneously. While the woman starts speaking the latter sentence, the child continues speaking the former. During the performance, the woman improvises within the short phrase, at times speaking only one word—the indefinite article *eine*—in a foregrounded manner. She also teaches the girl the acoustic difference of ‘b’ and ‘d’ by articulating them individually. The girl usually repeats what the woman says. But sometimes errors occur, especially with the word *berühren* (to touch), which she suddenly turns into *gerühren*—a childish neologism that stands ambiguously between *gerührt sein* (being emotionally affected) and the act of *rühren* (to stir, to affect).



FIGURE 4.1.6 Ulrike Rosenbach. *Eine Scheibe berühren*. 1971.

The central device of simultaneously speaking two words that share a strong phonetic resemblance creates ambiguity. On a semantic level, the synchronicity of both statements seems to mix two phases of life: the inventiveness of childhood and the realm of grown-ups, with their knowledge of sexuality. The doubled phrase also correlates to the dimensions of mediality—the German noun *Scheibe* can refer to the television screen—and of the body. To touch a ‘screen’ is a one-sided action: One can feel it, but the screen is inanimate. The transparency of glass may simulate the possibility of connection, but there is a clear separation: Despite mass media’s promise to connect people over long distances, physical distance cannot be overcome. In contrast, touching a *Scheide*, in the sense of a vagina, is an act of intimacy that creates a reciprocal physical sensation. In *Eine Scheibe berühren*, the signifier *Scheibe* stands for the distant perception of the eyes, of visuality; the signifier *Scheide*, in contrast, stands for the intimate perception of the skin, of tactility. Using simple poetic tools to foreground general questions of intimacy as opposed to the separation enforced by media is central to Rosenbach’s work:

Transparency, in relation to smooth, glassy surfaces, where images appear, is found in TV screens and monitors as well. The early video-studio-action *Eine Scheibe berühren*, from 1972, is but a careful approximation of this magic liminal surface, where the real living environment is separated from the world of images. With closed eyes, Rosenbach gropes the pane of the screen with a strange object that seems to be growing out of her skin. Are the borders that we consider real factual or merely imagined things? (Glüher 2005, 150)

Rosenbach’s video performance presents images of a woman touching something with a ‘body extension’—a medium in the sense of Marshall McLuhan (cf. McLuhan 1964, 7)—accompanied by a ‘double-voiced’ sentence that is itself ambiguous. The spoken phrases are not necessarily ‘poetic’ in their choice of words: Literariness is created through the repetition, wordplay, and evolving semantic complexity of the two simple nouns in their phonetic proximity.



FIGURE 4.1.7 Jill Scott. *A Beat in Step*. 1978.

A second example of a video performance that features elements of concrete poetry created by an acousmatic voice is **Jill Scott's** *A Beat in Step* (US 1978), which was part of her highly self-referential installation *Moved Up Moved Down* at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. The stairs leading to the second floor of the building were covered with white canvas, which was intended to be stained by visitors walking upstairs. Two monitors were installed halfway up the stairs: one showing live footage of the viewers from the angle of a security camera, the other one depicting a video loop of the artist climbing a huge staircase. As the artist notes, this had a frustrating effect on the viewers:

I would struggle up each big stair, then finally lie down horizontally on the top one and roll off-camera. This sequence was then repeated endlessly in a loop. The viewers complained that seeing the pre-recorded video and the surveyed images of themselves made them feel that the act of climbing up the stairs was more difficult. (Scott in Hahne 2003, 63)

The artwork's literariness is created by its 'impeded' form, which hinders the viewer's indulgence in the consumption of the artwork and requires them to actively engage with it. Literariness is also the result of the artwork's dense layers of self-reflexivity. The poetic device of excess structuring includes the installation's spatial set-up, live feedback from the visitors, and the pre-recorded video of the artist's performance and its self-referential voice-over.

The low-quality black-and-white footage creates stark contrasts, so the steps become the dominant device that horizontally structures the screen (Figure 4.1.7). This visual structuring is reminiscent of Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko's photograph *Steps* (1929), in which the effects of light and shadow on a staircase result in the diagonal patterning of the picture. On the linguistic level, Scott's work also creates a 'staircase' through the constant addition of single words. The spoken letters and words are: "A b | A beat | A beat in | A beat in step | A beat in step in | A beat in step instead | A beat in step instead of | A beat in step instead of a | A beat

in step instead of a turn.” The iterated phrasing of this concrete poem is accompanied by images of the artist climbing a giant staircase until she finally reaches the top step, where she lies down, looks intently into the camera for a moment just before the final phrase, “a turn,” is spoken, and then rolls off into the background and disappears from sight. It is a verbal-visual sequence of approximately 3:20 minutes, presented as a loop and in some ways resembling Dada movement poems. The (imagined) visual poem that forms when the spoken lines are transcribed reveals an inversion of the physical performance—the graphic outline of the poem creates a step from top to bottom, the artist climbs the stairs from bottom to top. Text and physical movement therefore create a performative inversion that comes close to the rhetorical figure of a chiasm:

A b  
 A beat  
 A beat in  
 A beat in step  
 A beat in step in  
 A beat in step instead  
 A beat in step instead of  
 A beat in step instead of a  
 A beat in step instead of a turn.

This translation from sound poem to visual poem reveals the device of ‘ordered succession,’ a central stylistic structure that creates an effect of literariness. At first, the verbal statement seems rather plain, but upon closer examination it is hard to paraphrase, mostly due to the polyvalence of the words ‘beat,’ ‘step,’ and ‘turn.’ ‘Beat’ could be a blow or a slap, but also a metrical or rhythmic stress (or tempo) in poetry or music; ‘step’ might refer to the stair, to dancing or walking, to measures being taken; ‘turn’ describes movements and actions but also bears musical connotations. The statement could claim that this ambiguous ‘beat’ is being executed while walking (“in step”) and “instead” of a movement (“turn”). At the same time, however, the viewer sees a person turning and hears a beat, a kind of rhythmic knocking. It is therefore literally not a beat ‘instead of’ something else but rather a beat ‘as well as’ a turn. The physical action of climbing and turning duplicates and contradicts the statement, since the artist’s movement on the stairs is also a ‘beat in step.’ Scott presents and performs a closed circuit, namely a certain form of potentialization: a recursive iteration. The use of seemingly simple yet highly ambiguous words in this video performance creates the work’s literariness.

**Gary Hill’s** video *Mediations (towards a remake of Soundings)* (US 1986), briefly discussed in Chapter 3, Section 1, can also be analyzed from the perspective of sound poetry. The heightened use of verbal devices to create a dense network of meaning and a poetic ‘surplus’ of seemingly constative and descriptive spoken text has been touched upon with regard to the acousmatic voice of the artist-performer. However, the reference to poetry is also suggested by the layout of Hill’s *catalog raisonnée*, since the text of the video performance is printed in the graphic representation of a poem, in verse:

speak  
 speak er  
 err aahh  
 a voice  
 a voice speaks out  
 out loud  
 a loud speaker lauds a voice  
 out loud

out of bounds from the picture  
 a picture of a speaker  
 a hand enters the picture  
 a voice enters the hand  
 a hand bearing tidings  
 tidings of a bare hand  
 a voice in the hand is worth two in the sand  
 a hand enters the picture  
 a picture's worth less without words  
 within words speak voices  
 a voice peaks through a voice  
 a voice bares a voice bearing voices  
 voice burials  
 a bare voice lies in the sand  
 a thousand grains of sand  
 a voice grain shifts bearing a grand old voice  
 a bare voice lies in the sand  
 grains of would-be glass sharpen a voice  
 a bare voice lies in the sand  
 stuck in the ground a grounded voice  
 a voice ground  
 voice grounds grinding voices underground  
 a voice bound under ground  
 bearing voices underground  
 holding ground  
 a voice from the underground  
 a voice is losing ground  
 a voice is lost and found  
 a bare voice lies in the sand  
 barely a voice can be said to be heard  
 one heard of wild voices kicking up the ground  
 (Hill in Broecker 2002, 122f)

Hill's text contains extensive repetition of the correlative words 'picture' and 'speaker,' both foregrounded by a plosive articulatory mode. As noted earlier, the equivocal and self-referential word 'voice' is uttered 30 times within this short piece. Other dominant forms of repetition, emphasized by the artist-performer's pronunciation, contain the vowel sounds 'a' and 'er,' especially in the beginning. Here, they fulfill a function corresponding to the initiating 'a' and 'b' in Scott's video performance: they indicate the processual transformation of inarticulate, indefinite sounds into precise human language.

Further poetic devices include parataxis, (parodistic) rhyme, and deviations from common idioms such as "a voice in the hand is worth two in the sand," "a voice is losing ground | a voice is lost and found," and "barely a voice can be said to be heard." In addition, there is line repetition that constitutes rhythm and also a sort of refrain—especially the formula "out loud," "a hand enters the picture," "baring"/"bare," "grounds"/"grinding"/"underground"—and wordplay and semantic shifts, which are especially obvious in the confrontation of "underground," with "underground" at the end. The poetic density of the seemingly descriptive text contrasts with the minimalism of the performance, where sand is scattered into a loudspeaker (see Figures 3.1.9 and 3.1.10 in Chapter 3). The poetic text intensifies the performance of the

profane action. At the same time, language is taken literally, exposing polyvalences on the level of phonetics and semantics.

The Italian-American artist **Aldo Tambellini** has written poetry for decades, and his work is an important example of the integration of poetic structures in media art. In his recent site-specific multimedia installation *Black Matters* (DE 2017)—conceptualized with Pia Bolognesi



FIGURE 4.1.8 Aldo Tambellini. *Black Matters*. 2017.



FIGURE 4.1.9 Aldo Tambellini. *Black Matters*. 2017.



and Giulio Bursi—he combines voice-over poetry recitations by different speakers with numerous film sequences and music. The artwork addresses the situation of African-Americans in the U.S. both from a contemporary and a historical perspective. *Black Matters* is the audiovisual performance of the meeting of the poetic and the everyday, and employs devices of perceptual estrangement that function as Shklovskian invitations to envision the world anew. In keeping with its theme and the aesthetics of his other artworks, Tambellini creates a work with exclusively black-and-white imagery. Over the long decades of his artistic career, he has developed a distinct aesthetic based on a ‘philosophy of blackness’ both in a metaphysical and an ethno-racial sense—an approach that the 2017 retrospective at ZKM chose as its conceptual background. In regard to this topic, the artwork is related to Louisa Babari and Célio Paillard’s video *Corps À corps* (2015), discussed in Chapter 3, Section 2. Ina Blom considers Tambellini’s political-poetic “strategic foregrounding of darkness” (Blom 2016, 57) with regard to earlier works, and she likewise links his “exposition of the very logic of racism” (ibid.) to Frantz Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Contrary to the simplicity that the aesthetics of black and white might evoke, *Black Matters* creates an audiovisually overwhelming complexity that strategically plays with the constant adding and withdrawal of sensory information from the viewer. This intricacy was foregrounded by the installation of the artwork, which presented it in a huge black, dark space. Black cushions were tossed over the floor, and seven TV sets sat on pedestals, reminiscent of the video sculptures of early video art. White light projections of abstract forms—so-called Lumagrams that the artist created as a series of paintings on glass slides—were projected onto the floor. High above the visitors, six large double projection screens were suspended from the ceiling. The sheer set-up of this installation prevented the viewer from taking in all the elements at once. At all times, at least one projection could not be integrated into the field of vision, thus challenging the recipient with an audiovisual overabundance (Figure 4.1.8). The complexity continues on the level of what is depicted by *Black Matters*. The television monitors showed old footage of people of color in urban street scenes, as well as interviews, some conducted by children. Within the exhibition space, the TV sets appeared like little islands of intimacy, seemingly inviting visitors to come closer and listen, yet the dialog was often not audible, frustrating the expectations. Corresponding to the visual complexity of the artwork, the multidimensional, multimedial design of the installation created a cacophony of music, voices, and noise. The soundtrack consisted of chants recorded at recent protest marches against racism, the deportation of immigrants, and U.S. President Donald Trump’s 2017 executive order 13769, banning entry to the U.S. by people from specific Muslim nations and titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” The line “Black Lives Matter” could be heard repeatedly, the protest call of the homonymous international political movement that initially started on social media in 2013 as a reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who fatally shot an African-American teenager, Trayvon Martin. By combining old and contemporary footage and audio recordings, Tambellini’s work underlines the fact that racism has by no means been overcome.

The projections on the screens show film footage that the artist recorded in the 1970s, when he was asked to document the various art programs offered to children by the state of New York. The assignment resulted in a 30-minute documentary; the remaining raw material went into his archive and had not been previously used. For *Black Matters*, Tambellini edited this archival material according to six ‘movements.’ Each of the large screens was dedicated to one art form—dance, photography/film, music, painting, sculpture, and acting/pantomime—and showed African-American children performing. The visual absence

of writing, poetry, or literature in general is striking (Figure 4.1.10). However, poetry is presented verbally and by adult speakers, and thus gains a special status. Woven both into the sounds of performing children and the brief fragments of protest calls are several of Tambellini's untitled and unpublished poems, spoken by him and other persons. Tambellini's mainly political poems function as an additional layer of meaning. The voice-over poems alternate with intradiegetic sounds, which are often musical and rhythmical. The soundtrack also contains extradiegetic jazz music and a repeating violin tune. All of these varying layers of sound were distributed by speakers on top of the high walls of the exhibition space; therefore, the texts were not fully audible: The sound level self-thematized its medial condition of volatility (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

In the sense of emblem theory, the poems could be considered as 'subscription' to the moving images, in that they comment on and reflect the visuals at an abstract level with literary, verse-bound language. In stark contrast to the images of children making art, the violence of the poetic lines stands out:

suspended in outer space  
 there were creative souls  
 isolated tortured & blinded  
 for envisioning humanity's genocide

At first glance the artist seems to suggest a rather dystopian sociopolitical diagnosis that repeatedly envisions a nemesis of humankind. Other stanzas contain statements, including quotes from Mahatma Gandhi such as "KILL | an eye for an eye | & the world becomes blind" or "KILL | a madness for madness | & the world explodes" leading to a "GENOCIDE INFERNO." As these quotations make obvious, Tambellini's poetry is enigmatic and 'dark.' But in his very idiosyncratic way, he also attempts to "indicate other ways of imagining a social world" (Blom 2016, 56).

A vision of an alternate social world seems to be connected to the process of creative destruction. The lines "Dark energy embedded in an empty space | Dark energy swallows the void | Dark energy begins the universe anew" channel the uncanny force of astrophysical dark matter and transfer it onto the protesters. This theme connects with other voices heard within this installation, speaking powerful and more utopian lines, such as a programmatic 'black energy' poem, spoken in a slight rap rhythm by Askia Touré, an African-American poet, essayist, and leading voice of the Black Arts Movement:

black energy  
 burns with fire  
 the sun's fiery disc  
 burns the void  
 black fire  
 ignites the liquid sky

The words of this short poem are accompanied by the rhythmic beating of wooden percussion instruments. Images of people moving and abstract visual forms flicker across the screens, the latter corresponding somewhat to the ideas of energy and fire, to the "fiery disc" of the sun, and the "liquid sky." Through the poetic language, the images that are moving simultaneously follow an associational form.

The demand for an alternate sociopolitical order becomes more pressing in the following lines, while the background music that plays simultaneously—a spiritual song—evokes associations of divine revelation and thereby highlights the poem's lines on creativity and creation:

suddenly  
 the deepest black  
 in the dark universe  
 suddenly  
 a cosmic sperm  
 fertilizes the universe's womb  
 suddenly  
 life breathes  
 inside dark matter  
 suddenly  
 there is a spark  
 from colliding energy  
 suddenly  
 from another dimension  
 we descend from stardust  
 suddenly  
 in silent solitude we create  
 inside dark matter

The audio-performance of this poem stands out in two regards: first, because a male and a female performer speak it alternately in the form of instantaneous ekphrastic evocations; second, because 'suddenly' is a performative temporal adverb in that its utterance coincides with its signification. Due to its repetition, the word corresponds to another eye-catching feature of the installation: the word "NOW," flashing up frequently in huge, white capital letters on a black ground on one screen or all simultaneously (the same device used in Ferdinand Kriwet's *Teletext*; see Chapter 3, Section 2). The flickering emphasizes the present tense of the viewing experience, the passing of time, but also the contemporaneity of the archival images. Both words have the capacity to create instances of present tense, which can be read as the central aesthetic impulse of Tambellini's installation. They also stress the motivation behind the demand for social change. It is not coincidental that the Karlsruhe retrospective was placed in the same museum gallery as an exhibition on the intermedia pioneer and concrete poet Gerhard Rühm (born, like Tambellini, in 1930), titled "soon | just | now." One of Rühm's concrete poems, a typo-collage titled "jetzt" (1958), consists only of the German word for 'now.'

### **Poetic Images: Experimental Video Poems**

The experimental writer and media artist Caterina Davinio defines a 'video poem' as "a particular type of video art containing poetry text, variously elaborated at a visual and acoustic level; its presence in video can be more or less wide—in some cases conjugated with the performance [. . .], in some others with the cinema" (Davinio 2002, 273). These features correspond to some of the concepts of the poetic or lyrical film discussed earlier in this section.

With a running time of almost 30 minutes, *The Water Catalogue* (US 1984) by the American artist **Bill Seaman** is a rather long video poem. As its title indicates, the video consists of multiple interwoven visual sequences that share the theme of water—a vertical montage



FIGURE 4.1.10 Bill Seaman. *The Water Catalogue*. 1984.



FIGURE 4.1.11 Bill Seaman. *The Water Catalogue*. 1984.

structure that tends towards the associational form, and yet it also offers a taxonomy. The work combines original songs and texts, an instrumental soundtrack and Super 8 images transferred first to three-quarter-inch video and then to one-inch video (cf. Seaman 1985, 51). As artist-performer, Seaman simultaneously fills the roles of the poet, cameraman, musician, speaker, singer, and producer. The soundtrack begins in a meditative manner, with synthesizer sounds accompanied by slow, steady beats. As the video progresses, the rhythm becomes more dynamic, evoking industrial sounds (Seaman speaks of “abstractions of popular dance and ‘rap’ music”; *ibid.*, 52). In combination with the soundtrack, the visual aesthetics resemble that of music video clips.

The black-and-white images show many variations of water in different settings and aggregate states during various times of day and throughout the four seasons: flowing (a river), contemplative (a quiet lake), wild (the ocean shoreline), as steam and smoke (coming out of a factory chimney), and as snow and ice (a glacier) (Figures 4.1.10 and 4.1.11). The main

aesthetic idea of the video poem seems to be ‘movement,’ corresponding to Sitney’s characterization of the lyrical film (cf. Sitney 1974, 180)—or, rather, transformation—alluding to the saying, ‘You never step into the same river twice,’ attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Just as the saying indicates that all things in life are in flux, the trope of water alludes to certain emotional, psychological, and physical states, such as easiness and flow or stillness and freezing. It was very popular in the early 1980s to present water in a variety of forms, as Frank Gillette’s six-channel video installation *Symptomatic Syntax* (1981) shows and Ina Blom summarizes:

[V]ideo’s alliance with water served to reconfigure the role of perception. On the one hand, the habitual association between video and water evoked the distracted or ‘memory-less’ perception that is usually seen as the unfortunate by-product of a televisual flow, the eternal present of informational updating. But on the other hand it also signaled a preoccupation with the technical conditions of attentiveness [. . .]. The question of attentive perception was brought to bear on a situation where video/water was not just a token for televisual flow but also for ecological crisis, systemic breakdown (Blom 2016, 77).

Seaman’s video alludes to all these dimensions. The work contains four original poems written by the artist. The first part of the third poem, “The Glass Bottom Boat Crew,” self-reflexively refers to numerous states of and in water:

A crystal glass filled to the brim  
 Was flung from a glass bottom boat.  
 I was drifting nearby on a red air mattress  
 Keeping myself afloat.  
 The crystal skipped like a stone  
 And on the water table left little rings.  
 The sound that it made when it tapped the surface  
 Made the crew of the glass bottom sing.  
 I dove down under the water  
 And listened to the crystal clear sound.  
 Somber taps were leaking through  
 As the waves began to pound.  
 (Seaman 2010 [1984])

Seaman presents each of the four poetic texts in a different manner. “The Wake” is sung in soft falsetto; “Make Light of Water” is spoken like a *sprechgesang*, even resembling a dialog. Only two single lines are fully sung, ending with the lines, “When it rains, it pours.” Between the second and the third poem, a long interval without text is partly accompanied by a humming voice and trance-like sounds. The “Glass Bottom Boat Crew” is spoken in *sprechgesang* as well, now in a highly rhythmic manner, vaguely reminiscent of rap music. In effect it has two parts, since the text is repeated, creating a sort of refrain with shorter lines that contain assonances, dissonant rhyme, and wordplay:

Can you float me a loan  
 Loan me a float  
 Fly like a loon  
 Loan me a boat  
 Sing like a loon

A blue blue tune  
Sing with the motor  
(*ibid.*)

After this *sprechgesang*, the last poem, “The Fireman,” is sung in a soft yet powerful voice. Seaman modifies and deforms the linguistic material by using rhythm as the “constructive factor” of versification (Tynyanov 1981 [1924], 31) as a central device. The narrative poem tells the story of a third-person protagonist. A ‘lyricization’ of the spoken and intoned texts is achieved in part through the f-alliteration—as in “The fireman feels the force of the water”—assonance, repetition, and rhyme, which are found in the third and fourth poems. Mainly, however, lyricization is achieved through Seaman’s use of his voice, which at times sounds as if he is enduring great suffering—reminiscent of that of a monk or a singer in church. This specific presentation mode as well as the music itself are highly evocative of the musical genre of Dark Wave, popular in the early 1980s, with its undertones of sorrow and melancholy.

With irregular verse and no meter, Seaman’s texts appear to be only partially conventional poems. Their sense of literariness is established through artificial articulation and the combination of ambient music and ‘poetic images.’ Indeed, the most poetic elements of this video poem are not spoken words but moving images. They vary from figurative, photographic precision to highly abstract and floating views. Through editing and slow motion, familiar images—such as water dammed in a lock, shown in the middle of the piece—are defamiliarized, resembling abstract painting. It is as if the camera itself were painting and drawing. The camera angle is mostly objective, though at times it tends towards the subjective. This perspective is suggested most notably in long, diffuse landscape shots taken through a rain-streaked, opaque train window when the camera itself is still and movement is external. The notion of the filmmaker as first-person protagonist—and consequently the ‘free indirect point of view’—is not dominant, however, since the camera perspective remains rather neutral throughout the piece.

Seaman’s texts and moving images are highly self-reflexive, dealing associatively with the trope of water and what one can do with it: drink, swim, dive, water ski, fish, water plants, walk in the rain, or extinguish fire. Seaman has termed this associational form “recombinant poetics” (Seaman in Spielmann 2002). He claims to be interested “in combinational structures where nonhierarchical relations between image, text, and sound or music can be explored by someone who is interacting” and “how emergent meaning arises through this interaction” (*ibid.*). This goal is realized by combining visual, verbal, and other acoustic material. It is most evident on the visual level, in the cross-cutting of new as well as iterated images—a device used to a heightened extent in the closing section of the piece, which functions both as a climax and a form of visual ‘refrain’ by repeating many previous images with increasing frequency. These rhythmically structured visual sequences, in other words, create a ‘visual rhyme.’ For instance, the image of a large stone falling into water and creating water rings is repeated again and again and edited in several match cuts with other round and moving objects. Both metaphorical and metonymical relationships are thus established.

**Eder Santos’s** video *Tumitinhas* (BR 1998) fully taps into Pasolini’s definition of poetic film as possessing an oniric quality. It is an audiovisual meditation on the memory of a love lost. The opening seconds perform what the voice-over will later talk about: Against a black background, letters forming the neologism ‘TUMITINHAS’ enter the screen from the right, shifting back and forth, morphing, overlapping. Their performance depicts the way in which single words of the Portuguese phrase *tu me tinhas* (you had me) contract into one word (Figure 4.1.12). The poetic quality of the video is also created by devices of montage: superimposition, slow motion, and time lapse effects, recalling Shklovsky’s definition of poetic film as a certain type of structuring.

The video consists of three parts in an associative mode. The first part is a series of grainy, abstract, blurry shots of people and a dog. The black-and-white images form stark contrasts,

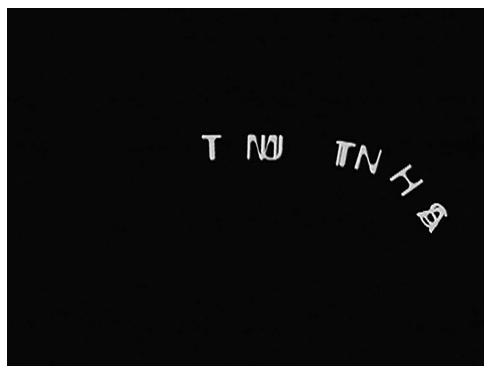


FIGURE 4.1.12 Eder Santos. *Tumitinhas*. 1998.

exploring shadows and the structures they evoke. Clouds in the sky float by in time lapse. After a short fade to black, abstract black-and-white pictures appear, superimposed against the sky, building up visual layers that merge into each other. A dreamy soundtrack by Stephen Vitiello accompanies the footage—presumably of old family film—which evokes a sense of memory. A beep announces an answering machine message from a woman, heard as a voice-over. She mostly speaks in Portuguese, except for the parting phrase: “Kisses for you and the cats. Bye.” The white subtitles provide the English translation of her words:

Stephen || [this is] Sandra, || I was a little girl || and couldn’t understand || what  
might be || Tumitinhas. || The love you had for me || Youhadme || And yet, what may  
it be? || Youhadme? || Yougaveme? || Now a dog howls | on the street. || A ring isn’t  
enough. || Love breaks.

The pace of the montage increases as soon as her voice is heard. Shots of a woman sitting on a table alternate with views of a woman’s face, evoking the effect of a man listening to the voice of a past lover. After images of traffic scenes, the screen fades to black. Sitney’s assumption that the poetic film depicts the view of the first-person protagonist can not be maintained in the case of Santos’s piece: Sandra addresses not Eder but Stephen, a ‘metaleptic’ reference to Stephen Vitiello and Sandra Penna, who composed the lines that the voice-over speaks. She addresses how she misunderstood a popular children’s song when she was young. The song, “Ciranda Cirandinha,” contains the lyrics:

O anel que tu me destes  
Era vidro e se quebrou  
O amor que tu me tinhas  
Era pouco e se acabou

The lyrics thematize a ring that was given by a lover, yet the ring was made of glass and broke. The broken ring is compared by analogy to their broken relationship. Sandra’s quoted words imply how a child does not understand the content of the song or the laws of love, but is attracted by sounds and combines them to the neologism “tumitinhas.” The second part of the video again evokes how “[a] ring isn’t enough” to be married. Black-and-white images of a woman’s face suddenly turn to color and then fade again to black and white. Flickering light

illuminates a torn picture of a married couple, fingers enter the frame, pushing the parts together. The absence of the woman is symbolized as superimposition on a mirror, and then on an empty bed. The mirror represents what has been lost, the empty bed forms the contrast and symbolizes recollections. In the third part of the video, the message on the answering machine is repeated. The voice is foregrounded by the reduced visuals: Apparitional effects of light move in front of a dark background, a fish swims in a tank. Standing out against the simple images, the message creates a mood of absence and loss, emphasizing what remains of a lost love: memories.

The 14-minute video *Identical Time* (US 1997) by **Seungho Cho** depicts many views from the New York City subway. Composed of single scenes without a story arc or destination for the subway ride, it is indeed a ‘plotless’ video, recalling Shklovsky’s definition of poetic film. *Identical Time* is an audiovisual exploration of loneliness within an urban environment. Cho recorded the work over the course of a year. The city appears nearly deserted, and the few passengers seem isolated and lost in thought; people are ‘commuting’ but not ‘communicating.’ Views from the window indicate the changing of seasons and the cyclic change of day and night (Figure 4.1.13). Time within the subway car, however, seems to stand still, reinforced by the homonymous poem that functions as subtitle. A white computer-generated font depicts excerpts from Octavio Paz’s long poem “El mismo tiempo” (1961), in English translation by Eliot Weinberger, presented in single, often indented lines, and put in the position of subtitles on the bottom of the screen. Paz’s title alludes to a ‘vertical’ temporality: time being laminated, layered, with no continuous flow. The soundtrack by Stephen Vitiello of dramatic or melancholic guitar and cello tunes supports the mood of loneliness and longing. Cho’s video poem is a reflection upon the transience of life, passing as time is passing on these endless subway rides.

Paz’s “El mismo tiempo” is a highly pictorial meditation on the life and memory of a lyric persona walking through a city at night:

This afternoon from a bridge I saw  
 the sun enter the waters of the river  
 All was in flames  
 the statues the houses the porticoes burned  
 In the garden feminine clusters of grapes  
 ingots of liquid light  
 the coolness of solar vessels  
 The poplars a foliate of sparks  
 the water horizontal unmoving  
 under the flaming earths and skies  
 Each drop of water  
 a fixed eye  
 [...]
 Reality suspended  
 on the stalk of time  
 [...]
 world weightless  
 as man is weighted  
 Is not beauty enough?  
 I know nothing  
 I know what is too much  
 not what is enough  
 (Paz 2012, 199 and 201)



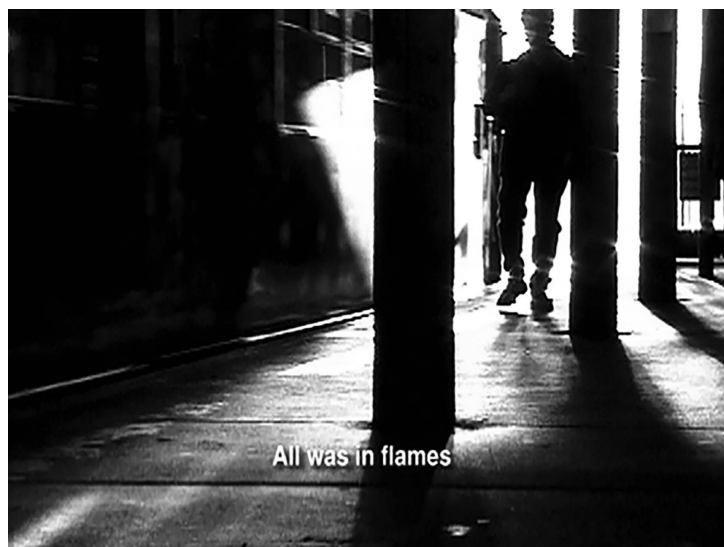


FIGURE 4.1.13 Seoungho Cho. *Identical Time*. 1997.



FIGURE 4.1.14 Seoungho Cho. *Identical Time*. 1997.

Corresponding video images appear associatively; for instance, the text thematizes ‘burning’ por-ticoes while the visuals show the columns of a subway station in bright sunlight, turning an increasingly intense red as the sequence proceeds. Through this associational and dense compo-sition, the aspects of memory and dream are foregrounded—the oniric quality of the subjective cinematographic form. This dimension of imagination is also dominant in Paz’s poem, as the intense and visually stunning lines quoted here—alluding to fire, water, and other natural ele-ments—make obvious (Figure 4.1.14).

The vertical structure of the subtitles that were taken from the poem provides an impression of coherence. However, they focus only on poetry in its mute, written form and blot out its aural

dimensions. Compared to the vocalized text in *The Water Catalogue*, this creates a quiet, more meditative atmosphere. The poem places the viewer—who also becomes a reader—into the position of a spectator of “contemplative subjectivity” (Gunning 1990, 61). Contemplation recalls what Sitney establishes as dominant of a poetic film: subjectivity. Without doubt, *Identical Time* evokes associations of subjective images: The subtitles at times match shots of the passengers on the subway, evoking the effect of interior monologs. At other times, the video shows a left hand—presumably of the artist himself—that turns and reaches out before the camera. This self-reflexive and repetitive element is an iconographic nod to the tradition of self-portraiture in painting, and the importance of the artist’s hands as tools of the ‘manual’ process of making art. As per Sitney’s understanding, Cho here shows himself as filmmaker operating behind the camera and therefore as the invisible “first person protagonist of the film” (Sitney 1974, 180). Furthermore, many of the shots seem to indicate a subjective camera that pans across the subway cars, looks out onto the platform, or observes the reflections in the windows. The camera is held at an angle to the windowpane, creating the effect of someone silently observing the reflections of other passengers while pretending to look out the window. As in Romantic poetry, the environment functions as a kind of mirror of the subjective conscience, which is self-thematized through reflections of the subway windows. It seems as if videopoetry were “an awareness of the world” (Tarkovsky 1989, 21), reflecting how the filmmaker—the lyric I—perceives his surroundings.

However, there are indicators that *Identical Time* can and should be understood from a different perspective than that of the filmmaker as first-person protagonist who hands down his experience to the viewers who “see this man’s intense experience of seeing” (Sitney 1974, 180). To the contrary, the artwork directly confronts the viewer with an intense viewing experience that centers on the viewer’s encounter with the artwork itself. As it turns out, Cho’s video makes these references only to then deviate from them. On closer observation, the camera never fully focuses on the passengers but remains—in truly poetic manner—ambiguous: It starts to zoom in on a woman on the subway but then shifts toward the advertising space next to her that resembles a blackened window. The same deviation occurs with regard to the subjectivity of the filmmaker, as many of the camera angles cannot account for the artist’s subjective perspective. In some cases, the camera appears to be very static, oddly tilted up, or, while exploring a subway car, the swerving hand-held camera gets too close to the objects to be matched with the vision of the filmmaker. It rather appears as if the camera itself were visually exploring the space and its structures from estranged first-person angles and viewpoints. This is quite interesting: Usually, a video camera functions as a fully automatized technological device that captures what it is pointed at. In the case of *Identical Time*, this ‘automat’ is employed as a deautomatizing device that renders our perception unfamiliar. It is technology used as artistic technique.

Rather than focusing on the artist’s experience, the video is an exploration of camera angles, editing, and especially objects and their structures. This emphasis is supported by the opening subtitles taken from Paz’s poem that describe an experience of perceiving personified objects: “It is not the wind | not the steps of the water sleepwalking | past the petrified houses and the trees” (Paz 2012, 193). The highly aesthetic images of *Identical Time* evoke sculptural shapes of light and constantly oscillate between states of transparency and opacity, between black-and-white and color. The opening sequence establishes this oscillation and interest in the materiality of objects: Before viewers can discern the objects captured in the video, the opening shots display an array of patterns and lights to the gentle sound of a string instrument. The camera zooms in and out on what turn out to be scratches on the windowpane of a subway car, and the images are matched aurally by the crescendo of the soundtrack that culminates in the dissonant screeching of a cello (cf. Marks 2000, 180) (Figure 4.1.15). But even once it is clear that these are images of a window, the view through it remains blocked. The scratches refer to a ‘non-readability’ of the environment, its fundamental opacity. With the aesthetic device of the scratched window,



FIGURE 4.1.15 Seoungho Cho. *Identical Time*. 1997.

Cho may allude to Stan Brakhage's experimental film *Reflections on Black* (1955), where the artist scratched the film material itself, a device that Sitney characterizes as "metaphor on vision" (Sitney 1974, 178)—or rather, as a metaphor on the negation of vision.

This continuous transition is a device used to thematize and conceal the medium of the camera. The video oscillates between transparent glimpses on the scene, such as shots of an empty subway car, and opaque images that lose their referential function as the viewer gets caught up in a loop of blurred contours that render the objects they depict obscure. Throughout the video poem there is a constant self-thematizing of the window glass between the recording device and the people (and landscape) it is recording. The glass pane turns into a master trope of separation, making human contact impossible. The materiality of the glass is also reminiscent of Sitney's remark that "the film-maker working in the lyrical mode affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting [. . .] its traditional use as window into illusion" (ibid., 180). *Identical Time* both highlights and negates the 'window effect' of the actual subway windows, shifting between transparency and opacity. But it is also exactly this opacity that allows for a shift from the perspective of the filmmaker to the experience of the viewers: Staring at the windowpane, their gaze thrown back onto themselves, the viewers are made conscious of their own perception.

The hand turning in front of the camera dissolves into a shot of the scratches on the window, as if wanting to touch—or invite the spectators to touch—the surface. Instead of moments of subjectivity on the part of the filmmaker or the passengers, these are instances of 'haptic' images (see Chapter 2, Section 2) that invite viewers to touch them while keeping them at an arm's length to what is depicted. The viewers' eyes consequently "function like organs of touch" (Marks 2000, 162) with the haptic vision tending "to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (ibid.). According to Laura Marks, haptic images "can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is" (ibid., 178). This feature directly corresponds to the Formalists' notion of the aesthetic experience deautomatizing by not merely 'recognizing' but 'seeing as if for the first time.' The perceptive aspect is dominant in certain sequences of this video poem, where the hand-held camera is creating quick and irregular movements through pan shots and tilts, as if it were exploring the forms and materiality of the subway car. Cho's video evokes the materiality of the objects seen, yet renders some of them unfamiliar in close-ups and odd angles, and in return defamiliarizes our vision of them.

These non-immersive moments of rupture can be linked to the notion of *zäum*’ or ‘trans-sense’ (see Chapter 3, Section 1). As introduced in Chapter 2, Section 2, Boris Eikhenbaum refers to the experience and cognitive process of the film viewer by the term of ‘internal speech,’ connecting the singular shots into a coherent whole. According to him, trans-sense images can be observed whenever “method and style” (Eikhenbaum 1974 [1927], 9) render familiar objects unfamiliar on the screen and thus enable viewers to “see things anew” (ibid.). When familiar objects are defamiliarized, they become bulky—Shklovsky’s notion of the ‘stone made stony’ comes to mind—and the perception process begins to stumble, making viewers aware of its qualities and sensitizing them to the medium.

Cho’s video features elements of *zäum*’ most strikingly in the scenes in which images lose their referential function and viewers see structures without being able to discern the objects they represent. They become aware of watching instead of being able to enter an immersive experience offered by a transparent medium. The final line of the video’s subtitle is also the final line of Paz’s poem: “indivisible identical perpetual | We never see it | It is transparency” (Paz 2012, 203). Though the line originally refers to an unchanging category of “time within time” (ibid.), it is also a good description of a perceptual experience that has become automatized. Geared toward content and communication, media are rendered as the much-discussed transparent windows onto another world. The technological devices might be touched, but nevertheless the mediating technology appears invisible to viewers’ perception. In the tension between transparency and opacity, Cho’s artwork becomes a presence that can be explored consciously.

Media art reveals the manifold guises of the poetic. It is not simply an exploration of language; the analyses in this section have shown how the poetic may also be attributed to other audiovisual features. The discussions have also demonstrated how poetic structures and poetic language manifest themselves across different media: in film, video, video performance, and net art. Poetry is present on a linguistic level through rhyme or assonances, use of alliterations, the incorporation of the artists’ own poetry, or verses borrowed from another poet. Moreover, references to visual poetry offer a way to pave the transition to the more metaphorical use of the poetic with regard to audiovisual, non-linguistic aspects of media art. However, one important conclusion from the discussions in this section is that media art does not simply adopt poetic structures but instead integrates them into a reflection on media development and communication. More importantly, it emphasizes a reconceptualization, a seeing anew, of the poetic that takes into account the reader and spectator: The ‘poetic’ need not be limited to discussions of subjectivity and structure alone, but also accounts for the viewer’s encounter with the artwork itself.

## 4.2 Elements of Drama

**Keren Cytter's** five-minute video *Der Spiegel* [The Mirror] (DE 2007) comes across as a condensed fusion of Aristotelian tragedy and bourgeois *Kammerspiel* aesthetics. The video is staged in an apartment and focuses on a single simple plot involving three main characters (one woman and two men) and a chorus. The woman, who cannot accept the fact that she is aging, is in love with a man whom she archaically refers to as her “knight.” That man, however, is not interested in her as a woman; he is searching for a girl to love. The other man is in love with the woman, but she shows no interest in him. The characters voice their dilemmas in dialogs and monologs, with multi-perspectival dramatic speech as the clear dominant of the piece. A chorus of three women comments on the action, provides information (“He is dead.”), and urges moral punishment for the dismissive potential lover by making the demand to “kill the man who screams again.” All the characters speak in a fast, staccato rhythm, the language shifting between German and English and also between high diction and a less-distinguished choice of words, as when the characters curse, thus creating a conscious rupture between the poetic and the ordinary.

Cytter's piece evokes drama only to then deviate from its conventions. The dialogs are dubbed in the same language as the sentences that are spoken. This creates a voice-over effect, which appears both similar to and unlike the dramatic form, therefore distancing the spectators from what they are watching. The actors break with the dramatic illusion by reciting stage directions, self-reflexively commenting on the function of the subtitles, or addressing the camera directly to create an *ad spectatores* effect. In a single take, the camera shifts quickly between the different characters. It is sometimes dropped on the floor and then grabbed by one of the actors, giving the voice-overs a subjective perspective. The camera seems to function both as audience and as an actor itself. It is precisely this dynamic between the evocation of drama conventions and the postmodern deviation that makes Cytter's *Der Spiegel* the perfect entry point for the discussion of media art and its adoption and defamiliarization of dramatic aesthetics.

### *Drama Theory and Media Art*

From a theoretical perspective, drama has been researched not only within the field of literary studies but also within the discipline of drama studies, which emerged in the early 20th century. Throughout this paradigmatic shift, theater performance has often gained more attention than dramatic text. Even now many scholars, especially when considering drama of the 20th and 21st centuries, do not



FIGURE 4.2.1 Keren Cytter. *Der Spiegel*. 2007.

consider only the “verbally fixed text substrata” (Pfister 1988, 7) but also its *mise-en-scène*. Therefore, it is not the poetically structured language of drama but its performance that is of interest to many researchers. Since the emergence of drama studies, there has been a debate between literary and drama scholars as to whether the drama text is only a ‘substrate’ of the *mise-en-scène* or a literary work in its own right. The literary scholar Manfred Pfister claims that the drama text is a “multimedial form of presentation” and a “scenically enacted text” (ibid., 6) that anticipates its staging: “As a ‘performed’ text, drama, in contrast to purely literary texts, makes use not only of verbal, but also of acoustic and visual codes. It is a synaesthetic text” (ibid., 7). Roland Barthes speaks of a form of “theatricality” that can be found in the drama text as an autonomous work of art (Barthes 2000 [1954], 75). The analyses in this subsection focus on references to the text or dramatic language as well as elements of theatrical performance. Media art acquires what Jacques Gerstenkorn has termed ‘theatricality’ with regard to film: First, theater may occur as the content of a media artwork, such as a video featuring scenes within a theater—as in Cytter’s *Untitled* discussed later. Second, media art may adopt general structures from theater, such as rhetorical patterns or choric speech, as in Cytter’s *Der Spiegel*. Third, media art may recycle explicit dramatic devices (cf. Gerstenkorn 1994; Jovanovic 2017, 8), such as teichoscopy as it is used in Magdalena von Rudy’s *Regnava nel silenzio* also analyzed here.

The debate around dramatic text and performance resonates with the views of the Russian Formalists and the Prague School Structuralists on drama and theater. Their contributions include meticulous descriptions of dramatic genres and their forms as well as studies that focus on the stage, the actors, and the effects on the audience. Although it seems as if the Formalist critics were less interested in the literary genre of drama than in poetry and prose, this impression likely results from the fact that their contributions to the study of dramatic texts and theater have not been as widely translated as their contributions to the study of prose and poetry. However, when taking into consideration that Russian Formalism was an attempt to establish a general aesthetics of art, Formalist findings on *ostranenie* as well as the focus on the formal aspects of genre apply to the realm of dramatic texts and theater, too. Silvija Jestrovic deduces a Formalist theory of drama by looking at historical avant-garde theater practice. She regards the Futurist *zaum*’ “stage language” and the “grotesque, trans-theatrical, and perspectival estrangement” of the theater director Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold as “theatrical embodiments of formalist theories,” especially of *ostranenie* (Jestrovic 2006, 47).

In fact, as Daniel Gerould’s 1978 survey has shown, several Formalist critics—Sergei Balukhatyi, Boris Tomashevsky, and Adrian Piotrovsky—wrote about drama, specifically melodrama (cf. Gerould 1978). Gerould explains their specific interest in melodrama with the high conventionality of its “stock formulas” (ibid., 153), which allow for a detailed analysis of the development of its form. According to Gerould, the Formalists did not study drama “as a purely literary form, but as a mixed theatrical mode” (ibid., 152)—which is appealing to our investigation into adoptions of dramatic elements in media art.

The three Formalists under discussion focused on different aspects of melodrama that could be generalized and applied to all dramatic forms. Centering on audience, Balukhatyi understands melodrama to be made up of different components, and he focuses on their composition and function (cf. ibid., 154): The purpose of melodrama is to “elicit from the spectator the greatest possible intensity of feeling” in “calling forth [...] ‘pure,’ ‘vivid’ emotions” (ibid.). Through devices such as dialog, plot themes, the integration of everyday material, unexpected twists that interrupt expectations, and “strikingly effective situations,” melodrama aims at “‘baring the passions’” (ibid., 155) of its audience. Working with the technical “principle of relief,” the “principle of contrast,” and the “principle of dynamics,” melodrama addresses the spectator, always attempting to “introduce the *unexpected* into the action” (ibid., 157f). Balukhatyi also addresses how melodrama is intended for the stage and should thus be written with this in mind (cf. ibid., 162). The contributions by Tomashevsky and Piotrovsky reflect how genres change and function in different media.

Tomashevsky focuses not on form as much as on historical and intertextual relations, influences, and developments of the genre, and suggests that melodrama is “a particular kind of tragedy opposing the classical canon” (ibid., 165). In contrast, Piotrovsky shifts his attention primarily to melodrama in film (cf. ibid., 165f). Considering (melo)drama as both a literary and filmic genre is a good transition to the audiovisual domain of media art that alludes to dramatic conventions.

More recent contributions to Formalist theater studies make only indirect reference to the Russian Formalists, as in theater scholar Michael Kirby’s book *A Formalist Theatre* (1987). For him, a “formal approach to analysis” means “concentrating on ‘external form’ rather than on the content or meaning of a piece” (Kirby 1987, ix). He stresses that his approach is not interested in “theatre as literature” but in “theatre as performance” (ibid., x) and claims that “[h]istorically, formalism in theatre has been more or less synonymous with style, with abstraction. It has been a theatre of visual and auditory formalism that related to painting and music and emphasized the senses” (ibid., 109). Contemporary drama studies follow this approach and refer at times to Kirby’s notion of ‘Formalist theater’ (cf. Lehmann 2006, 36, 57, 98, and 114).

The Prague School Structuralists established perspectives on all forms of drama and theater, though there is no general, unified Structuralist theory of drama. In fact, as Keir Elam states, the Structuralists brought into being “the richest corpus of theatrical and dramatic theory produced in modern times” (Elam 1980, 5). Michael L. Quinn describes up to three generations of Structuralist theories on theater, with Otakar Zich, Petr Bogatyrev, Mukařovský, and Jakobson among the earliest scholars (cf. Quinn 1995, 2). The Structuralist approach encompasses positions that value the performance more highly than the dramatic text as well as those that focus on the analysis of the dramatic text as an aesthetic object in itself (cf. Zich 1931; Veltruský 1977 [1942]), thus taking into account the text as well as the functions of stage design, acting, and the audience.

Structuralists as Mukařovský and Jiří Veltruský define theater as a distinct semiotic system, encompassing (among other things) acting, directing, voice, facial expression, and costume (cf. Mukařovský 1978 [1941], 206; Veltruský 1981, 227). However, none of these elements is, according to Mukařovský, essential; rather “[t]he essence of the theater is [. . .] a changing flux of immaterial relations which constantly regroup” (Mukařovský 1978 [1941], 210). As such, staged drama in particular is an interplay of different components, an aesthetic form in which “the individual arts renounce their independence, penetrate one another, contradict one another, substitute for one another—in brief ‘dissolve,’ merging into a new, fully unified art” (ibid., 205). Structuralists also direct their understanding of the theatrical form at the viewer, as an “immaterial interplay of forces moving through time and space and pulling the spectator into its changeable tension” (ibid., 203). In some theories, the audience itself is considered a component (cf. Deák 1976, 86). Mukařovský regards spectator and actor as counterparts, the latter serving the function of an identity figure, while he regarded the action itself as a drama’s core element with all other components involved in its construction (cf. Veltruský 1981, 230f). With the distinction between *signans* and *signatum*, emphasis is given to the separation of the actors from the roles they embody and the imaginary dimension of the spectator, the concept closely related to the idea of signifier and signified (cf. ibid., 232f; Deák 1976, 85).

As in prose or poetry, a dominant establishes a hierarchy (cf. Deák 1976, 85). The different components interrelate, and singular components may be foregrounded to attract the audience’s attention (cf. ibid., 88). The component highest in the hierarchy is the foregrounded element. As Elam explains, this is usually the actor. However, other components also may be foregrounded to deviate from this convention: “The bringing of other elements to the foreground occurs when these are raised from their ‘transparent’ functional roles to a position of unexpected prominence” (Elam 1980, 17). Foregrounding as a spatial metaphor is an especially fruitful concept in the theatrical space, where elements or objects can literally shift to the foreground while others retreat to the background. František Deák equates the terms ‘defamiliarization’ and ‘foregrounding’—thus,

in theater ‘foregrounding’ means “changing the traditional role of components in theater. For example, the scenic, visual information can be conveyed by speech, or an actor can be replaced by sound of lighting, or text can be projected as a painter’s image” (Deák 1976, 89). Resonating with Shklovsky’s concept of deautomatization, Deák proposes a model for how the relationship between object and actor can be examined and made strange so the world can be perceived in a new light (cf. *ibid.*).

According to Elam’s description, the Structuralist Bogatyrev advances the idea “that the stage radically transforms all objects and bodies defined within it, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack [...] in their normal social function” (Elam 1980, 7), which comes close to Shklovsky’s concept of art. The stage itself thus possesses defamiliarizing potential, so that the object or body on stage becomes “something other than itself” (*ibid.*, 9). Also, one object may take on several meanings, depending on its context (cf. *ibid.*, 12), so the spectator becomes aware of the signifier, the material itself (cf. *ibid.*, 18f). ‘Ostension’ and ‘deixis’ are relevant semiotic terms related to the specific self-reflexivity of a dramatic text and of theater performances. The terms correspond to the Russian Formalist and Prague School Structuralist concepts of foregrounding, estrangement, and laying bare of the device: While deixis is the act of showing, ostension is the showing of something in a communicative setting, its demonstrative foregrounding as opposed to its verbal naming. Thus, ostension within a theatrical situation results in the ‘thing’ being perceived as a sign (cf. Schoenmakers 1992, 445). These techniques work against the illusionary impetus, as they disrupt an immersive experience. They resurface in Bertolt Brecht’s model of theater, which is discussed later in this section. His theory of epic theater and its ‘alienation effects’ can be linked to the Formalists’ and Structuralists’ theories as helpful tools to discuss drama in its staged form. Their mutual interest lies in a focus on techniques or devices of estrangement.

### ***Core Elements of Drama***

The practice of dramatic writing has become more and more diverse, yet most literary studies of drama still share basic features. In general, two main genres of drama are distinguished: tragedy and comedy. The genre of tragedy in particular has established a set of formal genre features, which in part reappear in media art. A critical reflection on dramatic structures and tragic telos is evident throughout the 20th century, most notably in the often absurd and tragic-comic language performances of Dada and Expressionism and in the Brechtian alienation effect and Brecht’s notion of epicization (cf. Szondi 1987, 6; Lehmann 2006, 29, 41f). These tendencies are revisited and radicalized in neo-avant-garde performances of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in the so-called postdramatic theater of our time (cf. Lehmann 2006). Simply put, ‘postdramatic’ signifies that the conventional model of drama is questioned or self-reflexively thematized. Plot and nemesis are no longer the foci; instead, the materiality of the dramatic text and its performance, as well as the performers’ voices and bodies, are foregrounded. Nevertheless, classical features of drama remain indirectly thematized even in their conceptual absence. They set any contemporary, even postdramatic theater text in relation to the genre because even a strongly deviating stage text refers to the formerly rigid genre conventions. The classical features of drama consequently serve as the background to the media artworks analyzed in this section.

Traditionally, drama is considered the literary genre that differs from prose or poetry in its lack of a mediating instance. Instead, a “[d]ramatic text is constituted through the self-statements of the *dramatis personae*” (Lehmann 1992, 279), that is: through plural, non-homogeneous perspectives. The primacy of dialog is a central feature of dramatic texts, supplemented by stage directions. In drama studies, these two elements are distinguished as ‘primary’ texts versus ‘secondary’ texts (cf. Pfister 1988, 13f). The main structural components of a conventional drama printed in a book are the *dramatis personae* and a plot, presented largely through dialog. If media



art depicts two or more characters communicating and interacting within a stable setting and creating a ‘figure constellation,’ a reference to the dramatic form is present. Although narrative film is also based on dialog, in media art, interestingly, references to prose do not feature figural speech with actors present, only voice-overs (see Chapter 4, Section 3). Also, in conventional film figural speech is only one expressive means among others. In contrast, drama as a literary genre is primarily structured according to the device of artistic or ‘well-made’ dialog, a textual form that may be alienated in works of media art. Moreover, unlike works that refer to prose, media artworks that allude to drama employ the camera to focus primarily on actors, sometimes even acquiring a position similar to that of an actor.

The Occidental drama originated in Greece and reached its first peak around 500 BC. It developed from choral dances and songs, and the chorus remains a formative element for established dramatic forms (cf. Seidensticke 1992, 79). Throughout the history of drama, certain phases have attached value to the chorus as a structural element while others have rejected it as anti-illusionary. In classical tragedy, dramaturgy is based on the alternation of choral parts and clusters of scenes—the *episodion*, a term that can be translated as (narrative) ‘episode.’ Initially, there was just one, then two, and finally (with Sophocles) three actors confronting the chorus, resulting in a ‘three-actor-rule.’ Based on this rule, a dramatic text could accommodate only specific constellations of the *dramatis personae*: No more than three characters could be on stage simultaneously and the actors sometimes had to play multiple roles. The three-actor-rule applied to later tragedies oriented towards the Greek model, but it lost its relevance in the Early Modern period. The first and to this day authoritative theory of drama—relevant to conventional dramaturgy in plays and even in narrative cinema—is Aristotle’s *Poetics* (ca. 335 BC), which is mainly a theory of tragedy. According to Aristotle, drama is the mimesis of actions. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle focuses on basic dramaturgical models such as the development of plot, the choice of subject, and its structural limitations. With regard to the formal features of drama, five central analytical categories can be distinguished: time, place (or space), plot (or action), figures, and figural speech.

According to Aristotelian dramaturgy, ‘unity of time’ demands the action to be completed within 24 hours. This genre-constitutive brevity results in an elevated dynamic, so the notion of ‘passing time’ is often used as a dramatizing device. Contrary to prose, drama rarely contains any prolepses or analepses, but usually has a chronological story line. This principle of succession is seldom ignored, not least because of the lack of a mediating instance that could comment on and arrange the different scenes (cf. Mahler 1996, 76; Pfister 1988, 6). Due to the primacy of dialog, the presented time corresponds to the passing of real time in drama; its mode is “mimetic,” not “diegetic” (Ryan 2004, 23). However, there is a significant difference between the text of a drama and a stage production, as Hans-Thies Lehmann remarks:

Theatre is familiar with the *time dimension of the staging* peculiar to it. While the text gives the reader the choice to read faster or slower, to repeat or to pause, in theatre the specific time of the performance with its particular rhythm and its individual dramaturgy (tempo of action and speech, duration, pauses and silences, etc.) belongs to the ‘work.’ (Lehmann 2006, 153)

Just as Lehmann explains with regard to the performance of dramatic texts, the experience of media art is dictated by the exhibition environment. Despite the fact that viewers may enter and leave as they choose, they cannot view and hear the piece at their own pace: Time ‘belongs’ to the work.

Of the three Aristotelian principles the classicists derived from the *Poetics*, the ‘unity of place’ has been most noticeably ignored. From Shakespeare onward, what is referred to as the ‘open form’ of drama (cf. Klotz 1969; Schöblier 2012, 66) gained popularity, consisting both of a plurality of *loci*

and plot strands. This plurality of places and of plot elements could very well be—but has not yet been—discussed using the *fabula* and *sužet* distinction that the Formalists developed with regard to the distribution of content in prose texts. A central difference is that in prose shifts in time, place, and even plot are usually integrated through a narrative instance, which does not exist in drama.

Both the unity of time and the unity of place are the central parameters for depicting drama structures in media art, while the third Aristotelean principle, the ‘unity of action’ (referring to the fact that a drama normally concentrates on one main plot) does not play a significant role. While literary and audiovisual narratives share the feature of a flexible presentation of narrated facts and events with regard to chronology as well as perspective, dramatic plots are more tightly woven “since their temporal frame must roughly correspond to the length of the performance” (Ryan 2004, 23). With regard to the fourth analytical category, dramatic characters, limiting the number of actors according to the ‘three-actor rule’ is practiced in several works of media art.

In terms of the literariness of media art, figural speech—the fifth analytical category of drama analysis—is most relevant. Drama consists of dialogs, monologs, and choral speech. The latter characteristic of ancient Greek and classicist drama regained prominence as a device of ‘complicating form’ within the context of postdramatic theater (although not associated with Russian Formalist terms). Distributing information via dialog may result in subjective, fractured, and multiple perspectives. In classical drama, hints regarding how an utterance—and thus the character—should be understood are communicated verbally and non-verbally. Verbal forms represent the soliloquy and the ‘aside,’ the latter being a theater convention where a certain utterance is directed *ad spectatores* but is supposedly not heard by the other figures on stage. A soliloquy is a self-contained text segment spoken by a single character, depicting his or her thoughts, intentions, and feelings. Dialog and monolog can be combined in the form of “dialogical soliloquies” and “monological dialogues” (Pfister 1988, 127; also see Byron 2003, 16–18). Nonverbal information includes gestures and facial expressions, which are often found in stage directions, following a convention that gained relevance from the late 18th century onward, continuing well into the early 20th century.

In classical tragedy, if an event that is important to the plot cannot be shown on stage because it would destroy the unity of place, or if the staging of the event would violate either the rules of decency or verisimilitude, it is narrated through a mediating figure. This figure is either a messenger giving his or her account of a past event he or she has witnessed, or a person simultaneously depicting what he or she perceives off-stage in a ‘teichoscopy’ (*teichosopia*, Greek for ‘viewing from a wall’). The latter is a convention that allows a simultaneous off-stage event to be verbally represented and visually ‘withdrawn’ at the same time, which creates heightened dramatic tension and stimulates the audience’s imagination. Through these devices, dreadful events or scenes that cannot be represented due to the practical limitations of the stage (e.g. large battles with war carriages) are integrated by means of a narrative, not a scenic representation. In dramatic theory, these reports of ‘covered’ or ‘back-scene’ action are considered “epic elements by figures inside the action” (Pfister 1988, 76). Contrary to on-stage action that is “multimedial and a-perspectival,” they are “purely verbal” and linked to a particular perspective (ibid., 204). The postulate of a secondary status of narrated passages in relation to stage action can already be found indirectly in Aristotle, who defines tragedy as “a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude—in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts—in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative” (Aristotle 1987; Ch. 6, 37). The primacy of action dominates dramatic theory until the 20th century, for instance when Volker Klotz argues that narrated events “do not appear on the stage bare and unmediated, instead they are tamed, language has subjugated and articulated them” (Klotz 1969, 32). Other scholars do not consider the narrative depiction of events hidden from the audience’s gaze as an auxiliary

structure. On the contrary, they highlight how messengers' reports and *teichoscopia* contain their distinct aesthetic qualities: Narrative mediation is considered an "important and dramatically economical way of establishing focus and emphasis and creating suspense" (Pfister 1988, 204).

### ***Ostranenie and the Alienation Effect***

For several decades there has been a debate as to whether Brecht's well-known concept of the 'alienation effect'—the central device of his epic theater—was influenced by Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*. Douglas Robinson gives four explanations of how Brecht may have developed his idea of the *Verfremdungseffekt* ('alienation effect' or simply 'A-effect'): (1) he took up a German philosophical discussion on (aesthetic as well as social and economic) alienation, which was already established around 1800 by thinkers such as Novalis, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and later by Karl Marx; (2) he was familiar with Shklovsky's approach and based his concept on *ostranenie*; (3) he learned about estrangement as a theatrical device from the acting style known as 'Beijing Opera'; (4) he developed it, like most other key concepts of his epic theater, through his practical work (cf. Robinson 2008, 167f). In a German-speaking context, both Brecht's and Shklovsky's concepts are referred to as *Verfremdung*, causing a terminological confusion.

As already elaborated on, *ostranenie* stands for 'making strange' and is derived from the Russian adjective *strannyi* (strange; cf. Lachmann 1970, 228). Like Shklovsky's concept, the Brechtian *Verfremdung* also aims at "making-conspicuous" (cf. Robinson 2008, 170). It is not usually translated into Russian as *ostranenie* but as *otchozhdenie* (cf. Günther 2001, 137; Robinson 2008, 137 and 171), which is closely related to the German word *Entfremdung* (alienation), a term coined by Hegel and Marx and conceptualized by the latter with regard to capitalist production processes, in which workers are alienated from their products by the division of labor and the selling of their labour power. At first, Brecht used the term *Entfremdung*; only after visiting Russia in 1935 did he introduce the term *Verfremdung* into his writings. In his article "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936) he describes this device as follows:

The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious. (Brecht 1964a, 91)

Brecht explicitly speaks of an "effort to make the incidents represented appear strange to the public" (ibid.) and emphasized in a later text how "[a] representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (Brecht 1964d, 192). Similar to Shklovsky and other Russian Formalists as well as Prague School Structuralists, Brecht emphasizes the perception of the artwork. Opposing an immersive experience, he intended to establish a distance between actor and character, between spectator and the action on stage.

A difference between Shklovsky's and Brecht's concepts is that the former focuses on the disjunction of practical and poetic language in literature, while the latter envisions a new acting technique in which the actors distance themselves from their utterances by exposing the act of presenting ("to show with a definite gest of showing," Brecht 1964c, 136). Shklovsky sees the purpose of art as a restoration and intensification of perception, enabled by a complication of form. When he claims that "[a]rt is a means of experiencing the process of creativity," while "[t]he artifact itself is quite unimportant" (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6), it seems as if he perpetuates

the aestheticist idea of *l'art pour l'art*. Yet, his famous polemical remark that “[a]utomatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (ibid., 5) also shows the often overlooked ethical-political dimension of *ostranenie*. In Brecht’s theory, the perspective is similar, but with a different focus. Although he emphasizes that “the epic theatre is an extremely artistic affair” (Brecht 1964b, 126), its foremost aim is not the ostension of form as a means in itself but the establishment of a tool for intellectual intervention (cf. Mitchell 1974, 74; Günther 2001, 141). Therefore, the Formalist concept of *ostranenie* focuses on aesthetic perception and its ‘seeing anew,’ whereas the theater concept of *Verfremdung* is intended to expose alienating ideologies.

When Brecht illustrates his concept with the example of a man wearing a watch and suddenly looking at it carefully, realizing that it is “in many ways an astonishing piece of machinery” (Brecht 1964c, 144), his argumentation is nonetheless reminiscent of Shklovsky’s concept of deautomatization. The similarities are particularly striking in his definition of the A-effect:

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. [. . .] Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. (ibid., 143f)

In other words: “In both theories the (proper) role of art is seen as one of de-routinization, de-automatisation: art is the enemy of habit; it renews, refreshes our perceptions; by ‘making-strange’ it defamiliarises” (Mitchell 1974, 74).

In his “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect” (1940), Brecht lists devices essential to his epic theater—a radical new approach that discouraged involving the audience in an illusory narrative world and in the emotions of the characters. Its central goal is to establish a “non-Aristotelian [. . .] type” (Brecht 1964a, 91) of play that is not dependent on empathy or identification with the characters. Central to achieving that goal, the actor on stage does not fully merge with the person represented: “The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them” (Brecht 1964c, 137). To this end, the actor speaks his part “not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation” (ibid., 138). He does not hide his own face and puts on another one but needs to “show the two faces overlapping” (Brecht 2015, 65) through gestures of ‘showing’ and ‘quoting’ that distance the behavior and utterances of the persons portrayed. The distancing effect is achieved by a performer who “never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him,” which means that the audience “can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place” (Brecht 1964a, 91f). The objective is “to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work” (ibid., 92), thus exposing acting as a device itself. These performance strategies are characteristic of several media artworks that are discussed later in this section.

By using formal features such as signs and banners held up by the actors, projecting captions, or introducing a commentator who directly addresses the audience, epic theater destroys any mimetic impulse, losing its illusionary power and deriving a new agency. The alienation of the theater experience is further enhanced by three formal epic devices: the transposition into the third person; the transposition into the past; and speaking the stage directions out loud. While

the first two devices allow the actors to detach from their roles, the third device makes palpable the peculiar structure of dramatic texts:

Speaking the stage directions out loud in the third person results in a clash between two voices, alienating the second of them, the text proper. This style of acting is further alienated by taking place on the stage after having already been outlined and announced in words. Transposing it to the past gives the speaker a standpoint from which he can look back at his sentence. The sentence too is thereby alienated without the speaker adopting an unreal point of view. (ibid.)

The basic model of epic theater is the “street scene” (Brecht 1964b, 122), where an eyewitness of a traffic accident demonstrates to a crowd of people how this event came about (cf. ibid.). The action here does not take place in front of the audience but is narrated retrospectively, as in the classical messengers’ report (cf. Lehmann 2006, 31). In epic theater, the embodiment of a role is replaced by the demonstration of it in order to shatter the illusionist primacy of bourgeois stage productions:

The theatre’s demonstrator, the actor, must apply a technique which will let him reproduce the tone of the subject demonstrated with a certain reserve, with detachment [. . .]. In short, the actor must remain a demonstrator; he must present the person demonstrated as a stranger, he must not suppress the ‘he did that, he said that’ element in his performance. He must not go so far as to be wholly transformed into the person demonstrated. (Brecht 1964b, 125)

What Brecht conceptualizes here is a distance of the actor from the person portrayed or the event depicted. Generally, epic theater demonstrates rather than embodies—or it continuously shifts between these two modes. The effect of Brechtian devices is related to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “double-voice-discourse” (Bakhtin 1981, 324), which was also highlighted by Hans Günther (cf. Günther 2001, 138).

Peter Szondi sees Brecht’s revolutionary theater as part of the “tentative solutions” of the “crisis of drama” around 1900 that resulted both in an epicization and lyricization of the genre (cf. Szondi 1987). In contrast to Szondi, who bases his observations mainly on the overpowering authority of Brecht, Lehmann argues that “the epicizing tendency and the lyrical theater are themselves only moments: namely the transformation that has *mutually estranged theater and drama and has distanced them ever further from each other*” (Lehmann 2006, 30). According to Lehmann, this resulted not only in the dissolution of classical norms and a modified dramaturgy but also in a development toward a theater that is no longer even based on ‘drama’—what he calls “post-dramatic form” (cf. ibid.).

### ***Features of Postdramatic Theater***

The links between literariness and postdramatic theater have already been outlined in Chapter 2, Section 2. Postdrama consciously negates traditional genre conventions, resulting in the “failure of the classical aesthetic ideal of an ‘organic’ connection of the elements in an artefact” (ibid., 88). The organic whole of a drama is disrupted through the self-conscious break with the dramatic cosmos. Lehmann speaks of an “irruption of the real” (ibid., 101) through a violation of the dramatic fiction or breaking of the theatrical frame.

Lehmann's theory takes an interest in the effects of postdramatic devices on the audience, particularly the simultaneous overstraining of all sensory channels or the drastic reduction of the dramatic situation, for example through the mere iteration of single words or phrases (ibid., 89). At times, the synchronicity of plural levels of signification is taken to the extreme, aiming at a "paratactical, de-hierarchized use of signs" (ibid., 93). Lehmann emphasizes the aspect of perception as a central feature of postdramatic theater, which is of similar importance for the reception of media art:

In a frame of meaning that has become porous, the concrete, sensuously intensified *perceptibility* comes to the fore. This term, 'perceptibility,' captures the virtual and incomplete nature of the theatrical perception that is produced or at least intended here. While mimesis in Aristotle's sense produces the pleasure of recognition and thus virtually always achieves a result, here the sense data always refer to answers that are sensed as possible but not (yet) graspable; what one sees and hears remains in a state of potentiality, its appropriation postponed. It is in this sense that we are talking about a *theatre of perceptibility*. [...] The play(ing) as a concrete event produced in the moment fundamentally changes the logic of perception and the status of the subject of perception, who can no longer find support in a representative order. (ibid., 99)

Postdrama creates an awareness that is opposed to recognition, as does Shklovsky's understanding of the purpose of art. Postdrama alters the conventionality of perception of its viewers, who are kept in a state of suspense and indefiniteness. To achieve its effects on perception, postdrama often integrates multiple media, including video projections, to disrupt automatized recognition. Lehmann speaks of an "element of war against the audience" that was initiated by avant-garde and neo-avant-garde forms of theater and that attacked "its 'automated' perception" (ibid., 105; in the German original, there is also a reference to Russian Formalism; cf. Lehmann 1999, 180). In his book on the transformation of stage performances through technology and digitization, Chris Salter lists characteristics "that distinguish it from other forms of knowledge making." Stage performances are constituted by "an interest in enaction or doing," highlighting "real-time, dynamic processes over static objects or representations," as well as an "engagement with the temporal moment of the present." Performances further emphasize the importance of "embodiment and materiality," of "immanent experience," caused by "the effect of both human and nonhuman presence" (Salter 2010, xxiii).

Some of these characteristics are also significant for media art, especially for the video performances discussed in Chapter 3, Section 1. Theater productions that combine live performances with, for instance, video projections foreground "the inherent tensions at play between the live ontology of performance arts and the mediated, non-live, and simulacral nature of virtual technologies" (Dixon 2007, 23). The influence of media technologies on theater productions results in an 'aesthetic of overabundance' as described by Lehman:

Theatre in this respect reacts to media culture. For economic, aesthetic, and media specific reasons, McLuhan's world had to become a world of overabundance. It increased the density and number of stimuli to such an extent that this plethora of images increasingly leads to a strange disappearance of the naturally, physically perceived world. While 'instrumental perception', as media theory calls it in contrast to corporeal perception, is gaining ever more importance, the question of an 'appropriate' density of information, too, becomes increasingly independent from the conditions of physical, sensory perception. What remains open

is the question of whether the permanent bombardment with images and signs, combined with an ever increasing rift between perception and real sensual contact, will in time train the organs to register in an increasingly superficial way. (Lehmann 2006, 89)

In postdramatic theater as in media art, the “bombardment with images and signs” that is characteristic of contemporary media culture in general can be turned into an artistic device. In contrast to Lehmann’s slightly dystopian conclusion, it can also be argued that such a strategic overabundance does not necessarily numb perception but instead renews it. Media art imitates sensorial effects, for example by employing haptic images that address the viewer’s memory of touch.

### *Dialogic and Performative Installations*

Media art sometimes relates specifically to an understanding of drama as the dialog-based literary genre. On the level of mediality, either the use of multiple screens formally creates a dialogical setting or other features, such as artificially shaped dialogs, highlight media art’s relationship to drama. But it must be kept in mind that starting in the 20th century, theater questioned the paradigm of dialog. Andrej Wirth argues that there is a “gradual disappearance of the conversational dialog in favor of forms of dramatic discourse more removed from dialogue” (Wirth 1980; 16). While the conversational dialog of ‘dramatic theater’ takes place in a specific scene presented on stage, more recent forms of discourse transcend the ‘fourth wall’ and address or even integrate the audience directly (cf. *ibid.*). The “amplified speech-space” of Brechtian and post-Brechtian theater is constituted by discourse, not by conventional sequences of dialogical interaction: “[I]n this theater without dialog the figures only seem to be speaking. It would be more accurate to say that they are being spoken by the author of the script or that the audience lends its inner voice to them” (*ibid.*, 19). It is this seeming reference to conventional theater dialog that media art displays in various performative multi-screen installations.

In the 1980s and 1990s, **Bruce Nauman** produced several multi-channel video installations that perform a dialog between the screens. His polyphonic works based on iteration and variation have been compared to absurd theater, namely the plays of Samuel Beckett (cf. Melcher 1999, 51; Tubridy 2007, 5 and 9). An example of the continuous tension between dialogical and monological dramatic language is his two-channel work *Good Boy, Bad Boy* (US 1985), a video installation with a setting reminiscent of the classical picture stage. The viewer is confronted with two television monitors, mounted at eye-level on pedestals standing next to each other (Figure 4.2.2). Initially, the two figures bring to mind associations of news anchors in a split screen montage. However, when thinking in Structuralist terms, the exhibition room functions as the stage, while the video sculptures can be regarded as a replacement for the human actor in the flesh, and thus a defamiliarization of the theatrical convention. Two persons, presented only by their heads and shoulders but exactly to scale, make normative statements that partly contradict each other, speaking almost simultaneously with a slight delay:

I was a good boy,  
 You were a good boy,  
 We were good boys,  
 That was good.  
 I was a good girl,  
 You were a good girl,  
 We were good girls,  
 That was good.

I was a bad boy,  
 You were a bad boy,  
 We were bad boys,  
 That was bad.  
 I was a bad girl,  
 You were a bad girl,  
 We were bad girls,  
 That was bad.

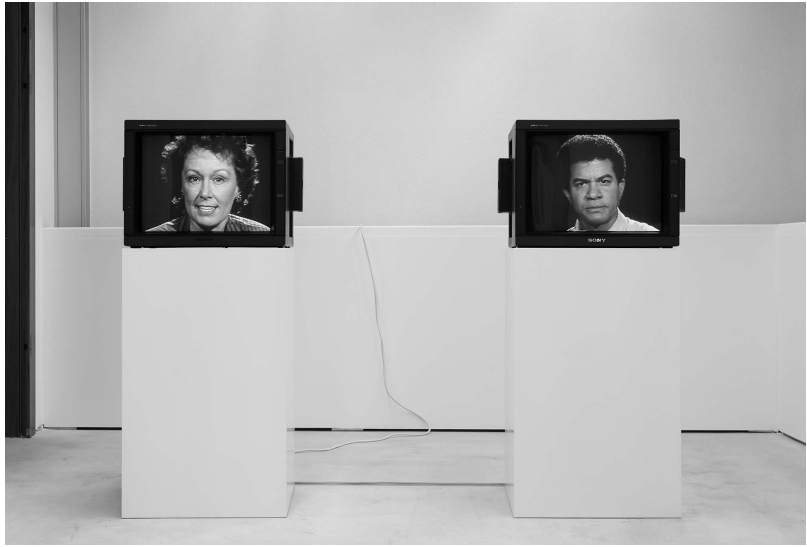


FIGURE 4.2.2 Bruce Nauman. *Good Boy, Bad Boy*. 1985.

[...]

I piss,  
 You piss,  
 We piss,  
 This is piss.  
 I like to sleep,  
 You like to sleep,  
 We like to sleep,  
 Sleep well.

I pay,  
 You pay,  
 We pay,  
 This is payment.  
 I don't want to die,  
 You don't want to die,  
 We don't want to die,  
 This is fear of death.  
 (Nauman in Blume 2010, 58f)

These absurd lines follow a common principle of declination, emphasized by the performers' rhythmic pronunciation. Each set of four lines constitutes a rhetorical unit; in the first line a proposition is formulated in the first-person singular, in the second line in the second person singular, and in the third line in the first-person plural; the fourth line forms an assessment or 'conclusion.' This rudimentary construction, varied throughout the piece, resembles strategies of concrete poetry, such as Eugen Gomringer's *Stundenbuch* (1965), where simple changes to words or word order create new meaning. What makes *Good Boy, Bad Boy* worth discussing within a section on the elements of drama in media art is its dialogic, or rather polyvocal choral setting.

The text, declining 'good' and 'bad' humans and deeds in a child-like manner, is reminiscent of a school recitation, "and yet the onslaught of two competing voices repeating the same cycle of phrases five times each suggests indoctrination rather than education" (Benezra 1994, 39). It consists of 100 phrases (lines), an arbitrary number that corresponds to Nauman's neon work *One Hundred Live and Die*, discussed in Chapter 4, Section 1. Diction and facial expression do not necessarily correspond to each other (cf. Schulz-Hoffmann 1997, 9), for instance when one of the actors claims "I'm having fun" and then immediately states "I'm bored," with an identical voice and facial expression. The same holds true for the personal pronouns and gender. The piece is performed by two professional actors—Joan



Lancaster and Tucker Smallwood—five times; at first in a neutral tone and later with more rhythm, power, and aggression. Many of the statements imply moral judgments that seem, through repetition and articulation, increasingly ambiguous, even threatening. Both speakers need different periods of time to recite the entire text (between 15 and 17 minutes), causing their statements to drift apart from each other, which throws the performance out of synchronicity, creating an absurd dialog:

Because the woman on the right monitor is speaking with more emphasis than the male protagonist, her talk is more time-consuming, whereby the sentences that are running synchronously at the beginning increasingly relate to each other like an echo, so that, due to minor changes in word and syntax combinations, they suddenly behave toward one another like polemical comments. With this form of the shifting parallelization of two actions or a sequence of sentence litanies, *Good Boy Bad Boy* is a typical example of Nauman's artistic approach to disassembling the contents of plot and meaning. (Frohne 1999, 35)

The communicative act proves to be fundamentally one-sided. Although the recipient is addressed directly by the two speakers, he or she is unable to answer. This may be a media reflection on the traditional 'fourth wall' in drama and film—but of course also, and even more so, on television. Contrary to this, the speakers try to make 'eye contact' by looking straight into the camera. What at first seems like a dialogical arrangement turns into two asynchronous monologs in the end—a highly "artificial relationship," both between the actor and the audience and between the man and the woman who speak "at a psychological and physical distance from each other, framed within their own separate monitors" (Van Bruggen 1988, 239).

For his video installation *World Peace (Projected)* (US 1996), **Nauman** chose a more immersive theatrical setting (in this case, the Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich, 1997). Five large screens show videos of speakers depicted as 'talking heads.' A total of seven people from different national and ethnic backgrounds appear individually on the screens, suggesting a global panel discussion or teleconference (Figure 4.2.3). The varying lengths of each video (between 45 and 59 minutes) and the fact that speakers reappear on different screens lead to a fluid, confusing situation. Through these formal conditions, it is very likely that no visitor will ever experience an identical performance.

Despite the first impression of a global conference, the 'panelists' make no political statements but instead utter constative phrases, referring to the act of communication itself and only varying the personal pronouns (as in *Good Boy, Bad Boy*). In the work's catalog, two versions of the dialog are printed in parallel columns, indicating that both tracks are spoken simultaneously:

[version 1]	[version 2]
I'll talk	I'll talk to you
You'll listen	You'll listen to me
You'll talk	You'll talk to me
I'll listen	I'll listen to you
I'll talk	I'll talk to them
They'll listen	They'll listen to me
They'll talk	They'll talk to me
I'll listen	I'll listen to them



FIGURE 4.2.3 Bruce Nauman. *World Peace (Projected)*. 1996.

You'll talk	You'll talk to them
They'll listen	They'll listen to you
They'll talk	They'll talk to you
You'll listen	You'll listen to them

(Nauman in Schulz-Hoffmann 1997, 19)

When visitors approach the exhibition space, they hear a polyvocal litany: a stream of words, modulated in different vocal registers. Inside the space, five persons are seen on large screens, thus appearing much larger than life, speaking, gesturing or doing both at once. Only after a while does it become clear that two participants are not communicating verbally but through sign language. The topic of 'world peace' seems to be human communication—an interaction carried out exclusively in English. But their claims run empty and the promised verbal exchange does not take place (cf. Schulz-Hoffmann 1997, 9). Therefore, the title *World Peace (Projected)* does not relate solely to the mediality—the video projection—but also to the 'projective character' of the dialog being shown, an ambiguity typical of Nauman's work with language (cf. *ibid.*). Just as in Dieter Froese's *The Piece in the Country (Failure Piece #2)*, discussed in Chapter 4, Section 3, the homonyms 'peace' and 'piece' are played out. A soft pronunciation may even allude to the notion of a 'word piece.' Apart from its theatrical setting—a form of immersive, accessible stage on which both the players act and the audience moves around—and its drama references, this work is reminiscent of modern mass media, especially due to the apparently 'live' format of popular

television talk shows. Communication itself is at the core of both of Nauman's works discussed here, with regard to the content and to the direct address of the audience through linguistic and appellative means. The link to the drama genre is made through formalized and repetitive language and also the absence of a moderator: It is (seeming) self-statements of (seeming) *dramatis personae* that the audience hears.

The relevance of the analysis of dramatic dialog in media art is particularly acute when confronting **Gerard Byrne's** monumental video installation *A Man and a Woman Make Love* (GB 2012), developed for the 2012 Documenta 13 in Kassel and presented there in the large two-story former ballroom of the Grand City Hotel Hessenland. In this installation, five large screens, dispersed throughout the room like partitions, presented a concurrent action with one shared audio track (Figure 4.2.4). The large-scale installation forced the audience to move around the dividing walls, making it impossible to view all the projections at once. The script of Byrne's installation is based on a 1928 series of roundtable discussions on sexuality and eroticism among a loose collective of male French Surrealist artists and writers, among them André Breton, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy. The discussion was transcribed and published in the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*. The title *A Man and a Woman Make Love* is taken from the first line of the script that audiences hear. The artist commissioned RTE, the Irish public television broadcaster, to create a TV drama of the original conversation as it was published in the journal. Using excerpts of the Surrealist's discourse is typical for Byrne's artistic strategy of reenacting conversations from specific historic moments to explore how the present is understood by revisiting the past.

Contrary to what one would expect, the set for the restaging of the Surrealists' meeting is a large parlor with conservative dark wooden furniture and décor: There is nothing 'avant-garde' about it. Similarly, the protagonists—played by British actors in their 30s to 40s—are dressed in



FIGURE 4.2.4 Gerard Byrne. *A Man and a Woman Make Love*. 2012.

conventional early-20th-century bourgeois men's clothes. The setting of the studio in a large interior space (presumably the hotel ballroom itself) is exposed, with only three walls. In a further violation of mimetic illusionism, viewers can see numerous camera operators filming the action. Byrne wanted the production to look like a classic 1980s television production, interspersed with 'behind the scenes' footage showing the creation of the piece, thereby emphasizing the artifice in the act of restaging. Although it was filmed in one continuous take, the television drama is presented across multiple projections. In presentations, the production is simultaneously enacted in the studio, filmed, broadcast, and watched—an irritating combination of heterogeneous representations of a shared contiguous temporality. The short, cut-out scenes in which a single person watches the final production are ironic with regard to both technology and gender: The production is displayed on old-style television sets as well as on flat screens and a laptop, and the viewers are women—the only women who appear in this work. At one point, some sequences are presented on a video observation screen hanging from the ceiling in the Hotel Hessenland lobby. Several shots are also taken from inside the control room, where its numerous monitors display the action as it is being recorded. Most of the control room screens show individual actors as they are conversing. The actor's first name is shown under the recording, indicating the personal camera (for instance "Alan 1," "Garett 2," "Robbie 3"). A staff member holds the script in his hand—and toward the camera—while observing the simultaneous filming in the control room. In short, *A Man and a Woman Make Love* is a highly self-reflexive and hypermedial video installation, exposing its creation as well as its (rather passive) reception.

Evoking the cliché of a stag party, the Surrealists' bawdy conversation is devoted to only one topic: sex. They discuss whether it is possible to discern if a woman feigns an orgasm and the impact of faking on a man's lust, and they are particularly interested in practices that were taboo in their time, such as onanism, mutual masturbation, uncleanliness in women, homosexuality, sodomy, brothel visits, and public sex. When discussing a woman's ideal age, some of them boast that they favor teenage girls. The discussion seems fueled by rivalry and competition, leading the men to make ever more fantastic statements. Drinking, smoking, bragging, they do not elicit admiration but antipathy. In this regard, *A Man and a Woman Make Love* is a parodic deconstruction of masculinity and the myth of the sophisticated artist.

The conversation jumps from one topic to the next, largely initiated by the character of Breton, who comes up with new sexual practices and often addresses his friends by name, asking for their opinions. The conversational tone the men use to talk about sex almost makes it appear that they are discussing a very different topic, like politics. They never hesitate or shy away from answers—but they do not share personal stories nor mention a female partner by name. Therefore, the discourse is both concrete and abstract.

Although some critics have compared *A Man and a Woman Make Love* to conventional, old-fashioned television productions, it also shares clear similarities with the theater (that are generally of importance for the artist, as he himself points out; cf. Byrne in Jocks 2007, 278). From a genre perspective, it closely resembles a conversation piece with its character types and fast verbal exchange, based on a 'well-made play' with an entertaining, witty script. Byrne claims to be interested in "bourgeois self-presentation" in the theater (ibid., 279), which is especially dominant in such conversation pieces. Translated, edited down, and conflated, the script does not conform to natural human speech, causing the acting to seem stilted. Byrne's aesthetic strategies have been discussed in reference to Brecht's theater concepts (cf. Best 2012)—although not with a direct discussion of the work focused on here—a fact that the artist himself confirms when he states that Brecht has definitely inspired him (cf. Byrne in Jocks, 278). Curiously, another of Byrne's artistic influences is Russian Formalism (cf. ibid.), though this topic is not further explored. Susan Best claims that the artist's "originality lies in his revival of the complexity of



FIGURE 4.2.5 Gerard Byrne. *A Man and a Woman Make Love*. 2012.

Brecht’s A-effect,” revealing what she calls “Brecht’s additive approach: the addition of distancing techniques alongside modes of engagement, identification, and bringing close” (Best 2012, 225). Disillusionism, the central device of Byrne’s Documenta 13 installation, is played out on various levels, most obviously by the fractured projection of the piece on several screens, including views of the shoot and how the audience receives the work (Figure 4.2.5). Another aspect is Byrne’s focus on textuality and ‘literarization’:

My work is about searching for texts, about a kind of rediscovery or discovering anew, although most of them are relatively unknown [. . .]. I prefer to work with texts that used to belong to the mainstream, but transformed into something obscure over time. (Byrne in Jocks 2007, 281)

Here, Byrne describes an estranging device that is relatively rare in the application of literary structures to media art: a practice of *ostranenie* based not on the act of verbal or visual presentation of language itself, but on an experience of strangeness due to the historic transformation and growing distance towards a text and its cultural universe from a diachronic perspective (cf. Kessler 2010, 69).

### ***Theatrical Overabundance: Playing with the Theatrical Frame***

An example of estrangement Shklovsky offers in his article “Art as Device” is the description of an outing to the opera in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, narrated from the perspective of a young girl, Natasha. The passage describes the scenery with almost microscopic precision, thus exposing the conventions of stage design instead of automatically interpreting them. For instance, Natasha describes props as “painted pictures depicting trees,” and one of the singers as “[o]ne young girl,

very fat, and attired in white silk, was sitting [. . .] on a low bench to which a green cardboard was attached from behind” (Tolstoy in Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 8). These quotations illustrate that the “device of enstrangement” (ibid., 12) Tolstoy uses here causes a distancing and disillusioning gaze, a gaze that decodes and deconstructs the rules and tacit agreements of the “Theatrical Frame” (Goffman 1974, 123–155). The ‘material’ of the theater is exposed by the seemingly naïve descriptions of an observer who is not willing to succumb to the rules of the game (cf. Lachmann 1970, 232). Such an exposure of the structures of both drama and theater—the latter in the form of a gaze ‘behind the scenes’—is the dominant of some media artworks. In this regard, they are meta-theatrical and reflect upon an elevated theatricality and an overabundance of aesthetic signs.

**Catherine Sullivan’s** five-channel installation *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* (US 2003) is another artwork that employs estrangement devices to explore the theater frame, and in so doing “raises questions about the relation of moving image art to theatre” (Newman 2009, 107). The artwork’s title evokes the picturesque landscapes of glaciers in the Arctic Ocean, conjuring an image of mesmerizing, barely touched nature. Yet the impressions brought about by the title clash with the dismal atmosphere and bizarre scenarios that the video reveals. Instead of the serene vastness of the Arctic Archipelago, Sullivan’s artwork confronts viewers with an atmosphere of constricted tension. This discrepancy introduces the installation’s first moment of deautomatization. Estranging effects are further enforced by the context in which the artwork was created. Sullivan’s piece was brought into being against the background of the Chechen takeover of the Dubrovka musical theater in Moscow in 2002. Nearly 200 people died when Russian security forces pumped poisonous gas into the building’s ventilation system before storming the building. Yet there are no direct references to these horrifying events in Sullivan’s black-and-white loop (about 27 minutes long), and the viewer is puzzled as to its influence on the piece. Instead of depicting scenes resembling a hostage crisis or the ‘spectacular’ news coverage of the incident, the artwork refers to a popular Russian musical with a German title, *Nord-Ost* [Northeast], which was being staged in the Dubrovka when the terrorist act happened. These different backgrounds create a densely layered web, with the artwork referring not only to a historical event but also to a musical, which in turn is based on a novel—*The Tivo Captains* (1938–1944), by Veniamin Kaverin—about a Russian expedition to the Arctic. This complex, conflicting structure of terrorism and entertainment appears designed to overwhelm the viewer.

The relationship to the novel and musical are also cryptic, however. Twenty-three actors performing up to five different roles each act out 50 pantomimes that symbolize different scenes from *The Tivo Captains* (cf. Sullivan 2006b). Yet as Sebastian Egenhofer claims, the content is hard to identify even for those familiar with the novel or musical (cf. Egenhofer 2006, 27). The script indicates the scenes’ at times absurd content, as in Part II, “Sim-Sim Under Siege”:

- A) The debating society argues over Ali Baba’s actual words in front of the cave, Lyadovians standing firmly behind “Open Sesame,” Pestovians making the case for “Sim-Sim.”
- B) Valka’s hedgehog can be heard clawing the bars of its cage.
- C) Romashka counts astronomical ranges of numbers out loud.
- D) The sound of applause can be heard from Grisha Faber’s play.
- E) GRISHA FABER (with uncertainty), RUSSIAN AIRFORCE SANYA (with a sense of victory), METROPOLESE (with a sense of absolute power), COMMUNE 4 SCHOOL SANYA #5 (with a sense of total failure): “My men, the hour has come!”

(Sullivan 2006b, 89)

The pantomimes do not reflect the content of the scenes; instead, the actors perform abstract gestures, make noises, weep, scream, and sometimes recite single sentences from the novel. Though the artist maintains that she had no “neo-Brechtian” (Sullivan 2006a, 50) intentions, the piece does in fact possess certain features of epic theater that contribute to the alienation effects of the artwork. The camera moves among the actors and peeks through doors to look in on the action, clearly directing the viewer’s focus to the actors. In particular, the type of acting contributes to achieving an A-effect, as the actors work against the creation of an illusion, showing the roles rather than embodying them. In some pantomimes, actors walk almost zombie-like, staring straight ahead, giving them an uncanny appearance (Figure 4.2.6).

The actors speak as part of chorus, yet their words bear no resemblance to the commentating function of a traditional drama chorus. *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* is a “deconstruction” of the theatrical frame, in which “the coherence of actor and role has been systematically dissolved” (Egenhofer 2006, 27). The actors themselves appear as the piece’s “raw material” (ibid.), which results in a clear division between the *signans* and the *signatum*. The viewer searches for connecting points, yet the artwork evades the grip of narrative cognition.

As Sullivan and Egenhofer state, *Ice Floes* refers to the musical as automatization perfected. This is achieved not only through action, for the abstract pantomimes are highly automatized, but also through structure, as they have been arranged at the intersection of arbitrariness and minute planning: The pantomimes are repeated again and again by each actor but in a different sequence. Thus, the piece follows a strategy similar to many artworks that use iteration as defamiliarizing device—especially artworks that employ verbal language (see Chapter 3, Section 1)—although it does so both through linguistic means and via repetition of the action. Yet far from becoming used to and therefore automatized to the events on the screen, the viewer is repeatedly faced with deautomatization. A viewer may recognize a movement pattern, yet that recognition does not lead to understanding. *Ice Floes* thus reflects on appropriation and adaptation as constant processes of recognition and annexation by the viewer: Viewing remains estranged, and the artwork becomes ‘the other,’ which the viewer cannot appropriate.

On this level, the artwork’s relationship to the terrorist attack is revealed. The viewer is forced to surrender to what is happening, unable to grasp the meaning of what is depicted. This happens not only in terms of the actors, who act according to the script without breaking away from



FIGURE 4.2.6 Catherine Sullivan. *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land*. 2003.

its automatized patterns, but also in terms of the viewer's feeling of being unable to understand and thus being forced to surrender to the arbitrariness of acts of terrorism. Sullivan states that "[w]ithin arbitrariness itself there lies a brutality whose only logic is a repetition that becomes increasingly more painful with every recombination" (Sullivan 2006a, 59), and the artwork seems to reflect in each repetition the brutality of being at the mercy of others. Sullivan's piece plays with the tension between arbitrariness and meticulous planning, just as acts of terrorism appear arbitrary yet are planned.

Strategically overwhelming viewers and confronting them with the uncanny demonstrates that the artwork is not a direct representation of the hostage crisis but more of a rendering of what can be experienced yet not depicted. Egenhofer regards the piece as contributing to a "modern critique of representation" (Egenhofer 2006, 13), and describes how "[i]n a cultural space overfilled with images, an effective iconoclasm cannot seriously do without images but must be an analysis of their genesis, of the forces and power relations that are at work in them" (ibid.). Within today's media-saturated culture and the omnipresence of image-circulating media, endless remediations of images allow terrorist acts and their power and disturbing force to unfold repeatedly—yet the images that cause shock circulate repeatedly until our senses dull. *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* attacks this process not by disrupting the viewer's experience through depicting already familiar images but rather by evoking what cannot be conveyed by these images: the fear and sense of being overwhelmed by images of the victims of the crisis. The artwork does not do this by avoiding images but by cutting the cord between signifier and signified. Stripped bare of their referential function, the grotesque pantomimes and estranged acting appear as the only way to depict the undepictable.

Videos and installations by the Israeli artist **Keren Cytter**, who works and lives in Germany, have a particularly strong connection to the drama genre and theatrical forms. Recurring stylistic elements in Cytter's experimental video works include long soliloquy or polyvocal pieces, in which sound and images are not fully synchronic or coherent; as well as subtitles and spoken words that diverge from each other, as when a female actor's words are dubbed in a male voice or a subtitle refers to something completely unrelated to the visible and audible content. At times, notes or stage directions are self-reflexively integrated into the dialogs or characters jump in and out of their fictional universe (cf. Peleg 2006, 7f). Dialogs and conversation, often presented in stage-like settings, are important features in Cytter's video art:

The films consist largely of conversations, monologues and/or a narrator's voice. These forms of communication overlap and merge erratically but systematically, creating multiple layers of voice, and thus generating intricate systems of verbal communication. A complex system of relationships between the different characters and their context results in an endless interactive attempt to stay in sync with the organizing order of the script. (ibid., 9)

As a rule, the artist disassembles elements of film into their components and joins them together in a new way—elements such as actors, role, voice, spoken words, audible texts, or subtitles. For example, Cytter's video *Dreamtalk* (NL 2005) presents a triangular relationship reminiscent of the 'three-actor rule' (cf. Benthien 2012, 320–323). Similar to an 'intimate play,' the *mise-en-scène* is dominated by language in that the characters mainly interact verbally, as in Byrne's video installation discussed earlier. But here the characters address each other mostly in verse. As in Cytter's *The Mirror*, *Dreamtalk* contains choral speech, which is unusual for audiovisual media but characteristic of certain types of drama.



Theatrical overabundance is the prime feature of two videos by **Cytter**, hybrid both in their topics and medial aesthetics. The videos were produced for the 2008 art biennale Manifesta in Trento, Italy, using local amateurs and entitled *Alla ricerca dei fratelli* (*In Search of Brothers*) and *Una forza che viene del passato* (*A Force From the Past*) (IT 2008)—both lines from a poem by Pier Paolo Pasolini. The performers speak Italian and the subtitles are in English. Both feature identical actors and settings as well as similar sequences, but each carries its own script. Each video is about seven minutes long and is screened as a loop. In a 2011 exhibition in the Kunstverein München, the physical setting reinforced the puzzling duplication and mirror structure of the twin videos: The works were presented in identical small black boxes but in opposite sections of the gallery, so that viewing the second resulted in an irritating sense of déjà-vu.

Both videos start with a theatrical fanfare that seems to announce a magnificent spectacle, creating a stark contrast to the following scenes of one-dimensional characters in banal settings and everyday situations. From the very beginning, the A-effect is enforced by means of false laughter and fake gestures, the exaggeration and changing of parts within performances. Some of the young men are stock characters, such as boys playing a dirty trick or young men hitting on a woman. The actors slip in and out of their roles in a manner similar to the appropriation and distancing of the different ‘role texts.’ The scenes do not unfold into a coherent plot but rather into many small and unrelated sequences. Contradictions are established on a linguistic level, as when a character is let into a building by a doorman accompanied by the polite words “Prego, entra” (Please, come in), after being asked to say something and then uttering the insult “Tua madre è una prostituta” (Your mother is a prostitute), while the next character, a seemingly innocent man, is immediately rejected. The text is at times very modern—using terms of cultural critique such as colonizer, racist, or cynic—which contrasts with the foregrounded sexist talk of some of the male characters, who refer to women as objects and property, calling them prostitute or bitch.

The pieces make excessive use of the dramaturgic tool of ‘meta-play’ or ‘play within a play,’ a convention the theater applies to reflect upon itself and human life as drama and role-play, as found in plays such as Luigi Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1921) or Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938; cf. with regard to Cytter Van der Heide 2007, 24). In Cytter’s videos two figures in particular can be associated with such a



FIGURE 4.2.7 Keren Cytter. *Alla ricerca dei fratelli*. 2008.

meta-theatrical approach. One is a young woman with a strong and full voice who seems to represent (or to be) a theater actress (Figure 4.2.7). She is depicted rehearsing in a local community center called “BRUNO” (which is written on the back wall of the stage area) but also offers commentary on the actions as a narrator in the epic theater: “And then he left his friends and the café he felt safe in. Walked away and let the demons take over his mind[,] eat his ears and drink his mouth.” The other is an elderly man, a sort of cultivated bohemian, who obtains a meta-theatrical position by reciting an untitled poem by Pasolini from a book. At times he also acts as a theater director, giving stage directions to the other participants. The passage quoted in *Una forza che viene del passato* goes as follows:

Io sono una forza del Passato.  
Solo nella tradizione è il mio amore.  
Vengo dai ruderi, dalle chiese,  
dalle pale d’altare, dai borghi  
abbandonati sugli Appennini o le Prealpi,  
dove sono vissuti i fratelli.  
Giro per la Tuscolana come un pazzo,  
per l’Appia come un cane senza padrone.  
(Pasolini 1964, 22)

It is the manifestation of a lyric persona that claims to be a revenant, to come from the past, from ruins, churches, and altars, and whose “only love,” ironically, is tradition. The poem mentions several loci of Italian cultural history, such as Rome’s ancient Via Appia. Within the context of the videos, both the language and content seem highly anachronistic. Even when the protagonist with the book is not visible, his articulatory mode is obviously the declamation of literature.

Another video by **Cytter** uses similar devices but in a different set-up: *Untitled* (DE 2009), produced for the 53rd Venice Biennale. The video, with a running time of about 15 minutes, was presented as a loop on a large room divider within an installation that used low spotlights and dark flooring to simulate the backstage area of a theater. *Untitled* is a highly meta-theatrical piece performed by professional actors and amateurs, among them Bernhard Schütz and Maria Kwiatkowsky, former stars of the Berlin Volksbühne. The piece is inspired by John Cassavetes’s film *Opening Night* (1977), and it is based on the ‘true story’ of a boy who murders his father’s lover out of jealousy—although Cytter changes the plot significantly in that here he kills his mother. It was recorded in front of a live audience on the stage of the Hebbel Theater in Berlin. The actors speak German and the video carries English subtitles.

Cytter’s turn to theater brings the usually hidden backstage as well as the atmosphere of a rehearsal stage into the picture. Including shots of the audience watching the production adds a further layer to the self-reflexive potentialization of the viewing experience; the video audience is watching (and mirrored by) the theater audience watching the actors, placing into sharp relief the physical and temporal displacement created by the context of the exhibition, which shows the video projection in the black box. At the same time, the video audience is further removed and granted more insight into the machinations of what is occurring. The moving image provides multiple viewpoints, and the viewing experience allows audience members to feel as if they are moving around the stage with the actors instead of being forced to remain politely seated. The camera seems to be an ‘actor’ itself, especially when it is used to film from the stage through the fourth wall into the auditorium, inverting the regular theater gaze (Figure 4.2.8).



FIGURE 4.2.8 Keren Cytter. *Untitled*. 2009.

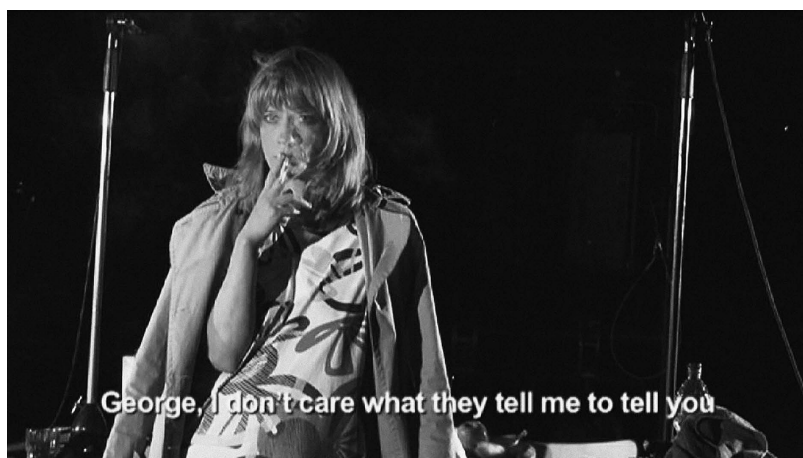


FIGURE 4.2.9 Keren Cytter. *Untitled*. 2009.

The mother is portrayed by the theater actress Caroline Peters as a kind of 'tragic heroine,' shifting between stage theatricality and a more reduced, film-like acting that is emphasized with long close-ups, reminiscent of John Cassavetes's film *Faces* (1968). Her main stage prop is a cigarette, although she is continuously admonished not to smoke on stage (Figure 4.2.9). The cigarette may be classified, as Tomashevsky suggests, as compositional motivation (cf. Tomashevsky 1965 [1925], 78f) that both structures the *mise-en-scène* and characterizes the protagonist. The story only unfolds rudimentarily, and the identity of the other figures on the stage remains vague. Some seem to be figures related to the production of the play, such as assistants to the director or a costume designer, who give stage directions or fumble around with Peters's clothes and hair. Others portray actors in a drama rehearsal that seems to be happening at the same time and is primarily heard, not seen, and is subtly interlaced into the main plot, as when the male protagonist acts with one of the two women while the audience hears an off-scene dialog that seems to be part of a rehearsal for a romantic drama sequence.

Alienation devices *à la* Brecht are applied, for instance when the two boys stand and face each other and one of them screams to his mother, who is out of the camera frame, “Georg didn’t wake up yet!”: an obvious contradiction or rather a distancing between words uttered and observable physical state. Or, to give a second example: the mother asks the boys to go to their rooms and the elder boy answers “We don’t have a room”—while the mother argues within the theatrical frame, the boy refers to the concrete stage reality.

Contradictions and wordplay fill the dialog, as in this short statement, spoken by a female off-voice (presumably the ‘lover’):

[spoken]

Lass uns zwei ficken  
Drei  
Und vier immer

[written subtitles]

Let’s fuck too  
Three  
Let’s fuck four ever

The ambiguity of *zwei*, which in German means both the number two and ‘the two of us,’ as well as *vier* (four), which in German is a wordplay between the words *vier* (four) and *für* (for), creates a defamiliarized variant of *für immer* (forever)—both reflected in the English translation, which creates another layer by exploring the homonyms ‘two’/‘too’ and ‘for’/‘four.’ Another example of this foregrounding of double or split meaning created in dialog is the question “Did he call?” answered by “How would I know, I was there”—obviously an illogical statement.

A further effect of estrangement—and a deconstruction of the dramatic ‘unity of action’—is achieved through a repetition of scenes that are not performed and filmed once more but simply cut in again in a different order. Iteration is not only a formal but also a thematic motif here, not least when actors comment to each other with an ‘again.’ Also, scenes are repeated and varied as set pieces of relationship dramas. Scenes of intimacy—between mother and child, between the lovers—are constantly interrupted as if to demonstrate that the psychological ‘intimate play’ is outdated. In one (repetitive) dialog, the following words are spoken by a female off-voice:

[spoken]

FEMALE VOICE:

Verlass mich nicht so  
Ich überleb das nicht  
Ich kann das nicht überleben  
Also verlass mich nicht so

MALE VOICE:

Was soll ich denn machen?

FEMALE VOICE:

Lass uns einfach abhauen

[written subtitles]

Don’t leave me this way  
I can’t survive.  
I can’t stay alive  
So please don’t leave me this way.

So what you want me to do?

Let’s just run!

Taken from the lyrics to the pop song “Don’t Leave Me This Way” (1976) by Selma Houston, the first four lines are not spoken in their German translation by the man’s lover, as one might expect, but by Kwiatkowsky, who appears as assistant director with a script in her hand. Only when the man asks, “So what do you want me to do?” does the lover speak, suggesting, “Let’s just run!” The recorded theater audience reacts to this break in the logic of plot (and embodiment) with laughter. There is a continuous unmarked entering and exiting of the theatrical frame, or the frame of fiction versus factuality: for instance, when a figure enters the stage only to tell one

of the actors “to stop improvising” now, or when the language abruptly shifts from beautifully uttered lyrical drama lines to drastic slang, spoken by the children. Overall, Cytter’s video establishes a disconcerting *mise-en-abyme* structure that both mirrors and frames the action, and also lays bare the theater dispositif.

The media artist creates an atmosphere of ambiguity, disquietude, and even suspense on stage through a constantly moving, seemingly involved camera; blurred or shaky images; and ambient and partly unsettling background music. Throughout the rather long piece, nervousness on the part of all participants is suggested. This atmosphere culminates in a ‘tragic finale,’ when the boy approaches his sleeping mother and shoots her with a rifle in the back—presenting the video audience with a close-up of dark red theater blood seeping out of her dress. The rather unmotivated and arbitrary murder scene is filmed from different angles, so at times the profile of the boy is visible with the illuminated auditorium in the background. In these instances, the theater lights are directly turned to the observing camera, which creates a symbolic ‘blinding effect.’ The audience is literally turned into eyewitnesses of this ‘terrible murder,’ while at the same time being observed as such.

Even though Cytter employs several techniques that may be considered Brechtian—or post-Brechtian, postdramatic—in *Untitled*, it is obvious that the focus is the artistic process itself and the modes and paradoxes of its perception, a perception that is fundamentally deautomatized. Theater as a medium with dramatic dialog as its core element is ‘made strange’ by employing another medium: video. In other words, through the numerous devices of disruption, iteration, breaking of illusion, and inverting the fourth wall, Cytter and her team expose the ‘strangeness’ of acting, of embodying, of a theatrical stage, of props, of dialog and the like. By adding the specific aesthetic devices of film—editing, *mise-en-scène*, and framing—this theatrical overabundance is simultaneously performed and exposed.

### ***Citing Elements of Classical Tragedy***

The two works considered here cite concrete elements of classical tragedy and transform them into new and surprising media settings. The first, **Magdalena von Rudy’s** *Regnava nel silenzio* (DE 2008), is a single-channel video piece of seven minutes. It is projected on a white wall a little above the viewer in an oversized format, as in the group exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* in the National Museum of Warsaw in 2010. The title is the first line of Lucia’s famous aria in the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1935), by Gaetano Donizetti. Two young women are presented on the screen in medium or extreme close-up in front of a black background, separated by a barely visible split screen. One wears a blue top, her blonde hair down; the other wears a red T-shirt and a ponytail. (Their clothing and hairstyle vary throughout the video.) The two young women are played by the same actress, a strategy the artist also uses in other works (such as *Pronuncio: Amor*, 2003, or *Persona Syndrom*, 2008). This duplication creates a disorienting effect and a heightened density. The two figures alternate being in the foreground, fading out and disappearing into the black background several times (Figure 4.2.10). The editing seems arbitrary, not following a recognizable dramaturgy. Most of the time, the women are positioned on opposite sides of the screen, yet sometimes one is shown on both sides. Below them, a horizontal black frame and, at certain moments, the outer frame of an open laptop are visible, the latter being switched on at the beginning of the video. The women view and describe something they seem to be witnessing, their gaze directed downwards. Due to the installation design, it is as if they are looking out of the frame, observing the audience. Von Rudy applies a further technique of the epic theater in that she does not allow the audience to maintain the illusion of being invisible spectators of an event. The formal characteristics of *Regnava nel silenzio* function as elements of disillusion as



FIGURE 4.2.10 Magdalena von Rudy. *Regnava nel silenzio*. 2008.

well as self-reference to the recording and reproducing medium: In an uncanny twist, the roles of spectators and spectacle seem to be reversed.

Speaking in the present tense in German (with English subtitles), the figures utter short alternating passages, sometimes continuing each other's unfinished sentences, sometimes partly overlapping. Several whispered phrases are spoken off the cuff. They describe an encounter happening off-screen, invisible to the audience: Two men begin to tenderly touch each other, kiss, and slowly undress. A central characteristic of the verbal performance is that the speakers do not comment on what they are observing. Although the modulation of their low, whispering voices shifts among sensitive, playful, and curious, their descriptions nevertheless appear somehow detached, like that of an anthropologist taking audio notes in a foreign environment. They do not seem to be watching an erotic encounter but a scene whose meaning has not yet been revealed, which elicits a strong A-effect.

The women's faces serve as projection screens for their emotions, while the narrated events, withdrawn from sight, appear exclusively in the audience's imagination. The aesthetic function of this verbal description corresponds closely to the dramatic convention of *teichoscopy*: a simultaneous off-scene event conveyed by a mediating figure describing what he or she perceives to the audience and the stage personnel. Von Rudy's application of this traditional dramatic element represents the homosexual encounter literally 'off-scene,' and as such refers to one of the suggested, albeit highly contested, etymologies for the adjective 'obscene': Greek *ἀσκεινο* (*ob skena*). The dramatic device of *teichoscopy* raises the question if—or, in which contexts—homosexuality is still considered obscene and must therefore not be depicted. The visual taboo is simultaneously foregrounded by the verbal descriptions. This technique of 'speaking out' stands in stark contrast to the work's title, claiming a 'reign of silence.'

Even though it is at no point explicitly mentioned, some viewers may recognize that the female figures are neither describing an imaginative nor a factual event but a scene from an actual movie: the first love sequence between the two cowboys in Ang Lee's Academy Award-winning *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Since the verbal re-narration is a remediation of a Hollywood movie, the question of the representational taboo is further complicated: The video paradoxically stages and claims the non-representability of a scene that has previously been seen by millions of people and which, according to film critics, has in fact broken one of the remaining taboos of mainstream cinema. Because the verbal representation refers to a concrete work of art, the mode of narration is thus not only to be considered a postmodern variant of *teichoscopy*, evoking simultaneity and presence—and a contemporary media reflection on this ancient dramatic



FIGURE 4.2.11 Hajnal Németh. *CRASH—Passive Interview*. 2011.

convention—but also as *ekphrasis*, a device of detailed verbal descriptions of works of visual art within literature, aimed at a vivid evocation of the object (cf. Heffernan 1993; Wagner 1996; Robillard and Jongeneel 1998). An element of alienation that is worth noting is the fact that the sequence in Lee’s movie is significantly shorter than the seven-minute-description that Von Rudy creates from it. Therefore, the two women describing what they see are presumably watching a slow-motion version of the love scene. *Regnava nel silenzio*, one may conclude, receives its literary qualities less through poetic language than through the adaptation of literary techniques established in classical drama.

Like von Rudy, the Hungarian-German artist **Hajnal Németh** refers in her monumental installation *CRASH—Passive Interview* (HU 2011)—exhibited in the Hungarian pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale—to a specific device of tragedy: the messengers’ report of a ‘tragic’ off-stage event. Whereas *Regnava nel silenzio* presents simultaneous narration in the present tense, this work presents retrospective narration in the past tense (an alienation device that can be applied “without the speaker adopting an unreal point of view”; Brecht 1964c, 138). Németh’s topics are not ancient murders or wars but everyday car accidents that the protagonists report. Visitors entering the pavilion were presented with a wrecked late-model black BMW behind a colored acrylic glass wall illuminated by pinkish light; a sung dialog that reconstructed the car accident was audible. In the next room, three music stands held open libretti of the duets. In the final room, the core of the installation, an extensive video screen displayed the sung interviews, and the visitor was encouraged to sit down and listen. Németh produced 12 so-called ‘records’ with dialogs based on interviews with the survivors of car crashes, sung by six different opera singers, comprising six different operatic voice parts in all. A relation to the genre of tragedy is made by such terms as ‘tragedy,’ ‘destiny,’ or ‘catastrophe’ that are nowadays used for individual and collective suffering of all kinds: sick children, lost soccer matches, natural disasters, terror attacks, or bank crises. Such a vernacular use of the tragic (cf. Eagleton 2003, 3; Felski 2008, 3) is reflected in this work. In one of the duets the topic is even verbalized explicitly: “Didn’t you think even

then [. . .] | That a tragedy had happened?" (Németh 2011, vol. 2, 90) one performer sings with regard to a profane car accident.

The meticulous interrogations of the events presented in duet form are 'passive interviews' because the accident survivor answers only with 'yes' and 'no,' while the interrogator is curiously informed about specific details. The interrogator knows not only the exact order of the events but also the inner feelings and sensations of the victim, as this example from the libretto of Record 12 indicates.:

[first singer]

Was there a lot of horsepower? Horsepower?  
 Were you staring at its hood? The car's hood?  
 Didn't you notice the central traffic island?  
 Had you knocked it down by the time you noticed?  
 The small sign? On the traffic island?  
 Were you alarmed? Alarmed?  
 Did you swerve?  
 To the right?  
 Was the right shoulder higher?  
 Did it start spinning then?  
 The car, spinning, with you inside? Yes, yes.  
 And then all of a sudden?  
 You went numb?  
 Did you then reach the first lamppost?  
 That you knocked down?  
 Did you then close your eyes?  
 (ibid., 88f)

[second singer]

Yes.  
 Yes.  
 No.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes, yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes, yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.  
 Yes.

This is a passive interview, where only suggestive closed questions are asked and answered, and the expressive possibilities of the person who experienced the crash are limited to 'yes' and 'no' answers.

Formally, the verbal reconstruction of accidents is reminiscent of Brecht's model of the 'street scene.' Németh, however, inverts the central idea: Here the accident victims themselves are on stage, not as eyewitnesses but as seemingly traumatized individuals who are unable to tell their own story, which is a task delegated to the interviewer (whose identity is situated somewhere between a police officer and a psychotherapist). In Brecht, the witness to a traffic accident demonstrates in detail to a crowd of people how this tragic event came about (cf. Brecht 1964c, 139) by using the mode of a distant narration, not emphatic appropriation. It is this device that establishes the 'epic' element in his theater concept. In Németh's work, however, both the interrogator and the victim come across as highly emotional due to the fact that they sing the lines with improvised opera melodies. Although the melodies are quite plain—the singers mostly use one syllable per note and few coloraturas, in part even a *sprechgesang*—they carry pathos and depict feelings such as pain, fear, horror, guilt, and relief.

While the narrations are charged with pathos by the use of opera conventions and the medium close-up shots of the singers' facial expressions, the theatrical settings create irony and a distancing effect. The operatic duets are all performed in locations associated with cars and modern mobility: a BMW plant in Leipzig with workers passing by; a car dealership showroom filled with glossy, upscale BMW convertibles; a tiny car garage; a tire retail store; the back seats of a cab; the side of a highway. The singers wear clothes that match the settings, such as gray work overalls with the car company's





FIGURE 4.2.12 Hajnal Németh. *CRASH—Passive Interview*. 2011.

logo or business outfits (Figure 4.2.11). They present their stories while standing in front of huge robots in an automated car factory or while cars race by on a German highway (Figure 4.2.12).

The background noise of the sites causes a disruption that does not prevent communication but creates an “aggregate communicative state in which the sign/medium as such becomes visible and can therefore be semanticized” (Jäger 2010b, 318). In Németh’s work the dominance of music or musicality (cf. Jakobson 1987 [1935], 42) is foregrounded through the highly disturbing background noise—which is the opposite of the contemplative silence one experiences when going to the opera. In classical opera, the effort of singing is hidden; here it is exposed through the singers’ struggle against the noisy background. Furthermore, the pathos and gravity of the singing clash with the profane content and prosaic style of the verbal exchange, causing an estrangement effect. The reductionist ‘yes’ and ‘no’ of the singer replying, as well as the slow pace of content distribution, gives the piece a strong sense of monotony and redundancy, which deconstructs both the suddenness and the traumatic character of the event.

Németh uses additional devices to enhance the artificiality, among them scenes where the partners exchange their roles during the performance (Record 11 and 12) or where only one singer performs both roles, that of the victim and that of the interrogator (Record 8). A comparable work is a recent single-channel video by Roe Rosen, entitled *The Dust Channel* (IL 2016) presented at Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017. Rosen here presents an absurd chamber opera about a woman who falls in love with her vacuum cleaner and sings in an exalted manner about the beloved device and its potential (“suck, suck, suck”)—a work full of sexual symbolism and cultural critique, alienating the act of singing and the idea of love.

In contrast, Németh calls her mixed-media installation an ‘experimental opera.’ In addition to the 12 ‘site-specific’ duets, the work also includes the famous aria “Lascia ch’io pianga” from Georg Friedrich Händel’s opera *Rinaldo* (1711), sung in an idling car and accompanied by an off-screen piano. When singing the aria, the mezzo-soprano Jana Kurucová—filmed through the windshield in medium close-up—performs the facial expressions typical of elegiac arias while being unable to move due to her position in the driver’s seat, wearing a buckled safety belt. Behind



FIGURE 4.2.13 Hajnal Németh. *CRASH—Passive Interview*. 2011.

her, constant traffic moves from the right to the left. Due to this peculiar setting, the performance of baroque pathos is highly alienated (Figure 4.2.13).

The work also includes an adaptation of the pop song “Coming” (1992), by Jimmy Somerville, which is an esoteric treatment of the themes of earth and heaven, and life and death. The song’s affirmative statements have been transformed into questions, however, creating an atmosphere of doubt and hesitation. In one part of the work, a child’s voice simply utters the lyrics. In another, a girls’ choir (Kinderchor Canzonetta Berlin) is filmed in a festive hall singing a contemporary piece produced exclusively for the media artwork with lyrics by Németh that adapt the lyrics of Somerville’s song, translated into German by Timea Tanko, with music composed by Reggie Moore. For the video, the camera filmed the adolescent girls individually in extreme close-up, each singing with the highest concentration. The final line, “ich werde geboren und ich sterbe” (I am born and I will die), in particular makes this song a modern version of Baroque vanitas. Both musical ‘extras’ are meta-comments on the topic of the tragic as treated in the 12 duets: the Händel aria as a joyful appropriation and subjectification of suffering, the choir as a deconstruction of this individuality and passivity. Németh’s *CRASH* is a telling final example of the various ‘elements of drama’ in media art: This installative multimedia musical theater applies, modifies, and questions tragic telos from a postmodern perspective.

As demonstrated in the analyses in this section, media art uses a broad range of allusions to the dramatic form. References can be quite literal, featuring theatricality in explicit depictions of actions that occur on stage before an audience. Adoptions of dramatic elements can also be subtle, as in Nauman’s installations in which live actors are replaced by representations on television sculptures or projection screens. This procedure of foregrounding by replacing dramatic elements with unexpected devices always has cultural and political implications, pointing to the merging of different art forms and their interrelationships and implying the alteration of traditional cultural forms by new media. Media art breaks with the performative maxim of the co-presence of actors and audience, with the camera as the device taking on either role and recording the action for the audience within the exhibition space. The presence of actors in media artworks that evoke features of drama stands out when considering other works analyzed in this study:

Except for a few video performances, as discussed in Chapter 3, Section 1, the absence of actors in many media artworks (even those that allude to narrative prose) is striking. In contrast to this, figural speech and dialog are set dominant in the works alluding to drama conventions, and acting itself may also become a defamiliarizing device, as in Cytter's single-channel works or Sullivan's haunting installation that breaks with the creation of an immersive dramatic illusion. Media art evokes the dramatic form and drama-like stage setting to explore its components and to deviate from its traditional form, taking drama into the audiovisual realm.

### 4.3 Elements of Prose

On the central screen of **Sam Taylor-Wood's** three-screen film installation *Atlantic* (GB 1997), a man and a woman sit at a table in the elegant dining room of London's Atlantic Bar and Grill. The screen is flanked by two others, one on the left showing extreme close-ups of the woman's head, and one on the right showing the man's hands (Figure 4.3.1). The woman seems upset; she is in tears and speaks hesitantly. The man's fidgeting hands reveal his nervousness; he smokes and plays with breadcrumbs scattered on the table and the label of a wine bottle. Their dialog is not audible, which turns the recipients into witnesses who must speculate on the meaning of the intimate scene. The visual codes convey a relatable, common situation while at the same time keeping the viewers distant. The three screens and the close-ups of the hands and face create an openness in the work, forcing the viewers to interpret, integrate, or synthesize the parallel scenes. The artist emphasizes the subjectivity of narrative construction:

[Y]ou are looking at two people interacting but you project what the discussion or argument is about. The viewer is put in the position of the people in the restaurant who are onlookers. And as an onlooker you're straining to understand what exactly is taking place. I want people to construct their own narrative, so they're looking at it and giving it endless possibilities. (Taylor-Wood in Ferguson 1998)

The visual and the acoustic tracks do not encourage a particular interpretation. The ambient sound of the restaurant defies direct reception. At the same time, closeness and distance are incoherent; viewers are intimately close to the emotions of the characters, nevertheless they do not know their cause. Is it a break up? A revelation of infidelity? Has someone died? Programmed as a 10-minute loop, *Atlantic* presents this open narrative as three projections, giving



FIGURE 4.3.1 Sam Taylor-Wood. *Atlantic*. 1997.

“simultaneous, yet different perspectives of one and the same, seemingly everyday scene”; the tryptic arrangement—reminiscent of Christian altarpieces—transfigures the banal into something “monumental, universal” (Karschadt, 2003, 360f). Long shots and close-ups, shot and reverse-shot break up the linear narration, not following a temporal continuum but running parallel. Because the material was not edited in post-production, the three simultaneous segments can be perceived as (and in) real time (cf. *ibid.*, 360).

### ***Narrative Prose and Time-Based Media***

Media art often plays with narrative structures and elements in defamiliarizing ways. Unlike dramatic elements in media art, works that allude to prose do so primarily through narrative voice-overs instead of embodied characters. Annette Jael Lehmann describes media art’s heterogeneous breaking up of “linear, causal, closed” narrative structures “in favor of a multiple, dynamic and open form of arranging of textual, narrative and audiovisual elements” (Lehmann 2008, 75). A common feature of narrative media art is incoherent stories that are not told seamlessly but rather in fragments, associations, and cause unstable narrative perspectives and points of view (cf. *ibid.*). Such deviant features presuppose a ‘conventional’ narrative form of chronology, of a meaningful unity of events, and of causal plot structures in both literature and in narrative cinema. Implied is a norm that includes a structured beginning and ending, which is negated whenever media artworks are configured as loops, creating circular repetition, with a viewer entering and leaving the exhibition space by her own choice. Michael Newman highlights a “distrust of narrative continuity” (Newman 2009, 105) that is typical of moving image art of the 1960s to 1980s. And though he describes an increased use of narrative structures in media art in the 1990s, narrative media art is highly peculiar, for instance through the use of super slow motion, as in Bill Viola’s or Douglas Gordon’s video art, or simply, as in *Atlantic*, through the pluralization of screens and audio tracks. Such strategic inconsistencies and incoherencies create uncertainty in the recipient’s perception and as such are prime examples of literariness.

Both literature and media art are time-based arts. Due to their sequentiality, they are also predestined narrative media. Even though narrative structures exist in various media, scholars have emphasized the “innate affinity of narrative and language” (Ryan 2014, 475) that can be traced back to oral storytelling across cultures. From a literary point of view, a narrative is a verbal presentation of factual or fictional events and comprises three basic aspects: linear description or ‘re-counting,’ mediation, and arrangement, in which narration takes on the act of choosing, ordering, and potentially judging (cf. Lahn and Meister 2008, 6). Narration can be defined as the portrayal [. . .] of a conceivable world that can be experienced, in which at least two different actions or sets of circumstances are centered around the same anthropomorphic entities and are connected to each other by more than mere chronology (Wolf 2002, 51). In addition to this, narrative prose is characterized by the existence of a mediating instance. Its construction contains ‘narrated events’ from the viewpoint of a narrator or a character as well as ‘presented events,’ which occur when concrete scenes with interaction and dialogs are depicted.

When investigating media art, the literariness evoked by elements of literary prose cannot be discussed within the context of literature alone; narrative concepts for film must also be considered. The experience of mainstream cinema still dominates the idea of narration in audiovisual moving images. Yet it would discount the magnitude of narrative strategies used in feature films to suggest a simple opposition between ‘lowbrow’ narrative film in the realm of movie theaters and ‘highbrow’ media art in the realm of art galleries. Rather, the perspective of literariness has the potential to highlight the distinct quality, use, or representation of narration in media art. The reference to narrative feature film modeled after classical Hollywood conventions is necessary for three main reasons: First, the terminology and methodology for the analysis of audiovisual

narration were developed with regard to feature film. Second, narrative cinema dominates most viewers' engagement, understanding, and expectations of the modes of storytelling that are also used in other audiovisual media. Third, media artists adapt and disrupt conventions of literary as well as filmic genre traditions. In order to inquire about the devices employed in artworks to create a *diegesis* (a narrated world), it is useful to reflect on some general concepts of narratology, both in literature and in film, in regard to the aspects of narrative order, voice, and mode.

### ***Narrative Order, Narrative Integration: Fabula and Sužet***

When discussing narrative texts, the story (the 'what') must be differentiated from its presentation (the 'how') (cf. Martinez and Scheffél 1999, 22). In terms of literariness, the second question is of primary importance. Considering their interest in form, it comes as no surprise that Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Tomashevsky introduced one of the most influential descriptions of this difference: They distinguish between *fabula* (story) and *sužet* (plot). To Tomashevsky, *fabula* is the entirety of the presented events (or motives) in their causal-chronological combination (cf. Tomashevsky 1985 [1925], 215), in other words: "the pre-aesthetic material at the writer's disposal for plot-composition" (Sherwood 1973, 33). The simple linking of events according to causality and chronology does not automatically result in literariness: "These events must be distributed, they must be constructed into a certain order, expounded, and from the story material [*fabula*] a literary combination must be made. The artistically constructed distribution of events in a work is called the *plot* [*sužet*] of the work." (Tomashevsky in Sherwood 1973, 33) In Formalist terms, *sužet* is the 'complicating of form,' the defamiliarization of the *fabula*. Tomashevsky refers to Russian novelists such as Leo Tolstoy or Alexander Puškin, who lay bare the construction of the *sužet* (cf. Tomashevsky 1985 [1925], 235 and 244).

In similar fashion, Shklovsky argues that a *sužet* is a "theme, into which a variety of motivations have been woven" (Shklovsky 1990 [1919], 16). He introduces a "staircase construction" that "will splinter even apparently unified non-aesthetic material, distort, and deform it, making it artistically perceptible" (Sherwood 1973, 34) to illustrate his idea of *sužet* devices. Literariness again lies in the effect of forms, as several types of graded iteration and "stepped construction" (Shklovsky 1990 [1919], 22), such as parallelism, the use of synonyms, deceleration, or repetition lead to a slowing down of the reception process (cf. *ibid.*, 22–30). Shklovsky aims to show how not only poetry but also prose has its own spectrum of devices, its specific literariness:

[F]or Shklovsky the part of the literary material which makes the work literary or poetic is *not* the basic 'story,' but the elaborations, complications and repetitions of the story, so constructed that the work is truly 'perceived,' the process of perception being heightened by 'retardation,' which serves to extend and intensify the perceptive process. (Sherwood 1973, 36)

Aesthetic devices such as "delays" and "roughened form," investigated by Shklovsky with regard to narrative prose, are also important for Neoformalism (Thompson 1988, 36). The same holds true for the Formalist's *fabula-sužet* distinction of literary texts (cf. Tynyanov 2005 [1927], 75–82; Thompson 1988, 38–44).

The arrangement and presentation of events contrary to their logical succession can be considered as a defamiliarization of an immediate, transparent representation. However, the sequencing of events can also be bound to genre conventions, and thus simply fulfill expectations and traditions. In order to be more than a conventional arrangement—to be a device of *ostranenie* that heightens the perception of readers or spectators, obstructs recognition, and caters to a new way of seeing—the *sužet* must be artistically motivated as a dissociation from conventions that expose a device (cf. Tomashevsky 1985 [1925], 235; Erlich 1980, 213).

Audiovisual storytelling is by definition constructed and technical, but institutionalized cinema has established narrative techniques that attempt to be transparent, to disguise all traces of artificiality. Film—in the sense of what is commonly referred to as ‘classical Hollywood cinema’—gives “the narrative the appearance of a natural observing position” (Kuhn and Schmidt 2014, 388). The emphasis here is on ‘natural,’ as the spectators are more than mere observers; they are integrated into the narration. This transparent and immersive viewing experience may be the dominant form of Western mainstream cinema, but this dominance must not be mistaken for the telos of audiovisual storytelling in general—and of media art in particular. As Thomas Elsaesser has argued, the narrativization of film must be understood as the historic result of a power struggle between cinema operators, film producers, and distributors (cf. Elsaesser 2002, 88–90). The films of ‘early cinema’ or the ‘cinema of attractions’ (1895–1907) did not represent narrative stories, but instead displayed vaudeville numbers, landscapes, city scenes, or demonstrated the illusionary tricks of the technical apparatus itself. The narrative instance was literally a narrator: a live cinema showman who connected the disparate short films of a program by means of his narration that also commented on and connected the individual films in front of the audience.

Technical strategies that are now considered elements of filmic language—such as close-ups, editing, or different camera angles—did not yet serve the purpose of smoothly weaving together a story. The subordination of technological and formal strategies to narration took shape between 1907 and 1913, a period that film historians André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning describe as follows:

The dominant feature of the system of narrative integration is that an element of cinematic signification is chosen and given an integrational role: that of telling the story. [. . .] The suturing of the film narrator and the viewer is guaranteed by the coherence of the process of narrativization. When the system of narrative integration was taking shape, a being was born whose [. . .] task is to modulate and direct cinematic discourse: the narrator, whose ‘voice’ is heard from the beginning of the film to the end, by means of the way it structures, at one and the same time, the profilmic, the camera work, and editing. (Gaudréault and Gunning 2006, 374)

From a film historical perspective, the phase of film’s narrative integration is of great interest because in this system, the ‘element of cinematic signification’ is subordinated to a narrative function, but is—in contrast to the subsequent classical Hollywood cinema—still visible. For the context of this study, the quote is useful as it highlights the fact that a code is based on conventions. Moreover, only when these conventions are fully internalized with regard to production and consumption does this code become invisible in a process known as ‘automatized recognition.’ Filmmakers developed and moviegoers learned a code that allowed for an integration of sign and story, film, and viewer, film space and auditorium. Boris Eikhenbaum foregrounds the novelty and power of narrative integration by describing the film viewer’s “continual process of internal speech,” denoting “the complex mental labour of connecting the frames” to make sense of what is depicted (Eikhenbaum 1974 [1927], 14; see also Chapter 2, Section 2).

Eikhenbaum emphasizes that filmic construction underlies certain conventions and mental processes for both the producer as well as the recipient. In media art, it is this conventionalization of audiovisual storytelling—and especially narrative integration—that is questioned and exposed. Neoformalist film theorists, in particular Thompson, have used the concept of *ostranenie*

to describe films that deviate from the norm of narrative Hollywood film-making and are designated to the realm of art:

Since everyday perception is efficient and easy, the aesthetic film seeks to prolong and roughen our experience—to induce us to concentrate on the processes of perception and cognition in and of themselves, rather than for some practical end. [. . .] Most films will contain a tension between those strategies that are included to make the form easily perceptible and comprehensible and those that are used to impede perception and understanding. (Thompson 1988, 36)

When investigating elements of narrative prose in works of media art, the question is less how these works differ from this norm than how strategies of audiovisual storytelling are used to evoke narrative prose by foregrounding the devices of both audiovisual and literary narratives. According to Thompson, “[d]efamiliarization is an effect of the work, rather than a structure” (ibid., 43). To investigate this effect, to inquire about its design, is to look for the “*dominant*—the main formal principle a work or group of works uses to organize devices into a whole” (ibid.). In Neoformalism the notion of Jakobson’s dominant (see Chapter 2, Section 1) as the element which “determines which devices and functions will come forward as important defamiliarizing traits” (ibid.), is adopted without much modification. The examples lay bare different techniques to deviate from the conventions of narrative feature film cinema—for instance, by employing literary devices. Yet they are unified by the artistic motivation behind the chosen aesthetic strategy; that is, their artistic motivation determines other motivations typically and especially found in narrative prose, such as compositional motivation, realistic motivation, and transtextual motivation (see also Chapter 2, Section 2).

Dominance of artistic motivation is most obviously indicated when the progress of narration is interrupted, disturbed, or retarded, or when the form is complicated in a way that exceeds contemporary conventions regarding the transformation of a *fabula* into a *sužet*. Defamiliarization can be achieved, for instance, by including sequences that are exterior to the *fabula*, or by exposing the narrative through self-reflexive comments that highlight how the represented diegetic world has been constructed through media and narrative instances. More subtly, the use of narrative techniques that stand out in feature film narratives, such as voice-over or the inclusion of written text elements (beyond subtitles), can also signify artistic motivation. The artistic techniques that undermine the automatization of perception, or the ‘narrative integration,’ are strategies that make the filmic representation opaque. Complementing theories of literariness with theories on film that describe similar techniques in regard to (moving) images allows us to investigate the various techniques of narrative defamiliarization in media art.

### ***Narrative Voice: The Mediating Instance***

Literary narratives not only rearrange events, but they also present them with a particular perspective, style, and voice. An author arranges the events into a specific *sužet*, but his or her presentation is in any case mediated by a fictional entity, the narrative instance, which is “an internal component of the total work of fiction” (Wilson 2005, 398). A mediating entity, therefore, is the central feature of the genre of narrative prose, distinguishing it from lyric poetry and drama (cf. Ryan 2014):

Mediacy, that is, the rendering of mediacy, is perhaps the most important starting point for the shaping of the subject matter by an author of a narrative work. Every effort to render the



mediacy of narration enhances the literariness (Roman Jakobson) of a novel or a short story, that is its very specific potential effect as a literary and aesthetic artifact. (Stanzel 1984, 6)

Franz Stanzel's quote illuminates the relationship between narrative mediacy and literariness: The more obvious and foregrounded the act of narration, the more its techniques lay bare, the stronger the effect of literariness.

G rard Genette and other Structuralist narratologists broadly distinguish between the 'mode' and the 'voice' of narration. 'Mode' describes the level of mediacy and the point-of-view of the narrated content; 'voice' addresses the act of narration itself, the way the narrative instance is positioned toward the events, as well as the subject and addressee of the narration (cf. Martinez and Scheffel 1999, 47–49 and 67–89). The mediating instance is the 'focalizer,' which Genette defines using the central question 'Who sees?'—or, more generally, 'Who perceives?' (mode). In contrast to this, he describes the narrating instance using the question 'Who speaks?' (voice; cf. Martinez and Scheffel 1999, 64).

The concept of narrative voice is important for media art that explores the distribution of oral or written language. The primary distinction in Structuralist narratology with regard to voice is between heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic narrative. In heterodiegetic narratives, the narrative instance is not a character who is involved in the story, and so here the grammatical third person dominates; in homodiegetic narratives, in contrast, the narrative instance is involved personally in the story he or she tells, and thus it is the grammatical first person that dominates. If the first-person narrator is also the main character, the narration is autodiegetic. Another central distinction is between extra- and intradiegetic narration. Intradiegetic narration is the norm; extradiegetic narration is found particularly in framing narratives in literature but also in audiovisual narratives, since they contain significantly fewer representations of 'inner life'—of thoughts and reflections—than literary narratives.

Questions regarding the voice of narration become more complicated when it comes to audiovisual narration, as film is "a largely syncretistic, hybrid and multimodal form of aesthetic communication" (Kuhn and Schmidt 2014, 3). The verbal narrative instance of audiovisual media corresponds broadly to Genette's category of 'voice.' It is technically realized "through voice-over or voice-off, through characters narrating in dialog, through intertitles and through inserted texts, that is, either phonetically/auditively or graphemically/visually" (Kuhn 2011, 95). The idea of a filmic narrative instance analogous to that in literature has, however, been criticized. Bordwell, for instance, sharply remarks that giving "every film a narrator [. . .] is to indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction" (Bordwell 1985, 62). Therefore, Bordwell and Thompson use the idea of a narrator only in the special case of voice-over narration (cf. Bordwell and Thompson 2013, 86f). Still, it cannot be denied that narrative film is characterized by an instance that structures the profilmic, the camera work, and the editing—in other words, that narrates a *fabula* in the form of a *su zet*, and lends the filmic narration a certain voice, regardless of whether it can actually be heard or is merely 'seen.' In order to avoid both anthropomorphization and the idea of 'narration without narrator,' as well as to do justice to the plurimedial nature of film (and alluding to Genette's differentiation of 'mode/perception' and 'voice/speaking'), Markus Kuhn distinguishes between a "visual narrative instance" (mode) and "verbal narrative instances" (voice):

The process of filmic narration takes place in the interplay between a visual narrative instance that narrates by showing or demonstrating scenes audiovisually, with one or more (or even no) verbal narrative instance(s) that narrate using words and that can—but do not have to—be subordinate to the visual narrative instance. (Kuhn 2011, 85)

The verbal narrative instance—present in voice-overs, script panels, and text inserts—is of heightened relevance for narrative media art. (Audio)visual examples are the focus of one of the following subsections.

### ***Narrative Mode: Perception and Perspective***

Without explicitly coining a stand-alone concept of narrative perspective, both Shklovsky and Tomashevsky refer to the specific manners and viewpoints of narration when giving examples of narrative defamiliarization in literature. They highlight, for instance, that Tolstoy's story *Kholstomer* (1886) is narrated from the perspective of a horse (cf. Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 6–8; Tomashevsky 1985, 235). Shklovsky remarks that, through this peculiar narrative mode, “the objects are estranged not by our perception but by that of the horse” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917], 7). Shklovsky's approach to the literariness of prose is in this case a point-of-view theory, “insofar as it refers to perspectival means of estrangement” (Stanzel 1984, 10). Every Tolstoy example that he selects for his argument uses the device of “inadequate perspective,” which aims to “separate the thing from its usual background, making it appear strange, new and no longer self-evident, thereby destroying the automatism of perception (and of consciousness)” (Lachmann 1970, 233).

In general, perspective or point of view result from the narrative instance as well as the characters. In his influential work *Narrative Discourse*, Genette introduced the concept of ‘focalization’ to highlight how perspective is not solely a question of the given narrative instance—be it a first-person, a figural narrative situation, or an authorial, even omniscient narrative instance. Focalization describes the respective levels of knowledge distribution and is found in three types: ‘Zero focalization’ stands for ‘nonfocalized’ auctorial narration, where the narrative instance knows and communicates more than any given character. ‘Internal focalization’ is the most common form of focalization in prose; it is used whenever the narrative instance is geared to the knowledge of a specific character (which may shift during the narrative). ‘External focalization’ means that a narrative instance knows less than the characters, it is the most neutral narrative situation in which the characters are described only from the exterior, without introspection (cf. Genette 1980, 189f). Kuhn considers the visual narrative instance in film—which corresponds to the focalizer in literature—as a “selecting, perspectivizing, accentuating, structuring, combining and organizing mediating instance” (Kuhn 2011, 90), by making use of the filmic devices of camera and montage. Perspective in audiovisual narratives, however, is not only a question of camera work and editing, but a product of the complex interplay of audiovisual as well as verbal narrativization. To adequately analyze these relations and components, Kuhn suggests complementing Genette's notion of focalization with two other concepts that have been introduced by François Jost, ‘ocularization’ and ‘auricularization’:

I relate focalization to the knowledge or relationship of knowledge between narrative instance and character and disconnect it from questions of perception in the narrow sense. For the visual aspects of perception (‘vision’), I use the [...] term ocularization [...] and, for the auditive aspects (‘hearing’), the term auricularization. (Kuhn 2011, 122; cf. Jost 1989, 121–136)

Differing slightly from Genette, Kuhn depicts focalization with regard to audiovisual narratives as “the possibility of selecting and relating information” (Kuhn 2011, 122). Therefore, he employs it in a similar manner to the notion of perspective discussed above.

### *Variations on First-Person Narration in Media Art*

Unlike the preceding discussions of elements of poetry and elements of drama in media art, the analyses that follow have been structured according to specific narrative subgenres. Their distinct features are considered the normative background against which the media artworks perform their adaptations and disfigurations. The first and second subsections of analyses are devoted to variations on first-person narration, which is a common feature for certain narrative literary genres such as diary, autobiography, or the modern novel or short story. In homodiegetic and autodiegetic narration, the narrator is part of the story as a character, and the grammatical first person comprises two different roles: that of the narrating and of the narrated self. This subsection deals with reflections and alienations of first-person narration in general; the following subsection is devoted to a more specific genre of first-person narration, namely that of autobiography.

The German-American artist **Dieter Froese**'s video *The Piece in the Country (Failure Piece #2)* (U.S. 1979) opens on a black screen to the sound of the artist's autodiegetic voice-over: "When we left for the country, I had decided that I would take my video equipment along." Subsequently the black screen fades to a close-up of a forest, and the voice-over continues: "We had visited some friends, or were actually planning to visit the house of some friends. They were in Chicago, so we had the house to ourselves." These narrative lines, introducing the setting and context of the video to the viewer, at first sound like the opening sentences of a casual fictional text. The use of past tense implies conceptual scripturality, the verbal imitation of written language. Yet, whereas one would expect a prewritten text to be read fluently, Froese's intonation becomes increasingly stagnant, interrupted by audible breathing between words, as if the artist were searching for what to say. The illusion of conceptual scripturality is thus disturbed by signifiers of oral, even improvised speech, and eventually shifts to an effect of live recording when the narrator sighs and then switches from past to present tense: "I am sitting now in the garden. And, uh, I am planning to make a piece." The plan to make a piece—a performance, a project, an intervention—is the conceptual premise of the video and of artistic practice in the 1970s in general (cf. Frieling 2006b, 174). Similar to, for instance, John Baldessari's ironic video performance *I Am Making Art* (1971; see Chapter 3, Section 1), the artistic goal or motivation is not the finished work but an interest in the process. The tangible videotape is nothing more than a remnant.

The narrator's voice-over seems spontaneous, like stream of consciousness; it continually shifts between considerations about what kind of piece he could do, expressed in the present tense, and past-tense memory snippets of what he and his partner Kay have done since arriving in the country. These shifts create disorienting disruptions, as they transgress the border between the world of the telling and the world of the told. By employing *metalepsis*, the trespassing of different diegetic levels (see Chapter 2, Section 1), *The Piece in the Country* reflects on its own mediatedness. The mediatedness comes especially to the fore at the end of the video, when the audio track and images boldly collide: While the images continue to show the rural forest—a deer appears and looks curiously into the camera—a clearly audible crack on the audio track indicates discontinuity, and then the artist suddenly directly addresses the audience:

As you might be able to conclude from the background noise, I have returned to the city. I have been watching the tape with you for the last ten minutes. So there is now a piece after all. It turned out somewhat different than the pieces I do in the city, however, I do now realize that several of my previous works came into existence either in the country, or on the way to it. Or, by setting myself up to fail. As a city dweller, the occasional visits to the country is a luxury which makes me uneasy. Perhaps it is the fear of failing to perform relaxation successfully at a given time and place.



FIGURE 4.3.2 Dieter Froese. *The Piece in the Country* (Failure Piece #2). 1979.

Then the camera swiftly pans to the left to focus on the cabin. Alluding to an earlier scene in which the artist wondered about asking his partner for advice on the piece, the voice-over continues, even addressing the recipient directly: “You see? Let’s give it another chance. Perhaps Kay does come out. Kay? Could you come out for a moment? You see? She just asked me: What should I do? I think I’ll rather stop.” The picture fades black again and the piece is over. The artist executes the act that he simultaneously articulates (turning off his camera).

This performative doubling is a central feature of Froese’s self-reflexive video. For example, when speaking about his equipment and monitor, he depicts it with his camera; he ostentatiously zooms in and out when speaking about the possibilities of camera focus; and he even tapes himself speaking into the microphone (Figure 4.3.2). Moreover, metaleptic narrative structures are brought into play when it becomes clear that comments that cause the piece to appear to be a live recording have actually been added later. The artist is not only commenting on the work during production, but also integrates meta-comments while looking at it in retrospect. *The Piece in the Country* is the remnant of a performance of failure. By conceptually setting himself up to fail, Froese fails to find neither ‘a piece’ nor ‘peace’ in the country, and yet he also fails to fail. The result is a refusal to create a work of art, but in the end it is this self-referential refusal that results in the piece and effects the literariness of Froese’s video.

Australian artist **Tracey Moffatt**’s works often deal with cultural memory and collective trauma. Her highly stylized works use

the devices of avant-garde film—such as sound that comes from somewhere other than the image—to subvert linear narrative, allowing the interweaving of past and present, including the haunting of the present by the past, and the projection of an alternative future in which injustice can be held to account. (Newman 2009, 100)

In so doing, Moffatt exposes “representations of the Australian aboriginal people and the complicity of the viewer as a passive witness to atrocity and injustice” (ibid.). This is also the case

in Moffatt's experimental short film *Nice Coloured Girls* (AU 1987). The film's *fabula* could be reconstructed as follows: Three young Aboriginal women pick up a middle-aged white man in Sydney's nightlife neighborhood of Kings Cross. They have him buy dinner at a fancy restaurant, encourage him to drink and, when he passes out in a nightclub, they steal his wallet and run away.

The montage of the first sequences follows some cinematic norms of continuity editing. The film starts with an (establishing) aerial shot of Kings Cross at night. The camera then pans down in a circle to street level before a cut switches the sight to point-of-view images of neon signs and shop windows recorded by a hand-held camera. Several reverse shots to the feet of three women already suggest that these women are the bearers of the subjective camera gaze; the subjective images are then replaced by a longer take of the three aboriginal women walking towards the camera (Figure 4.3.3). Point-of-view shots are interwoven with shot/reverse shots between characters and a few sepia-tinted tracking shots. In contrast to this use of conventionalized cinematography, several artistic devices avert an uninterrupted immersive viewing experience: They are an epigraph at the film's beginning, acousmatic narration of two male voice-overs, subtitle narration, and several extradiegetic inserts.

Layered over the establishing shot at the beginning of the film is a written text excerpt from William Bradley's account *A Voyage to New South Wales* (1788), set with justified margins, alluding to verse in a poem:

One of them came into the water  
to the side of the boat,  
we ornamented this naked beauty  
with strings of beads and buttons  
round her neck, arms and waist.

This extradiegetic diary quote is accompanied by sounds of chirping birds, paddles hitting water, and the heavy, rhythmic breathing of a man. The breathing may be the breathing of a sculler, but



FIGURE 4.3.3 Tracey Moffatt. *Nice Coloured Girls*. 1987.

there is also a sexual quality to it. This underlines the erotic undertone of the quote, the desire of British settlers to possess the land as well as its female inhabitants. Placed at the opening of the film, the epigraph introduces the historical and literary background of *Nice Coloured Girls*: the representation of aboriginal women as exotic, sexualized objects in the colonial accounts of white men.

This background and its influence on contemporary Australia pervades the whole film. Two male voice-overs, one with a British accent and the other with an Irish accent, speak of encounters between male conquerors and aboriginal women. The speakers adopt an old-fashioned, declamatory manner of speech. Although these diaries have been written by two different authors, they melt into one almost seamless narration, the voice of a singular male colonizer's discourse. The first voice-over continues the sexism of the epigraph and is combined with the first shot of the three women walking through the red-light district:

If ever they deign to come near you to take a present, they appear as coy, shy and timorous as a maid on her wedding night. But when they are as they think out of your reach, they hollow and chatter to you, frisk and flirt and play one hundred wanton pranks equally significant as the solicitations of a Covent Garden strumpet.

The peculiar combination of visual and acoustic layers highlights how the colonial perspective still pervades the present perception of Aboriginal women. Another voice-over gives a similar account: "Several girls who were protected in the settlement had not any objection to passing the night on board of ships. Though some had learnt shame enough to conceal, spoils had occurred during their stay." The voice-over quotes are paradigmatic examples of colonial travel accounts that portray aboriginal women as sex objects, which Monika Fludernik summarizes as follows: "[T]he women are presented as houris in whose bosom the colonizer will experience the ultimate jouissance or as sirens whose dangerous charms lure the naïve traveler to his destruction." She further describes how in these stories "the colonizer is always figured as male," which automatically leads to "a feminization of the colonized" (Fludernik 2012, 921f). As the unified homodiegetic voice of white men, the acousmatic narration also signifies the perspective of the white man in the filmic main narrative. However, even if the colonizers' accounts function as a background or frame, a sort of haunting *mise-en-abyme*, the dominance of the colonial discourse is undermined by what appears to be the collective counternarrative of the contemporary Aboriginal women.

The soundtrack of the visual narrative of the girls' night consists mainly of background mumbling and intradiegetic music—though the music clearly also comments on the action, such as Aretha Franklin's "Evil Gal Blues" (1964) or "Nasty Girls" (1982) by the pop trio Vanity 6. The camera depicts conversations, but these are not audible. Instead, subtitles printed in white letters, which resemble signs—an alienation technique common in Brecht's epic theater—communicate the perspective of the three women in the form of a first-person plural narration: "If we've got nothing else to do | we usually go up the Cross | any night of the week."; "Friday and Saturday nights | are the best nights."; "Most of the time we've never got | any money so we pick up a Captain | and make them pay for our good time."; "We call them Captains because that's | what our Mothers and Grandmothers | have always called them."; "Our relatives don't like us to follow | in their footsteps this way but how | can we not when we've got no money."; "First they offer us smokes." Using subtitles instead of figural speech implies two things at once: The muteness of written language alludes to the ignored voices of the Aboriginal people, and a silent, subversive script is enacted without cognition of the hegemonic White culture.

As the quote from the first set of subtitles shows, they do not substitute dialog or simply comment on particular scenes. The subtitles may match the images—for instance, when the subtitle



FIGURE 4.3.4 Tracey Moffatt. *Nice Coloured Girls*. 1987.

reads “First they offer us smokes,” the white man sits down at the women’s table and offers them cigarettes—but they are composed in such a seamless manner that they can also be read as an independent narration (Figure 4.3.4). This collective we-narrative writes back to the equally collective voice of the colonizers and their descendants, while Fludernik emphasizes that “[t]here is no *one* ‘postcolonial’ narrative technique,” she also highlights the “high incidence of we-narratives in (post)colonial literature” (ibid., 905 and 913f). The simple fact that we-narratives are generally uncommon—even more so in the form of filmic subtitles—can be regarded as a device of defamiliarization. But this device is also most powerful in representing “a collective subject in opposition to the hegemonic paradigm of the isolated Western consciousness” (Richardson 2011, 5).

Similar to the colonial accounts, the narration of the women also perpetuates stereotypes. The white man is not recognized as an individual, but as a predictable representative—yet the women’s standpoint is informed by a knowledgeable repetition of history. They exploit their historically perpetuated role and turn it into their own advantage. Caroline Vercoe stresses:

As Moffatt weaves colonial and modern-day narratives, our understanding of the past becomes inextricably linked with our understanding of the present. Moffatt highlights the interdependency of colonizer and colonized. She presents an urban context in which the women adapt to their economic and social space by knowingly adopting certain stereotypical guises in order to obtain a desired outcome. (Vercoe 1997, 154)

Both the voice-over narration and the written narration provide a subtext and a context, yet they are not subordinated additions that primarily serve a compositional function but rather strands of a (post)colonial narrative net. The perception of the audience can shift between these narrations, and the voice-over certainly has the power to redirect the attention from the ‘main’ narrative. The true device of disturbance, however—the distraction that literally stops the action on display—are nonnarrative extradiegetic inserts that can be further divided into three groups.



FIGURE 4.3.5 Tracey Moffatt. *Nice Coloured Girls*. 1987.

The first group of inserted sequences consists of medium close-ups of a naked Aboriginal woman standing on a beach. She is first cut into the main visual narrative when the man offers the women smokes. Looking straight into the camera, she seems at first to disapprove of the behavior of three younger women, just as the subtitle “Our relatives don’t like us to follow | in their footsteps this way” suggests. However, she then nods approvingly. When the women rob the man, a last insert depicts her laughing with them. As a form of *metalepsis*, she seems to watch the action, like a goddess or a personification of all female ancestors that also had a ‘captain.’ This first group of inserts delays the filmed narration and points to its fictionality, but also connects the younger women to a history of female resistance.

The second type of extradiegetic inserts has an even stronger effect of defamiliarization. Several sequences show different black-and-white drawings of colonial scenes in golden frames mounted on a wall in a gallery-like setting. In one sequence, a woman’s hand sprays black paint over a drawing as if attempting to efface history. When the color fails to cover up the image, she uses a stone to smash its protective glass plate (Figure 4.3.5). But even after the glass is shattered, the drawing remains undamaged. A final stroke lets the wall on which the drawing is mounted fall over. The wall is revealed to be a moveable divider in a darkened film studio. This metatextual performance is a disruptive comment on history: The past cannot be erased or destroyed; the colonial master narratives can only be challenged and unmasked.

Close-ups of three extremely short performances between a naked white man and a naked Aboriginal woman make up the third group of inserts. One performance illustrates one of the voice-over narrations, while the other two are entirely detached from the narrative events. In the first performance the man resolutely places his hand on the woman’s ribs. Green paint is sprayed over the bodies, and when the man removes his hand, the woman’s body is left marked with his handprint. The color of the paint makes the tone of her skin appear darker than before; when the color runs down, the drops evoke the association of blood. In the next performance, the roles are reversed: yellow paint accentuates the skin tone of the man. These sequences can be read as explorations of the interdependent inscriptions of power, gender, and race as signified by the racist discourse on skin color.



Although these three performances are extremely short, they are the most powerful disruptions. They form the dominant around which all other devices of defamiliarization are organized. The rather seamless audiovisual, subtitle, and voice-over narrations, even the inserts of the woman on the beach as well as the drawings, are all variations on the undead discourse of the colonial past that is based on racist ideology. Literature—the genre of travel accounts in particular—has played a pivotal role in perpetuating and normalizing colonial oppression and exploitation. Colonial literature, colonial discourse, is a discourse of strangers, but one that is still such a given that it is easy to be blinded to it. Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls* combines several competing narrations, voices, perspectives, and disruptive devices to make the strangers strange again. In its use of language, Moffatt’s work applies narrative techniques that come close to what Bakhtin has termed “heteroglossia” and “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 1981, 324; see Chapter 2, Section 1), which aim at deconstructing power relations and a seeming unity of history. What’s at stake here is not esthetics but the de-assimilation, the othering of dominant discourse.

**Jonathan Hodgson’s** experimental short film *Feeling My Way* (GB 1997) could be summarized as follows: A man leaves his London house to go to work (or meet a friend) in the morning. Unlike a ‘proper’ narrative, there is no action, no conflict to be solved, no progression or development of events. This eventless *fabula* stands in strong contrast to the *sužet*—the very particular, bold visual style of the short film. *Feeling My Way* is almost entirely composed of point-of-view shots without any establishing shots that reveal the bearer of the gaze. The shifting hand-held camera depicts the surroundings in a manner that seems random at times, more focused at others, creating an effect of glancing while walking. Through this subjective camera perspective, the gaze of the audience—determined by the lens of the camera—is aligned with the gaze of the protagonist, whose identity is only hinted at and communicated indirectly. The film starts with a descent down a staircase, after which a male hand opens the front door of a house; at the very end of the film the protagonist rings a doorbell and announces himself as “John.”

The use of the subjective camera creates an effect of first-person narration, and other devices perpetuate this effect. The images never allow for a transparent look at the surroundings; to

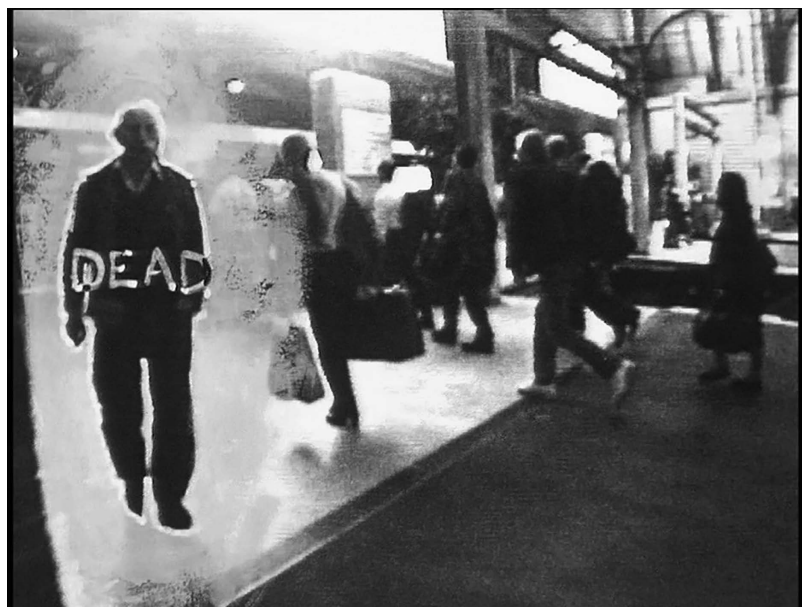


FIGURE 4.3.6 Jonathan Hodgson. *Feeling My Way*. 1997.

varying degrees they are always manipulated. In some sequences they are overexposed or the coloring is accentuated. In others, objects such as trash cans are singled out and marked by what looks like crayon borders. The photographic images are often partly or completely replaced by drawings. Similarly, the soundtrack foregrounds individual sounds from the street noise, the ringing of a telephone, the sound of car motors and music. Moreover, handwritten notes are placed over the images throughout the film, with the manual drawing style of the text-image-combinations bearing a certain resemblance to comic strips.

The written notes, however, do not create a comprehensive narrative. While some communicate factual information, such as the time, the majority appear to be subjective comments, associations, thoughts, or feelings of the protagonist. Since they are not framed and mediated, they are to be considered as autonomous interior monolog or ‘quoted thoughts,’ presented in a highly mimetic and direct mode. A stray dog sniffing in the garbage is labeled “NAUGHTY DOG,” a filthy mess on the sidewalk as “HUMAN REMAINS.” A sleeping homeless person triggers the double question “Dead || Or || ALIVE?”; commuters in a train station are tagged either ‘DEAD’ or ‘ALIVE’ and in the images that follow, passersby are replaced by drawn skeletons (Figure 4.3.6). Two questions, “SO WHAT?” and “Is that all there is?” appear to simply pop up without a distinct trigger, and as such hint at the prevailing mood of the protagonist. The artistic devices of image and sound manipulation, the inclusion of written text, and the associative stitching of images and text all add up to an effect of an audiovisual stream of consciousness. They are the dominant that leads to the defamiliarization of an everyday experience. More precisely, the opacity of *Feeling My Way* simulates automatized associations, a subconscious stream of thoughts and feelings affected by alienation.

### **Autobiography as Act and Device**

Etymology is usually referred to when trying to define the genre of autobiography: a written (*graphein*) account of a person’s life (*bios*) authored by that person (*autos*). Yet, questions remain of how to distinguish autobiography from other first-person accounts, as well as the genre’s relation to fact and fiction. The most prominent solution to the ‘authenticity dilemma’ was proposed by Philippe Lejeune, who centers his argument on the identity of the ‘author-narrator-protagonist’ triad and coined the notion of the “autobiographical pact” as the “affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the *name* of the author on the cover” (Lejeune 1989, 14). Autobiographies lead readers to believe that they are reading the truth about the writer’s life. They do so by weaving random events into a plot that simulates a coherent development of a self-contained individual, a “retrospective teleology” (Brockmeier 2001, 252). Instead of mimetically reflecting the author’s a priori life, autobiographical narratives are in fact cultural techniques that generate identity. Media art highlights some of these (problematic) features and paradoxes. Due to the inherent performativity of media art, the genre of literary autobiography is not only reflected and modified but also ‘acted’ out on different levels.

Two clever early examinations of the literary genre of autobiography are the video performance *Selbstbeschreibung* [Self-Description] (DE 1974) by **Peter Weibel** (mentioned in Chapter 3, Section 2) and the performance *AutoPortrait* [Self-Portrait] (DE 1975) by **Jochen Gerz**. Both works literally perform their titles and display the ‘autobiographic’ as a concrete artistic act of writing. In their works, Weibel and Gerz stand behind glass panes installed between the camera and the artists: While in Weibel’s video performance the pane remains invisible, Gerz is standing behind a lectern onto whose front the pane was mounted. Weibel is writing, from his perspective, in mirror-inverted lines so that the viewer may decipher several of those scribbled words or questions, including letters written in the wrong direction—for instance, “welche | Prinzipien verletze | ich, daß es mir im Le | ben so schlecht geht?” (what principles do I break

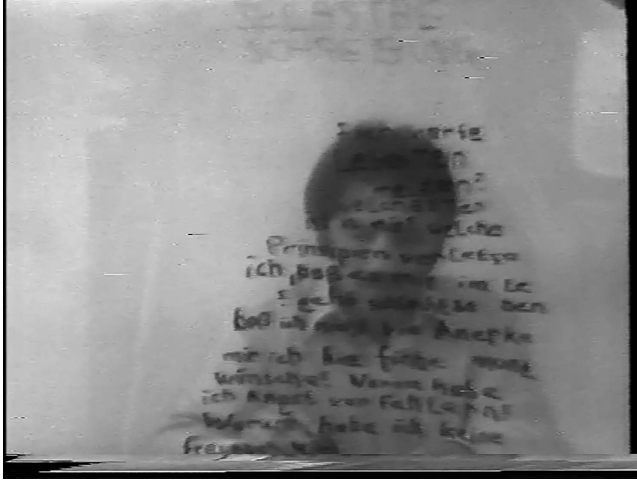


FIGURE 4.3.7 Peter Weibel. *Selbstbeschreibung*. 1974.



FIGURE 4.3.8 Jochen Gerz. *AutoPortrait*. 1975.

to lead such a bad life?)—whereas Gerz is writing in an inverted direction from the camera perspective and in such small letters that only the act of writing is visible.

The shape created by the lines of Weibel's writing vaguely mimics the contours of his body—alluding to concrete poetry—so that at the end of the performance the shape of the written text visually represents the artist (Figure 4.3.7): 'Self-description' is translated verbatim and turned into 'self-depiction.' As Gerz is performing his *autoportrait*, he merges the literary genre of autobiography with the painting genre of 'self-portrait,' contrasting the duration and linearity of both video and literature with the temporal (and spatial) fixation of painting (Figure 4.3.8). This contrast is particularly emphasized by the sheer length of the recorded performance, which stretches the (minimal) action over the course of 73 minutes.

Interestingly, the self-referentiality of Gerz's performance of the self does not produce transparency but a visual barrier of illegible words between the artist and the recipient. In other words, the act of self-writing does not create the illusion of a writer who renders his life bare to

a reader. Instead, his writing foregrounds the previously invisible border of a glass pane, which becomes visible only after it has been made opaque. The self-portrait is not a confession that suggests closeness between writer and reader; on the contrary, the highlighted process of production confirms the subjectivity and alterity of artist and viewer. Gerz's and Weibel's works formally reference the literary autobiography and the pictorial self-portrait, reflecting these genres critically and playfully. They subvert the 'autobiographical pact' by writing *in persona* and 'on themselves,' but without revealing any elements of personal history.

Another artist who provocatively plays with autobiographical strategies is the well-known British artist **Tracey Emin**. The supposed autobiographic character of Emin's works must, however, be considered as an authenticity effect. One work that exposes the genre of autobiography as a construction of an artistic self is her single-channel video *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (GB 1995). The peculiar title promises intimate insights, following in the tradition



FIGURE 4.3.9 Tracey Emin. *Why I Never Became a Dancer*. 1995.



FIGURE 4.3.10 Tracey Emin. *Why I Never Became a Dancer*. 1995.



FIGURE 4.3.11 Tracey Emin. *Why I Never Became a Dancer*. 1995.

of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782–1788). The structure of the work is distinctly split. The first and longer part is mostly composed of anonymous Super 8 found footage of the seaside resort of Margate and a female voice-over narration. The second part, recorded on video, shows Emin dancing in an empty room to Sylvester's 1978 disco hit "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)."

The video starts with a wiggly point-of-view sequence of a person running to school. A soundtrack of heavy breathing and the first lines of the voice-over reinforce the subjectivity of the images, giving a first-person account in the past tense: "I never liked school. I was always late. In fact, I hated it. So at thirteen, I left." Through the autodiegetic narrator, the subsequent images of streets and shops, beaches and piers—not necessarily matching the content of the spoken text—are quasi-automatically turned into subjective images (Figure 4.3.9 and 4.3.10). As such, the narrative device of voice-over functions in a way similar to the narrator-presenter in early cinema screenings: It provides coherence and gives meaning to arbitrary images. Past tense, intonation, rhetorical figures, and the occasional sound of book pages being turned mark the voice-over narration as the performance of a prewritten text in the epic preterit (interestingly, the spoken text of *Why I Never Became a Dancer* was printed in verse in Emin's book *Strangeland*, published in 2005 but in prose in another edition):

I'd hang around cafés, drinking coffee, exploring Margate's golden mile. [. . .] And then there was sex. It was something you could just do. And it was for free. [. . .] It didn't matter that I was young, thirteen, fourteen. It didn't matter that they were men of nineteen, twenty, twenty-five, twenty-six. It never crossed my mind to ask them what the attraction was. I knew. Sex was what it was. (Emin in Luard 2006, 194)

The narration's neat chronology and goal-oriented impetus are striking. Broken down into a simple scheme, the *fabula* is as follows: Hatred towards school → school dropout → sex as hobby → new interest: dancing → local dance championship in 1978 → public name-calling by former lovers ("Slag! Slag!") → escape to London → self-determined realization as successful artist (this last step is not narrated verbally but suggested by the artist's dance on video).

The narration clearly employs the pattern or autobiographical effect that Jens Brockmeier calls ‘retrospective teleology.’ It is highly cohesive, focusing on those events that turned the ‘narrated I’ into the present ‘narrating I.’ The uttered pronoun ‘I’ suggests the identity of protagonist and narrator, an impression that is confirmed when the first part of the work blends into the second. The present-tense dedication, “Tony, Doug, Richard: This one is for you!” marks the leap from narrated past (Margate, Super 8) into performed present (dance, video). The temporal change indicates that the retrospectively sketched self-development has been completed: The ‘goal’ of the journey has been reached.

The closure, the completion of development, is also indicated by the specific use of visual media. Super 8 is the analog film material of home movies. It creates an atmosphere of intimacy and authenticity and, as a now-obsolete medium, invokes nostalgia, the past. Video, in contrast, is the medium of the present—or at least was the medium of the present when *Why I Never Became a Dancer* was produced. Almost simultaneously with the switch from Super 8 film to video, the acousmatic narration ends. The disembodied voice is replaced by the body of the dancing adult artist (Figure 4.3.11). The voice-over is thus not only the main medium of representation in the first part of the work. It is, more importantly, a device that creates an authenticity effect. For the voice is not any voice: It is the voice of the artist, the trace of the narrator, the present voice of the protagonist. Thus, the autobiography effect results not only from the pattern of narration but more specifically from the voice:

Emin’s films and videos [...] are not solely concerned with narrative and content. [...] The authenticity—or, rather, the authenticity-affect—of Emin’s persona is a function of what Roland Barthes called ‘the grain of the voice.’ It can be literally the voice that conveys authenticity, perhaps through its human imperfections, rather than what it tells us about. (Healy 2002, 160–162)

Contrary to the term ‘autobiography,’ the attribute of authenticity has the advantage of naming a quality that describes both the manner of the representation as well as its effect on the audience. Criteria related to content, psychological purpose, and truth are not important. *Why I Never Became a Dancer* seems authentic because it uses specific devices—narrative techniques and media technologies—to create this impression. However, it is the very perfection of the narration that exposes the artist’s ‘confessions’ as constructed and factitious. This artificiality becomes even more obvious upon a closer investigation of the discrepancy between what is told and what is shown. Words and images converge only in a few sequences, and the images do not necessarily serve an illustrative function. In one sequence, for example, the camera depicts a carnival claw machine. Simultaneously the voice-over speaks the following lines: “I remember the first time someone asked me to grab their balls, I remember the power it gave me.” Yet, while the narrator speaks about power, the toy slips out of the claw—an image that not only reveals the sly character of the machines but that is the first to debunk the narrator’s statement as pure illusion. It is an interference that disturbs the impression of authenticity and foregrounds that autobiography is a literary genre, that is, an artistic construction.

The construction of the self—or more accurately, the persona—through artistic devices and media representations is also laid bare in Emin’s video installation *The Interview* (GB 1999). The flexible work can be exhibited either on a television monitor combined with two children’s chairs and house slippers or—as presented in the exhibition *fast forward* at ZKM | Center for Art and Media in 2003—on two monumental screen walls standing at a right angle, which enclose the audience sitting in between (cf. Schumacher 2003, 149–151).



FIGURE 4.3.12 Tracey Emin. *The Interview*. 1999.

Both screens depict the artist sitting casually on an orange couch in an artist's loft, though wearing different outfits: On one screen Emin wears a short dress with a plunging neckline and is continuously smoking cigarettes (Figure 4.3.12); on the other screen, she wears jeans and a sports sweater. The Emin in pants interviews the one in the dress, although both intermingle at times. It is a relentless self-discovery, imitating early autobiographical texts such as the *Confessions* of Augustine or Rousseau. Emin's video installation is both an externalization of an inner monolog and a self-reflexive performance of artist and art critic. The 'critic,' however, asks mostly intimate, personal questions, referring to such private topics as abortion, loneliness, self-doubt, physical, and psychic obstacles, while the 'artist' justifies such suffering as inevitable side-effects of her career. *The Interview* is an existential fictive disputation on the meaning of life and art, and at the same time a drastic exposure of the expectations towards autobiographical content, presented by a 'split personality.'

Another auto-fictional work is the video installation *Autoportrait* (DE 1999) by the Bosnian-German artist **Danica Dakić**. The Bosnian War (1992–1995) took place when the artist was already living in Germany, so she did not experience it directly. This experience of exile resulted in a politicized concept of art, and Dakić's works deal with topics such as escape, displacement, and the uncertain futures of migrants. Language and issues of "understanding and the lack of it, and the interrelation between image and language" (Dakić in Groos and Milovac 2009, 44) also play an important role. In *Autoportrait*, a video of the artist's bust is projected on both sides of a large screen that is mounted like a border in the middle of a dark exhibition space. This particular spatial setting is significant, since viewers are not only allowed to circle around the screen but are also forced to position themselves on one side. As in the case of Gerz's video performance, the title of the work refers to self-portraiture in painting, yet the duplication hints at the theme of a division of the self (cf. Spieler 2004, 61)—a strategy also employed in Emin's *The Interview*. Even more striking is the disfiguration of the artist's face: her eyes are replaced by a second mouth implanted on her forehead, turning her into a strange, two-mouthed 'Cyclops' (Figure 4.3.12). As Rainhard Spieler has observed, the presentation of the artist's face "in classical three-quarter pose against a black background" resembles "the manner

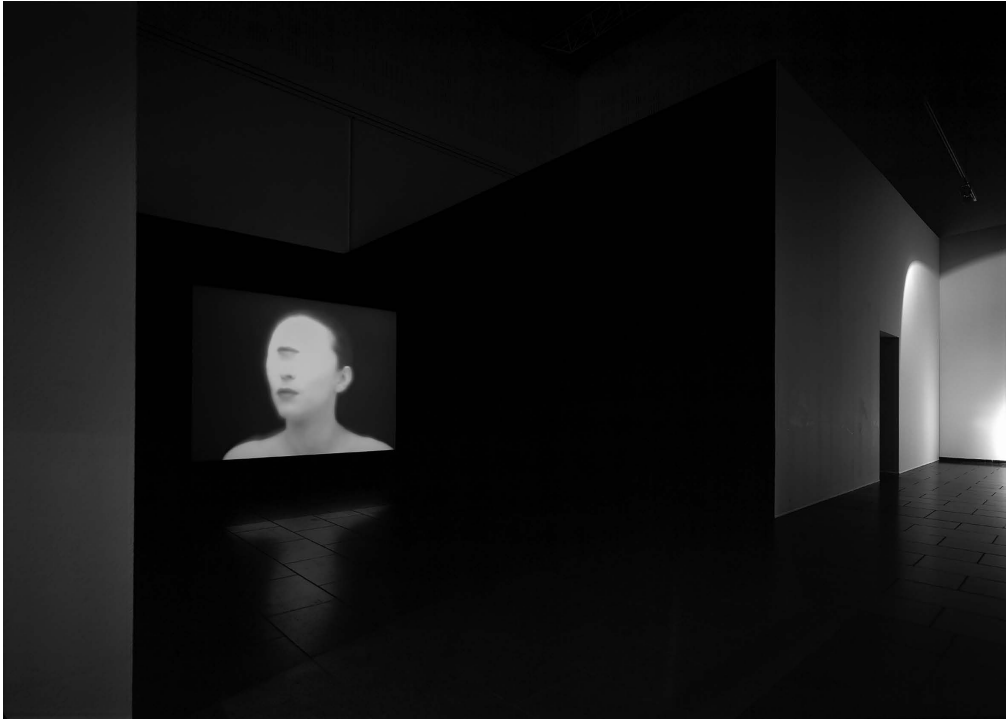


FIGURE 4.3.13 Danica Dakić. *Autoportrait*. 1999.

of the Old Masters,” but the “intervention” of the second mouth “catapults us [. . .] straight into the new millennium” (ibid.).

The topics of division, duplication, unity, and alienation—established in the visual display—are reinforced on the acoustic level of the work. Both mouths talk, at times simultaneously, but in two languages: The natural mouth speaks Bosnian; the additional mouth German. According to Dakić, this device creates “a passage between two languages” (Dakić in Blažević 2004, 25). This passage, however, does not necessarily lead to integration or understanding. The languages remain distinct—but when the mouths talk at the same time, the amalgamation results in incomprehensible pulp. The mouths narrate two fairy tales whose texts are printed in the exhibition catalog side-by-side in the neat style of a child’s ‘best handwriting’ at school. Both fairy tales—a literary genre traditionally passed down by word of mouth—address the themes of language, identity, and voice. The Bosnian tale tells of voices from all over the world that whirl around on “the island of voices,” ghostly and bodiless (cf. Dakić 2004, 133). The German tale narrates the story of a lonely man, the *Spottvogel* (mocking bird), who lives in the forest and imitates the voices of others. A stranger who enters the forest inquires, perplexed, about the whereabouts of the people whose voices he can hear. The conclusion to the spoken fairy tale reads: “‘There is really nobody here apart from me,’ answered the Mocking Bird. ‘Do not ask your ears, because they will let you hear something else. Ask your eyes instead, because they will not deceive you. Do you see anybody apart from me?’” (ibid.) Thus the German fairy tale comprises both intramedial self-reflection as well as intermedial commentary, which, however, proves to be paradoxical—both in regard to the disfigured portrait and the audience. The advice to trust the eyes is useless for a person who only has two mouths, and the eyes of the viewers are deceived, because they see something that does not exist.



These narrated worlds negotiate common issues, yet they are by no means translations of one another but rather autonomous, independent narratives that may have been handed down in their respective cultures and linguistic communities. The two worlds remain parallel. This situation of ‘double-voicedness,’ in which one must listen to both tales simultaneously, becomes palpable as a fundamental disruption, out of which only brief moments of understanding emerge. These instances of transparent communication pass on fairy tales but no autobiographical details as such. Dakić’s *Autopportrait* is therefore a form of self-presentation that is not primarily about personal experiences but “an attempt, to reflect on collective experiences” and “to adopt a position such that the personal story becomes more or less invisible” (Dakić in Groos and Milovac 2009, 44). What becomes and remains visible instead is a border, an uncanny division and duplication that simultaneously demands and prevents an unambiguous positioning.

An artistic approach comparable to Emin’s *Why I Never Became a Dancer*—yet less explicitly personal— defines French-Moroccan artist **Yto Barrada**’s work *Hand-Me Downs* (FR 2011), prominently presented in the Arsenale at the 54th Venice Biennale and also projected publicly in New York City’s Highline Park. In Venice, the video was presented as television sculpture, with benches in front and miniature speakers hanging from the ceiling above the seated audience. This setting created an intimate atmosphere, as the visitors had to sit down and listen closely in order to fully grasp the 15 short stories narrated by a female voice-over. The video is composed of analog found-footage film snippets (transferred to digital video). It starts with black-and-white images of a small boy carrying flowers, followed by a color sequence of a girl with a doll and an older boy who is dressed in a suit and looks through binoculars. Simultaneously, the voice-over announces the film’s title and provides a dictionary-like definition: “Hand-me downs is English. There is no equivalent in French. It refers to clothes which are passed from brother to sister, from girl to boy, from older to younger, in the same family. Stories are handed down, too.”



FIGURE 4.3.14 Yto Barrada. *Hand-Me Downs*. 2011.

This verbal epigraph sets the interpretative frame for the short stories that follow, narrated by the artist herself in first-person past tense. They are separated by white numbers superimposed on the filmic images, and some of them have titles that are, however, only spoken (for instance: “The Skeleton,” “Meat Machine,” “The Bicycle,” “The Green Suit”). As the narrator frequently refers to family members and provides information about the family (“We were eleven children. I am number six. My father was transferred to the countryside and we had to leave town, to my mother’s dismay.”), the audience is lured into believing that the stories are indeed stories that have been handed down in Barrada’s family as identity-generating folklore.

The film footage appears to have been taken sometime between the 1940s and 1960s, and, as a lot of the material shows signs of wear and deterioration, the passing of time is strongly inscribed into the work—a strategy also used in Matthias Müller’s *nebel* (see Chapter 5). Some film fragments seem to come from colonial recordings, showing close-ups of African people in traditional clothing, a missionary school, or a Maghreb market. Others are sourced from typical home movies depicting, for instance, children playing and family holidays at the beach or on cruises. The third layer of *Hand-Me Downs* is music: Voice-over and images are often accompanied by a soundtrack of blues, jazz, and country music excerpts originally recorded between 1927 and 1931. All this creates a dense structure of different historic times, places, and cultures.

The combination of (alleged) personal stories with found footage results in disjunctive narratives, where verbal account and images match only occasionally, for instance when the voice-over speaks about reading or dancing and at the same time unidentified persons performing these activities can be seen. In other instances text and images are combined to form an almost didactic contrast, for example when information about poverty, hunger, and meal vouchers during World War II collide with footage of bourgeois Europeans relaxing on a luxurious Mediterranean cruise ship (Figure 4.3.14). Nevertheless, the artist may suggest that the memory of families and the historical traces found in film are interweaving components in developing cultural identity—an identity shifting between Europe and the Maghreb countries with their mutual colonial history.

While some of the anecdotes presented by Barrada’s voice-over could at least in theory refer to facts, most are too absurd to be true and seem to be a product of a child’s exaggerated imagination—or a device of conveying the creativity of memory. The start of the first story, “The Goat,” already establishes the narrator as unreliable: “My mother was a goat.” The second story, “Feet,” is not necessarily fantastic, yet it is extremely cruel. It is read by Barrada accompanied by Dixieland jazz, with vocals and prominent wind players:

My father found two children by the side of the road. Their house had burned down so he took them and they grew up with us, helping my mother with the chores. The little girl from the road became a young woman and one day she disobeyed. My father hanged her by her feet all night long. We took turns supporting the weight of her body. We were forbidden to take her down.

While recounting this incident, the first-person narrator pauses after telling of the girl’s punishment. During her silence, the black-and-white images show a flying parachutist, a chained barking dog, and a car driving on a country lane. There are only loose associative correspondences between text and images; one might imagine the father of the story driving the car home through the fields, for instance, as he is observed through a window from above. Or, while the narrator speaks of the “young woman” that the little girl has become, a young female farmer is seen bending down to clean a bucket and then looks straight into the camera for a moment through a cluster of bushes.

Two more examples illustrate the associative relationship between voice-over text and filmic footage. Story Number 6, with no title, is one of the shortest 'hand-me downs.' This miniature contains vague allusions to a fairy tale and opens to the sound of blues music with a vivid banjo and a male singer. The tale goes as follows: "From time to time we could hear some noise through the haystack coming from the neighbors. We hid there and watched a man, standing on a stool, fucking a donkey, his donkey. My nanny told us that once she saw a man born with a donkey's head." The reduced fairy tale is combined with footage of two donkeys shown in medium shot. Contrary to the verbal narrative, however, they carry large baskets of sand on their backs, guided through a barren landscape by a barefoot shepherd. The opening scene, shot from a bird's-eye perspective, shows a shore with men collecting sand in small containers. This is contrasted at the end of the tale with a long-shot of two cargo ships traveling on the horizon. The footage presents a clash of cultures: a pre-industrial form of transport on the one hand, and industrialized transport on the other. This may be an allusion to the Maghreb countries as agricultural societies versus Europe as industrial. In the tale that accompanies the images, the clash of cultures is further amplified by an obvious collision of class. The fable reveals the prejudice and latent racism of the child, who casually claims that her neighbor sodomized his donkey while also speaking fondly of her nanny. This miniature narrative is thus a good example for a concept that looks simple at first, as it contains several double-meanings and even cultural critique on closer examination.

The last story, "Harmony," is one of the less brutal episodes and is again told from the perspective of a girl whose family seems to be rather well off:

I'm seven, my sister is eight years old. Everyone says we live in perfect harmony and that we complete each other. She likes blue and green, I like pink and red. We wear the same clothes in different colors. At night in hotel rooms, she always chooses the bed by the door, while I choose the bed by the window. She recently told me that she chose the door side, thinking that the murderer would sneak in the window, kill me, and give her time to escape. I told her, I always thought he would come in through the door.

While the recipient listens to this narrative, the images present a summer scene at a southern lake in a dry hilly landscape with pine trees. Two early adolescent girls are bathing and paddling on a tree-trunk. One wears a blue bikini, the other a red one. Later, they are seen hiking through detritus and chasing one another. Since viewers see two young girls and hear about two girls simultaneously, there is a stronger tendency towards narrative closure. Even though the first part of the tale is narrated in present tense, the narrative tense changes in the middle, which might indicate a temporal gap of several years. This would justify the holiday scene, which reveals both sisters' secret thoughts and fears as adolescents. Unlike the other stories, this one contains no music. The silence creates a certain uneasiness and latent tension between the two barely dressed young girls in this mountain solitude.

Listening to one story after the other, three features become obvious: Many tales broach issues of brutality and the cruelty of both parents and children; the narrating 'I' is definitely not a singular person but a collective subjectivity consisting of different voices and historical periods; and the stories are not presented in a strict chronological order. Another feature is their literariness: Like Emin in *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, Barrada reads stories that have been prewritten rather than telling them spontaneously, so that her speech carries not only a 'conceptual' but also a factual writtenness. The 15 narrated miniatures of *Hand-Me Downs* could be called a collection of tales; however, it is a rather fragmentary and heterogeneous corpus with unidentified variable

first-person narrators, united solely by Barrada's voice. As made obvious in the three miniatures that were discussed, some tend more towards narrative integration, others definitely less. Within each of the 15 stories, some correspondences between the footage and the recounted stories exist. Their vagueness, however, lets the viewer reflect on both the importance of photographic images for personal memory and the nearly reflexive impulse to create meaning and closure, even while simultaneously realizing that the images do not at all represent a factual and coherent biographic history but are contingently found and combined footage.

### ***Audiovisual Explorations of Epistolary Fiction***

The last literary genre correlating with media art discussed in this book is a type of narration that is decidedly related to script. It substitutes face-to-face communication, whilst delivering residues of physical contact. The epistolary novel first arose in the 17th century and reached its heyday of popularity in the 18th century (cf. Beebee 1999; Bray 2003). Works of this genre are composed of letters from one or more protagonists, and a prominent characteristic is their power to give the impression of immediacy and intimacy. They are often associated with sentiment and discussions of morality, and seem to offer direct insight into the inner life of the letters' composers. Author, narrator, and protagonist as well as the implicit and the actual reader seem to merge into one.

The effect of intimacy is perpetuated by other features as well. First, many canonical epistolary novels are about intimacy, not only as they convey inner feelings, but because they also deal with intimacy in the sense of (forbidden) love and (inappropriate) lust. Second, intimacy is created through the relationship between the writers. Often, the letters are addressed to a lover, a confidant, a close friend, or a mother or father (figure). Third, these works feature a continuous "oscillation between narrating self and experiencing self" (Bray 2003, 27). Epistolary fiction is highly self-reflexive, as the act of writing is not only its precondition, but also part of the plot. One could say that by simulating a mediated, albeit non-artistic form of written communication, the mediatedness of fiction writing is converted into immediacy. That is, although the genre puts strict restraints on the author and the constructedness is obvious, the construction is also naturalized. Even if epistolary fiction is factually scriptural, it is marked by a conceptual orality, using elements and features of a language of proximity (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 23; see Chapter 3, Section 1).

In **Chantal Akerman's** experimental film *News From Home* (FR/BE 1977), French letters written by the artist's mother to the artist, who lived in New York City from 1971 to 1973, are read by the artist in a monotone voice and combined with footage of the city: subway rides and stations, traffic, shop windows, buildings, and construction sites. The voice-over is often drowned out by city noise, which is especially remarkable since none of the sound was recorded synchronous with the images. The feature-length film is strikingly eventless, as if the camera were simply documenting erratic strolls. Nevertheless, the footage is far from random. Long, static takes and slow vertical pans foreground the meticulously composed framing following the golden ratio. Even more visually kinetic recordings—taken for example from a moving car—add to the overall quiescent, distanced atmosphere of the pictures. The view of the city is both revealed and obscured (cf. Bruno 2014, 131): New York City is not depicted as a buzzing metropolis; rather, the texture of the city itself is accentuated. This perception is supported by text fragments offered by the city itself: on plates, signs, or cars and in shop windows, for example. These random messages and information—"don't walk," "park fast," "birthday cards," "doughnuts," "bar," "Port Authority"—create a suddenness and contingency that stand in harsh contrast to the endless verbal lament. Feelings of disengagement and distance pervade the mother's letters; she hardly tells her daughter about her own life. Instead, she ceaselessly begs her to write more often. The repetitive wording emphasizes the fact that the

letters do not seem to reach her daughter but rather fall into a void between them. The title *News From Home* therefore seems bitter: The letters do not provide news from home; they only iterate the same old story of a mother missing her (grown up) child. Moreover, the letters are not part of a plot as in classic epistolary fiction. The mother's monologs highlight the failure of communication. The dominant of *News From Home* represents exactly this denial of plot and communication for the sake of artistic perception.

Distance is also the dominant of **Mona Hatoum's** *Measures of Distance* (CA 1988). In this video, the image of a letter—written in Arabic script—is superimposed on photographs of the artist's naked mother in her shower and combined with a soundtrack that mixes a cheerful conversation between two Arabic-speaking women and a foregrounded female voice-over. As the credits for the video reveal, the slides and conversation were taken and taped in Beirut in 1981 (Figure 4.3.15). The dialog is between Hatoum and her mother; the voice-over is the artist's reading of an English translation of the letters she received from her mother.

In contrast to Akerman's *News From Home*, the geographical distance between daughter and mother does not result in emotional distance. Rather, the multimodal layers that 'measure the distance'—the very devices that create an effect of opacity—unveil a unique intimacy. On the visual level, the Arabic script stands between the spectator and the mother's naked body. It functions as a screen that shields the mother from a voyeuristic gaze, while self-referentially duplicating the screen of the monitor. The handwriting is a visual disruption—for Arabic-reading viewers and viewers unable to read Arabic alike. The writing, blown up so that the letters cannot be seen entirely, literally becomes an *arabesque*, decoration. Script receives an ornamental function (see Chapter 3, Section 2) that renders the video cumbersome and adds a haptic quality to the pictures. Though partly concealing the skin of the mother, the handwriting is also the mother's bodily trace, a medium of contact, of intimate touch.

This bilingual and multimodal work suggests both proximity and distance, and evokes a number of dichotomies and differences between home and exile, reading, and writing, reading



FIGURE 4.3.15 Mona Hatoum. *Measures of Distance*. 1988.

and translation, mother and daughter, and autobiography and artistic imagination. The medium of script is connected to questions of corporeal presence and absence, as the letters recited by Hatoum turn that which we see into an event that is significant for both biographies: the afternoon spent together in the bathroom, the photographs of the mother used in the work, and the father's jealousy. By cross-fading the letters as Arabic writing and as an audible oral text, the Arabic dialog between mother and daughter, the past—the personal event—is correlated with the present, and the 'biographic' is shown both literally and in its processuality. The composition of the epistolary narration is monological as only the letters of one person are read aloud, yet the mother frequently refers to letters she received, meaning her daughter's perspective is also communicated, albeit indirectly. Hatoum's selection of excerpts focuses on the beginnings of the letters; viewers repeatedly hear the salutation "My dear Mona." This refers to their communicative impulse, but also to the artist persona Mona Hatoum, who 'calls' herself with her own voice as the self-referential addressee of her video artwork.

Translating the letters is an act of appropriation that is expressive of the distance separating mother and daughter. The latter is highlighted by the monotone voice with which the artist reads and repeatedly falters and pauses. The peculiar intonation is not only a technical means of bringing to the fore the quieter recordings of the Arabic conversations, thus heightening the contrast to their cheerfulness, but it is also a device that serves to mimetically depict the process of remembrance and the caesuras and gaps that come with it. However, by reading the words of her mother, the daughter nevertheless speaks in her mother(s) tongue. The translation is also a form of 'transplantation': In an act of assimilation, the daughter, who was forced into exile by war, has taken her mother with her. The translation and the necessity of writing letters signifies a rupture, but this rupture is fruitful as it nourishes an unforeseen intimacy through distance, which is clearly articulated in the first letter read in the video:

My dear Mona,  
the apple of my eyes.

How I miss you and long to feast my eyes on your beautiful face that brightens up my days. When you were here the house was lightened up by your presence. Now it feels as if the house has lost its soul. I wish this bloody war will be over soon so you and your sisters can return and and we will all be together again like in the good old days. I enjoyed very much all these intimate conversations we had about women's things and all that. You know I have never talked in this way before. Why don't you come back and live here and we can make all the photographs and tapes you want. You asked me in your last letter if you can use my pictures in your work. Go ahead and use them but don't mention a thing about it to your father. You remember how he was shocked when he caught us taking the pictures in the shower during his afternoon nap.

If *Measures of Distance* is read as a remediation of epistolary fiction, the selected excerpts follow the topics traditionally covered by this genre, addressing "desire, authenticity, privacy, the feminine, and disorder, both domestic and political," while particularly alluding to the fact that the epistolary novel "has been seen as particularly (and by some as dangerously) accessible to women writers and readers" (Heckendorn Cook 2006, 284). Though this letter is clearly a letter from mother to child, the wording is nevertheless quite ambivalent in its resemblance to a love letter. Though far from suggesting passionate love, it bespeaks a level of intimacy and female companionship that has the power to threaten the hegemony of the patriarch. In the private letters to the daughter, the mother's reference to certain topics or situations express joy and appreciation. Transmitted by the English voice-over, however, the

letters seem to provide a condensed synopsis, as if peeping through a keyhole. The English-speaking audience is let in on the women's secrets, but only partially. Similar to the father and husband, the spectator who does not understand Arabic is excluded from the bond that connects the two women. The fragmented writing and body situated behind it are only conditionally legible:

The non-Arabic-speaking viewer experiences a sense of frustration when trying to decipher the blurred shapes of Hatoum's mother through a veil or wire cage of Arabic script while having to listen attentively to the English translation of those letters [. . .]. Similarly, the Arabic-speaking viewer becomes equally frustrated when attempting to block out both the English translation and the visual presentation of the letters in order to catch the more enticing conversation between mother and daughter, revolving around such physically intimate details as a couple's wedding night or a young girl's experience of getting her period. (Khan 2007, 325)

Perception oscillates between transparency and disruption (or opacity), as cultural transcriptions succeed or fail due to the audience's language competency. However, even a viewer who knows both languages and is familiar with both cultural contexts is caught in a permanent to-and-fro between four semiotic poles: Arabic lettering, body, the English voice, and the Arabic voices. Mehre Khan connects the difficulties that arise when viewing the artwork to the experience of "diasporic communities" (ibid.).

Although *Measures of Distance* uses real letters as source material, the video displays compositional devices of epistolary fiction. The letters in epistolary novels masquerade as real letters revealing truth and intimacy addressed to a real person, when, in fact, the information provided by the letters is addressed to a public audience. The framing of the edited letter collection disguises the artificial composition and attempts to achieve transparency. The structuring of a *sužet* in the form of letters is, in other words, the most naturalized realization of the staircase construction. The "digressions and delays [that] deflect the action from its direct path" (Thompson 1988, 37) are justified by the characteristic delay and fragmentation of postal communication. *Measures of Distance* lays this construction bare. The translated excerpts highlight how the privacy suggested by epistolary fiction is a chimera.

**Jenna Bliss's** short video *Dear Dad (The Analyst)* (US 2013) is composed of animated digital text, voice-over, and pictures of a swinging paper pocket watch, a hand holding a cigarette, and a mushroom cloud. The epistolary form is condensed to the salutation 'dear dad' before expanding into a monolog by an ambiguous narrator and ending with an asynchronous duet of a female and a male voice. The first typed sentences seem to indicate that a daughter is writing to her father:

Dear Dad (the analyst)  
 You can call me sweetheart,  
 but, I'm broken  
 like all the women leaving your room.

Though the salutation and the 'you' suggest intimacy, this effect is contradicted by the distanced appellation of 'the analyst,' the distance being highlighted by the typographic device of parentheses. The work's title is ambiguous with regard to genres: The main title, with its *inquit formula*, refers to epistolary fiction, while the subtitle in brackets sounds like a short story.

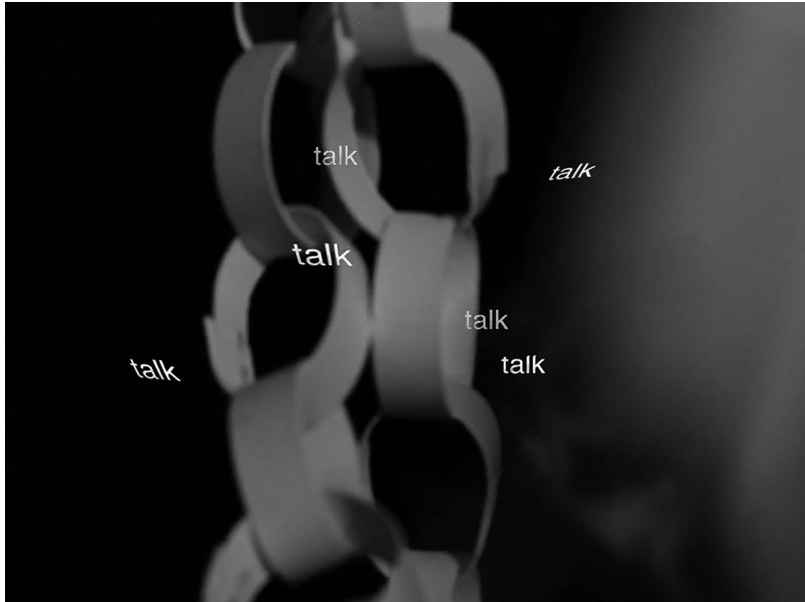


FIGURE 4.3.16 Jenna Bliss. *Dear Dad (The Analyst)*. 2013.

The writer also appears to have more than one father, or the father occupies more than one role. The father (figure) may also be a psychoanalyst and the writer of these lines a psychotherapy client. The following statement increases this initial ambivalence: “Weeping through open doors, | hearts unlocked inside. | Freud put an end to the mystery of Woman.” In these ironic sentences, the personal speech to a father shifts to an omnipresent observation that also reveals the identity of the dad: He is Sigmund Freud, the father not of a particular woman but the foremost authority on hysteric womanhood.

The typed text is next replaced by a male voice-over, a shift from a language of distance to a language of proximity. Though it seems obvious that this male voice must belong to the father, the spoken text is ambiguous with regard to the identity of both the narrator and addressee. The intonation induces a transcription in lines:

Picking up yourself like a booty,  
 You self-made-up man,  
 but that’s all talk,  
 all voices but no mouths,  
 just speakers.  
 What a joke.  
 Nothing is harder than the closeness between two people.  
 I’m a pervert,  
 perversion,  
 Because I want more.  
 My perversions define myself in the century of the self.

Throughout these monological lines, several pauses occur and the accompanying soundtrack frequently changes its style. After the quote, the speaker goes on to complain: “Ah, but broken



hearts still persist, no matter how much I talk, talk, talk.”The self-referential verb ‘talk’ is spoken eight times and appears simultaneously as moving script on the screen. Highlighting this word in particular alludes to the ‘talking cure’ invented by Freud and his fellow psychoanalysts. The quoted text, spoken by a male voice, works like a string of beads to associatively connect key terms of psychoanalysis: self, talk, perversion (Figure 4.3.16).

One line stands out due to its aphoristic style (and length): “Nothing is harder than the closeness between two people.” This aphorism can be regarded as the central proposition of *Dear Dad (The Analyst)* because it informs both the content and form of the video. As discussed earlier, epistolary fiction is traditionally the genre of self-examination and self-revelation, as well as intimate communication. Letters are written both to express innermost feelings and to overcome an insurmountable distance. In the psychoanalytical setting, as well as in letters, the most intimate feelings are revealed—but no matter how close writer and addressee, patient and analyst feel, the structural distance between them cannot be overcome. Their dialog is always imagined and in fact remains within the realm of the monolog. This gap is expressed in the asynchronous spoken duet with which the video ends:

Fears, tears, and fantasies,  
 this text.  
 My voice.  
 What would I do without you?  
 The clamor of this stuff never seems to go quiet.  
 I don’t want to be silent.

The female and male voice-overs speak the same text, but their speeches differ in rhythm and speed. The voices remain separate, parallel, and yet they only become manifest when differentiated from one another.

From a more critical point of view, this passage can also be understood as a reference to Hélène Cixous’s call on women to break free from the hegemony of male discourse:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (Cixous 1976, 881)

In this line of thought, the fragmented, polyvocal, and multimodal form of *Dear Dad (The Analyst)* takes on the challenge of the analyst’s or father’s ‘phallic speech’ in two ways: by employing a traditionally female genre and by seemingly breaking free of genre conventions, thus tentatively attempting to create a new voice, a feminine mode of narrating. Bliss’s short video condenses several aesthetic devices: it blurs narrative genres with drama and shifts between linguistic modes and gender and social roles.

Section 4.3 demonstrated how media artworks give room to unusual modes of audiovisual narration, such as the first-person plural in Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls* or the use of epistolary fiction in Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*. Other artworks dismantle the contrived authenticity of autobiographies by merging literary and audiovisual devices. In contrast to studies that delve into the specifics of filmic narrations or promote an understanding of narration as transmedial

mode, our approach specifically zoomed in on allusions to literary subgenres. By integrating such elements of literary narration, media artworks also defamiliarize conventions of narrative feature film, such as by exposing the act of mediation or by a pluralization of their narrative voice.

Chapter 4 explored allusions to and deviations from conventions of poetry, drama, and prose. Using genre as a background for the analyses of media artworks proves fruitful provided that its norms are not considered rigid rules that dictate the production of literature. Media art's deviations are reminders that genre conventions are not only in constant flux but are themselves material for artistic explorations. Allusions to experimental literary genres, such as visual poetry, as in Cia Rinne's *archives zaroum*, particularly attest to an emphasis on formal playfulness and interaction with an alert spectator. In general, the allusions to genre conventions and disruptions are not means in themselves, as some artworks suggest cultural critique, others even express a clear political agenda. Rather, they reveal the underlying structures of culture, and lay bare ideas and situations that may have become invisible and automatized with regard to class, race, gender, or sexism. As the discussion of poetic subjectivity has shown, genre is used to diminish boundaries by integrating the spectator as an active part of the artwork, addressing his or her senses to encourage critical examination of that which is mediated. Viewers are made aware of the habitualized ways of engaging with art; they are sensitized towards techniques that construct everyday surroundings as well as the technology that helps to shape them.

# 5

## WORKS OF LITERATURE IN MEDIA ART

Wandering through the Central Pavilion at Giardini during the 57th Venice Biennale, one could enter a large exhibition space equipped with a free-standing projection screen, a sculptural object reminiscent of iron girders, and a bench enveloped by an art déco style brass mantle. The video screened in Korean-American **Sung Hwan Kim**'s mixed-media installation *Love Before Bond* (US 2017) presented an assemblage of scenes circling around three protagonists. At one point, a close-up depicts three passports in an odd perspective, filmed from above as each is paged through by a pair of hands. The passports have been issued by different countries: the Republic of Sudan, the U.S., and the Republic of Korea. The passport photographs appear to show the video's protagonists: two adolescents and a young man. The relationship between the three remains cryptic.

In one central scene, the teenage boy stands in front of a brick wall, looking down, while giving orders to the girl, such as: "Put your legs together. Weight on your heels, not on your toes. Stand straight. "Put your toes to the ground. Straighten your back. [. . .] Don't be afraid to show your body. Your body is beautiful. [. . .] It's interesting. [. . .] Turn around." Why he gives these orders and why the girl follows them remains a complete enigma. The scene creates ambivalent associations, ranging from instructions in an etiquette manual for respectable girls, to uplifting encouragement, to sleazy objectifications.

Kim also applies aesthetic devices discussed in previous chapters, such as choral speech and alienated pronunciation. He also uses different languages that produce semantic ambiguities to evoke defamiliarization. The French words "le pain invisible," for instance, are spoken by the young man within a monolog in Sudanese Arabic while we see a loaf of bread (French: *pain*) so that the images contradict what is spoken. The meaning of the words shifts when understood as English, which becomes clear when a subtitle presents the sentence "no one sees the pain" shortly after. The oral and written language of the video shifts from colloquial expression to a more literary style containing several provocative and unanswered questions: "Why don't you take me in your arms?" the girl asks twice. "And who has not dreamt of violence?" can be read two times while the Sudanese man asks the same question in Arabic. Although the characters interact, their dialog is utterly strange. It does not seem as if they are necessarily talking to each other, but as if words are put in their mouths, as if someone or something else is speaking through them.

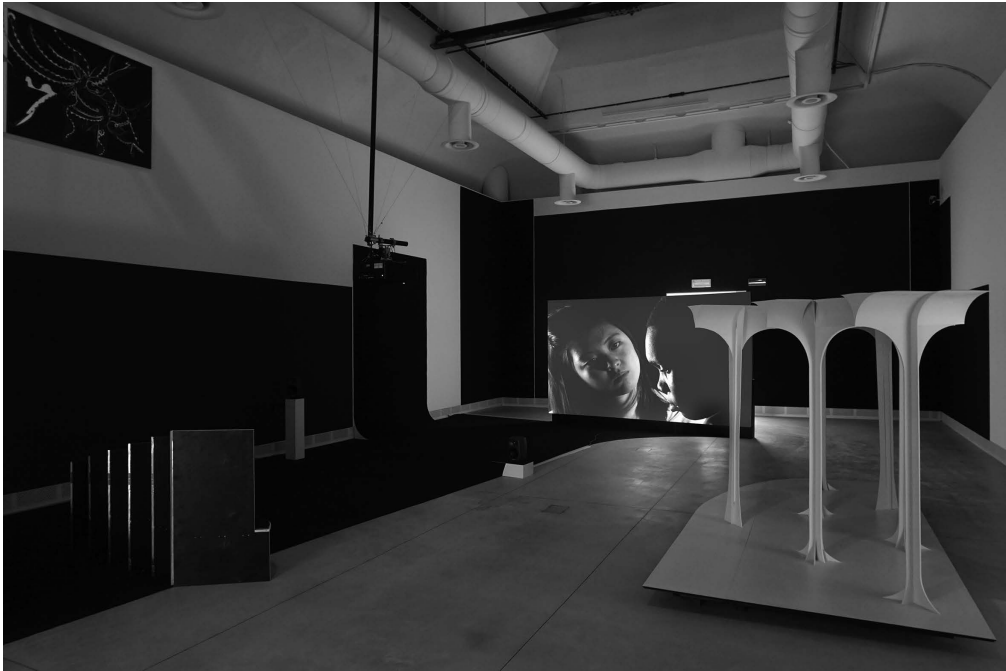


FIGURE 5.1 Sung Hwan Kim. *Love Before Bond*. 2017.

This A-effect becomes clear when reading the informational text on the wall, which tells viewers that Kim's installation refers to literary texts by William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, and James Baldwin. However, only repeated examinations of the work—as well as a close familiarity with these authors' works—leads to the insight that Kim is directly quoting Baldwin's texts only. For instance, one of the questions noted earlier is from Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory* (1915) but as quoted in Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1962). The function of the quotes remains opaque: Taken from their context and interwoven with text segments that Kim wrote himself, they create a dense intertextual web. To make sense of this web, viewers must become active interpreters: Perhaps the collage of text fragments from Shakespeare, Conrad, and Baldwin, and their collision with seemingly unrelated images of an Afro-American boy and an Asian-American girl attempts to highlight the underlying web of colonialism and racism that affects relationships in the postcolonial world? Kim's visual imagery—the protagonists' different skin colors; the ostentatious use of the colors white, brown, and black—would indicate this. Viewers are left to wonder: Is *Love Before Bond* a contemporary adaptation of Baldwin's works?

Just as in Kim's installation, media artworks quite often not only use poetic strategies or refer to literary genres in general—as Chapters 3 and 4 have demonstrated—but they also refer to concrete literary precursors, both prose and poetry. The manifold pieces discussed in this chapter quote or transform a variety of literary works, including Dante Alighieri's epic poem *La divina commedia* (1321), Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), Maurice Blanchot's novel *Thomas l'obscur* (1941), Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955), Christa Wolf's narrative *Kassandra* (1983), and Charles Bukowski's poem "The Man With the Beautiful Eyes" (1992). Such

references may be explicit—particularly if the literary work is used in its entirety or if its title appears in that of the media artwork—or, as Kim’s video installation demonstrates, very opaque, entangled, and difficult to decipher.

Notions of fidelity, medium specificity, and originality have fueled the theoretical discourse on literature to film adaptations and shaped the quest for methodologies. This chapter links the writings of the Russian Formalists on the matter of adaptation in silent cinema to perspectives from contemporary adaptation studies. It also revisits some previously introduced concepts, such as intertextuality, dialogism, intermediality, and transcription. This theoretical prelude informs the subsequent analyses and carves out the specific perspective of the ‘literariness of appropriation.’

In the realm of cinema, the term ‘adaptation’ distinguishes films that are based on a previously published literary work from those originating in an ‘original screenplay,’ as defined by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (cf. MacCabe 2011, 3). The cinematization of canonized classics and popular bestsellers has proven to be a successful business model for films and (reissued) novels alike (cf. Cartmell and Whelehan 2010, 22f; Kerrigan 2010, 94; Higson 2004, 35, 40f). This is by no means a new phenomenon, since screen adaptations are as old as film itself. Unlike contemporary feature-length adaptations, however, the earliest adaptations made sense only when the audience was familiar with the literary work. Due to the technical restrictions of a single reel with a running time of only a few minutes, many of them refer to literary sources by focusing on “peak moments” of pre-existing “theatrical performances” (Gunning 2011, 44f).

Boris Eikhenbaum describes the reworking of a novel into a screenplay as one of the author’s “obligations to culture” (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 122) that ensures the continuation of the work’s popularity and the writer’s reputation. In mixing ethics and economics, Eikhenbaum anticipated a growing interdependence between film and literature, but he did not foresee that the popularity of film would also work against it. In the 1930s, Hollywood “provided a source of major income, if not artistic satisfaction, for every important playwright and author in the United States,” yet film scholar James Naremore points to a “significant historical irony” (Naremore 2000, 4):

At the same time that the movies, the legitimate theater, and the book-publishing industry were growing closer together, sophisticated art in general was in active rebellion against bourgeois culture and was intentionally producing work that could not be easily assimilated into the mainstream. (ibid., 4f)

Film drew on literary sources to gain social prestige, to become a legitimate form of art. Yet, when cinema succeeded in capitalizing on the cultural value of literature, the conservatism of Hollywood and the advent of high modernist aesthetics with its ideal of pure art devalued film (again), and especially filmic adaptations.

Until recently, most theories and definitions of adaptation have been written with regard to mainstream feature films. Only in the past decade has a broader perspective incorporating such diverse phenomena as avant-garde film, musicals, TV shows, videogames, interactive e-books, apps, and YouTube clips emerged. The aesthetic routine of feature film adaptations therefore constitutes a norm. Media art is not subject to the same rules of success as commercial cinema, so appropriation in media art results in very different artifacts and processes. In contrast to William Verrone’s book on avant-garde film adaptations that pitches experimental film against mainstream movies to argue for the former’s artistic superiority (cf. Verrone 2011), this study understands established conventions of feature film adaptations simply as the background for media art’s deviations.

The relationship to a literary text is not always overt in media art appropriations, so spotting the reference, the cues, can be tricky. Its success depends heavily on paratextual information (captions in the exhibition space, remarks by the artist, or databases) as well the viewers' previous knowledge. For example, the allusion to Gertrude Stein's iconic line "a rose is a rose is a rose" in the title of Ulrike Rosenbach's single-channel video *Eine Frau ist eine Frau* ("A Woman Is a Woman") (1972) is apparent only to those who are familiar with Stein's work and detect the similarity in the syntactic structure. Yet even after the reference has been identified, the way in which literary work and media art relate is usually not self-evident either. Often short and abstract, media artworks do not rely, like narrative cinema, on actors playing characters (see Chapter 4, Section 3), on recognizable actions, or a *mise-en-scène* that attempts to meet the reader's imagination, reworking the source material in a way that bridles at unlabored recognition. Some present quotes from texts in the form of subtitles, animated words, or voice-overs, and combine quotations with images that seem completely unrelated. Others transpose multiple literary works into a single-channel video or—as in the case of as Nalini Malani's *In Search of Vanished Blood*—even into an immersive multi-channel installation. Some artworks openly claim a link to a work of literature, yet their complicated form might nevertheless motivate the viewer to revisit the artworks and the source texts multiple times to gain an idea of just what is happening. In this type of appropriation, one might speak of the defamiliarization of the whole work as a device that prolongs the viewer's perception.

### Adaptation as Appropriation

In general, 'adaptation' designates the relationship between an audiovisual entity and a work of literature—although other ties between source and adaptation exist under the same heading, for instance a musical composition based on a painting. The question of how this intermedial relationship is or should be revealed, as well as the very nature of this relationship, has produced a vast amount of research proposing heterogeneous definitions. Often, these definitions are based on a comparative approach between text and film, proposing various taxonomies of proximity. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan warn in the introduction to their anthology of literature on screen: "Hidden in these taxonomies are value judgments and a consequent ranking of types, normally covertly governed by a literary rather than cinematic perspective" (Cartmell and Whelehan 2007, 2). Even theories that explicitly challenge these assumptions rely on some form of proximity evaluation to demarcate adaptations from other forms of referencing.

Linda Hutcheon gives a threefold definition of adaptation: as "*formal entity or product*," "*process of creation*," and "*process of reception*" (Hutcheon 2006, 7f). Accordingly, adaptations are an "acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works," a "creative *and* an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging," as well as an "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (ibid., 8). Julie Sanders argues in a similar vein but emphasizes that the "more sustained engagement with a single text or source" distinguishes an adaptation from "the more glancing act of allusion or quotation" (Sanders 2006, 4). 'Glancing' here suggests a certain kind of superficiality associated with the act of quoting. Sanders continues, "Adaptation and appropriation are inevitably involved in the performance of textual echo and allusion, but this does not usually equate to the fragmentary *bricolage* of quotation more commonly understood as the operative mode of intertextuality" (ibid.). From Hutcheon's and Sanders's perspective, allusions, citations, samplings, and quotations are related to but not classified as adaptations or appropriations. While this latter differentiation might apply to some cases of conventional feature film adaptations, a brief allusion in media art does not necessarily imply a superficial relationship to the literary precursor. In Gary Hill's video *Incidence of Catastrophe*, the quoting of a single line

from Maurice Blanchot's novel *Thomas l'obscur* constitutes a subtle (albeit crucial) hint, a starting point for considering the video as a thoroughly re-created version of the literary text, a cue that leads the viewer to regard the "adaptation as *adaptation*" (Hutcheon 2006, 139).

Sanders sees adaptations as well as appropriations as sustained engagements with a literary text. But her differentiation between adaptation and appropriation is influenced by notions of proximity, since "appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source" (Sanders 2006, 26). Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner regard this demarcation as limiting and suggest considering appropriation as part of the process of adaptation:

In this other aspect of appropriation rests the metabolic quality of adaptation as a creative and metamorphic process: material is broken up to become part of a new living organism. Hence, the terms of adaptation and appropriation—kept so hygienically apart by Sanders—start to merge. They are not two separate processes, but rather appropriation seems to be part of adaptation. [. . .] The process of adaptation as appropriation, thus, tends to be characterized in this context as the creation of new cultural capital. (Nicklas and Lindner 2012, 6)

The concept of adaptation as appropriation allows consideration of references ruled out by Hutcheon's and Sanders's definitions. It breaks the adaptation free from a subordinate relationship to its source. In appropriation, a literary text becomes the raw material, the 'libretto,' for something different. An appropriation is not 'a journey away' because the source material remains within the new creation. In this regard, Verrone's characterization of appropriation is valuable: "Appropriation may borrow, reconstitute, mimic, echo, allude, imitate, continue, rewrite, or refashion elements or characteristics of the original, including styles, plots, themes, motifs, subject matter, or generic tropes"; it does so, however, "in a way that allows us to see both the originality of the new work [. . .] and to point us back to the source for reexamination" (Verrone 2011, 35). Verrone describes a continuous movement between source material and appropriation in the reception process, a co-awareness of both works. Though Verrone stresses the value of the adaptation, he still refers to the notion of 'originality'—an idea that has been criticized as outdated in, for instance, comparative textual media studies (cf. Hayles and Pressman 2013).

In her study, Sanders only briefly mentions Paul Ricœur's understanding of appropriation (cf. Sanders 2006, 7). Ricœur uses the term to explicate the interpretation of literary texts. The hint is interesting insofar as he—contrary to Sanders—considers appropriation as a means of diminishing distance:

'Appropriation' is my translation of the German term *Aneignung*. *Aneignen* means 'to make one's own' what was initially 'alien.' According to the intention of the word, the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalizes, renders contemporary and similar. [. . .] Appropriation is the concept which is suitable for the actualisation of meaning as addressed to someone. It takes the place of the answer in the dialogical situation, in the same way that 'revelation' or 'disclosure' takes the place of ostensive reference in the dialogical situation. The interpretation is complete when the reading releases something like an event, an event of discourse, an event in the present time. As appropriation, the interpretation becomes an event. (Ricœur 2016, 147)

Ricœur argues trenchantly that appropriation is at once a form of acquisition and interpretation. It is the result of a hermeneutic construing that inevitably adds new meaning and thus ‘deforms’ the original. Ricœur considers appropriation to be a dialogic endeavor, an actualization and negotiation. He even conceptualizes the act of appropriation and its ‘dialogical situation’ as an ‘event,’ perceivable in the present tense through a recipient to whom this actualization of meaning is addressed. Likewise, in media art, the defamiliarization of a literary text is both an act of interpretation and of annexation. Such an inclusive and dynamic approach towards appropriation allows all kinds of seemingly brief references that characterize the various forms of recurrence to literary works in media art to be accounted for. With regard to the following analyses, Mike Kelley’s single-channel video *Superman Recites Selections From ‘The Bell Jar’ and Other Works by Sylvia Plath* or Joan Jonas’s multimedia *Reading Dante* series are good examples of an interpretative appropriation of literary texts.

### Intertextual Dialogism

As pointed out in Chapter 2, Section 2, Julia Kristeva coined the term ‘intertextuality’ with regard to Michail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism. In literary studies, the introduction of the paradigm of intertextuality aimed to surpass the traditional methods of “*source-and-analogues* research” (Pfister 1985, 19). Intertextuality and dialogism have spurred a fruitful but controversial debate, for instance in regard to Harold Bloom’s concept of an ‘anxiety of influence’ (Bloom 1973; cf. Broich 2007, 17). This concerns artistic strategies of fighting off, surpassing, or erasing the precursor text (cf. Lachmann and Schahadat 2004, 683). Literature and media art could be said to hold a relationship of admiration and subversion, as media scholars have generally suggested (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2000, 15; Hutcheon 2006, 20). The core understanding of literary intertextuality is based on the assumption that the author is not only aware of his or her use of external texts or motifs but also expects the reader to realize that this use is intentional (cf. Broich 1985, 31). This dimension emphasizes the reception aesthetics of intertextuality (cf. Hoesterey 1988, 13). Manfred Pfister has developed an influential applied model for ‘scaling intertextuality’ (Pfister 1985, 25–29), which records the type and intensity of intertextual references on a graduated scale.

Robert Stam adapts the established Poststructuralist concept of intertextuality to theorize the ‘palimpsestous’ relationship between an audiovisual adaptation and a literary text. Transferring the concepts to adaptation and amalgamating them, Stam points out:

Adaptations [...] can take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism. An adaptation, in this sense, is less an attempted resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process. The concept of intertextual dialogism suggests that every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces. All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflation and inversions of other texts. (Stam 2000, 64)

In Stam’s line of thought, he presents audiovisual adaptation as a re-creation of a literary source—the novel, in his case—and he also suggests understanding adaptations as one special event within an infinite dialog of “the entire matrix of communicative utterances” (ibid.).

Stam develops his concept further with reference to Gérard Genette’s five categories of text-text relations, namely transtextuality, intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality (cf. Genette 1997, 1–9 and 397; Stam 2000, 65f). Three of them have proven to be particularly helpful descriptions: ‘paratexts’ are text elements that accompany a work, such



as titles or credits (cf. Genette 1997, 3); a ‘metatext’ comments on another text (cf. *ibid.*, 4); and ‘hypertextuality’ refers to the relationship between a ‘hypotext’ and a derivative ‘hypertext.’ In the context of adaptation, the last category is especially interesting, as it establishes the literary precursor as hypotext, which the (audiovisual) adaptation, the hypertext, “transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends” (Stam 2000, 66). In turn, the adaptation may function as hypotext for other hypertexts. Thinking of adaptation as intertextual dialogism aims at eliminating hierarchies between art forms by proposing that every work is bound in an infinite web of relations (in several media artworks, pop songs, for instance, play a key role). The idea of a network also questions the concept of authorship and characterizes each adaptation as a (re)writing that is as valuable as the hypertext.

Referring to the relationship between film and literature, Eikhenbaum emphasizes that although both are specific in their modes of expression, they are not isolated: “None of the arts are fully bound entities, since syncretic tendencies are inherent in each of them; the whole point is in their interrelationship, in the grouping of elements under one sign or another” (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 124f). The context of intertextuality frames the process of adaptation as an interart mechanism triggered by cues in the literary text. As Stam notes with regard to film adaptation of novels:

The source novel, in this sense, can be seen as a situated utterance produced in one medium and in one historical context, then transformed into another equally situated utterance that is produced in a different context and in a different medium. The source text forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting film text can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform. (Stam 2000, 68)

By emphasizing that hypotext and hypertext are historically and culturally situated, Stam suggests the possibility that the question of which cues are appropriated from a source in the process of adaptation might also depend on ‘extratextual’ influences. It is therefore not only important to compare which elements of a literary text have been used, but also to ask precisely how they have been transformed, and why others might have been omitted from the frame of understanding adaptation as an intertextual process of cueing (cf. Leitch 2007b, 332). Stam’s intertextual perspective on the process of adaptation counters the approach of fidelity criticism, which judges the value of an adaptation based on the faithfulness of the film to its literary source—a struggle going back to silent film (cf. Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926]).

As media art adaptations engage with literary texts in a way that renders references partly unrecognizable, they likewise challenge the applicability of fidelity criticism. It is of little benefit to evaluate quality based on how ‘faithfully’ the story line, the characters, poetic images, moods, and atmospheres adhere to the adapted work. The intense, yet often covert, processes of appropriation that characterize media art adaptations are more interesting. However, a comparative analysis, albeit often dismissed, can be fruitful in discovering the intricate relationships and exchanges between literature and media art.

Closely tied to the question of fidelity is the concept of medium specificity as, for instance, proposed by George Bluestone, who views literature (novels) and film as “overtly compatible, secretly hostile” (Bluestone 2003, 2) due to the media’s intrinsic differences. According to him, “the novel is a linguistic medium, the film essentially visual” (*ibid.*, vi), and both follow different conventions “conditioned by different origins, different audiences, different modes of production, and different censorship requirements” (*ibid.*). An approach like this that “takes place on the grounds of high modernist aestheticism” (Naremore 2000, 6) has been rightfully criticized

for being biased with regard to limiting film to a purely visual and literature to a purely verbal art form (cf. Elliott 2003).

As early as 1948, the film theorist André Bazin attacked the defenders of medium specificity and suggested “that we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed” (Bazin 2000, 26). A critic who, in the distant future, would be confronted with a novel and its stage and film adaptation would find “a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic” (ibid.). In contrast to Stam, Bazin saw a clear advantage in the idea of a work’s core, corresponding more or less to the notion of the ‘text substrate’ in drama studies (see also Chapter 4, Section 2), because it does not have to be linked with the notion of the higher value of an original:

The ‘work’ would then be only an ideal point at the top of this figure, which itself is an ideal construct. The chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more than the chronological precedence of one twin over the other is a genealogical one. (Bazin 2000, 26)

The intertextual approach to adaptations of prose and poetry in media art accounts for the fact that “[o]ne and the same literary piece can appear on the screen in different stylistic treatments” (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 126). Eikhenbaum does not rank the value of different arts, but construes adaptations as “the natural meeting of film and literature” (ibid., 124). This ‘natural meeting’ is possible, since he avoids placing literature and film in the essentialist, binary categories of word and image, though he describes the basic material of film as photography and verbal expression as that of literature (cf. ibid.). Moreover, this ‘meeting’ of both arts already points to what will be discussed later: the interdependence of media art from its literary precursor and the mutual exchange taking place between literature and media art. A literary text and an audiovisual adaptation can both hypothetically, for instance, “be discussed in terms of narration, style, character, tone, point of view, setting, and plot” (Verrone 2011, 16). However, it is important to bear in mind that equivalents are always constructions formed in the process of reception. Arguing that strict fidelity is impossible and that the transference from literature to film necessarily entails an “automatic difference” (Stam 2000, 55), a concept like intertextual dialogism opens up the investigation to perceive all shapes, rewritings, or interpretations of a (literary) work. As Stam makes clear:

But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings, including even readings of the narrative itself. The literary text is not a closed, but an open structure (or, better, structuration, as the later Barthes would have it) to be reworked by a boundless context. The text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation. (ibid., 57)

In following this line of argument, literature, and audiovisual art have to be regarded as “summas by their very nature. Their essence is to have no essence, to be open to all cultural forms” (ibid., 61). Although it would be limiting to reduce them to an essential ‘core,’ both literature and media art differ from each other due to their “respective materials of expression” (ibid., 59).

As the preceding debate reveals, most theories on audiovisual moving image adaptation have been developed with regard to works that are based on narrative prose. However, there are many cases of media art in which a poem constitutes the hypotext. The audiovisual adaptation of poems—though less popular—has a long tradition, dating back to the early years of cinema (cf. Orphal 2014). Media art adaptations of poetry stand in this tradition, as Scott MacDonald observes:

First, each makes available to an audience a previously published poem or set of poems in a new, cinematic form, and second, each makes the presentation of the poems, which are included in their entirety, the foreground of the film experience. That is, these films do not *adapt* the poems (revising them for use in a new context), they deliver the original words in their original senses, as precisely as possible, to new audiences through a different medium. They are, in other words, closer to new *editions* than to adaptations. (MacDonald 2007, 14f)

MacDonald here defines adaptation as ‘revision’ for a new context and differentiates adaptations from experimental film ‘editions’ that “deliver the original words in their original senses” (ibid., 15). Three of the works analyzed in the following subsections—Matthias Müller’s *nebel*, Rick Hancox’s *Waterworx*, and Jonathan Hodgson’s *The Man With the Beautiful Eyes*—remediate complete poems in the form of voice-overs or subtitle transcriptions. In these particular cases an adaptation functions as an edition. However, MacDonald’s argument seems to be driven by the will to prove the ‘high culture’ value of experimental film, as ‘editions’ in the realm of literature are respectable, academically approved formats, whereas adaptations are more readily associated with the realm of popular entertainment. The verb ‘to deliver’ is also an unfortunate choice, as it sounds as if a medium is just a neutral container for the communication of meaning. When media artworks perform literary sources through a voice-over that recites a whole text without altering the words, they could simply be regarded as illustrations and interpretations (cf. ibid., 25). The question must be raised as to why some images or sounds might seem like an illustration and others like a disturbance or contradiction, and what kind of dialog opens up between them. For the following analyses, strategies of disturbance or estrangement are of special interest, since they correspond to the Formalist idea of disruption, thus renewing the recipient’s perception (which is further discussed later in this chapter).

## Adaptation, Translation, Transcription

When thinking of adaptation as intertextual dialog and negotiation, one may address similar features that are shared by both arts. To account for this, Stam suggests substituting the trope of fidelity with the trope of translation: “The trope of adaptation as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation” (Stam 2000, 62). This connection of adaptation studies to theories of translation echoes Roman Jakobson’s category of “[i]ntersemiotic translation or *transmutation*,” that “is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959, 233). Despite differences, adaptation, and translation can be regarded as concepts that complement one another (cf. Raw 2012, 6; Azenha and Moreira 2012, 61; Tsui 2012, 56). Speaking of adaptation as translation is a trope that has also already been evoked by Eikhenbaum. He concludes that the practice of adapting literature to cinema is “neither staging nor illustration, but rather translation into film language” (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 123). Eikhenbaum here uses another analogy by speaking of audiovisual moving images as a form of language. This much-criticized analogy helps

to bridge the differences between both art forms. Eikhenbaum proposes this analogy from the perspective of the viewer or reader in order to observe similarities in the languages of literature and of film:

This is precisely the point: that cinema is not simply a moving picture, but a special photographic language. [...] The cinema audience is placed in completely new conditions of perception, which are to an extent opposite to those of the reading process. Whereas the reader moves from the printed word to visualisation of the subject, the viewer goes in the opposite direction: he moves from the subject, from comparison of the moving frames to their comprehension, to naming them; in short, to the construction of internal speech. (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 123)

According to Eikhenbaum, then, the difference between the language of film and that of literature is that literature moves from speech to visualization and film from visualization to internal speech. Yet instead of limiting film to a pure visual art form, Eikhenbaum values the subtitle, the word, as being “buried so deeply that it must be divined” (ibid., 125). Considering both ‘languages’ with regard to the cognitive responses of the recipient can become the bridge between them. These ideas resonate with Kamilla Elliott, who further develops Bluestone’s theory by looking for structures of analogies between literary tropes and the filmic images concerning the reader’s or viewer’s respective cognitive response (cf. Elliott 2003, 209–222). Elliott does so in order to “navigate between the visual and the verbal within as well as between signs and arts,” suggesting that “if a verbal metaphor raises mental imaging, then conversely and inversely, a pictorial metaphor raises mental verbalizing” (ibid., 221). Media artworks may not simply translate the literary devices of their precursors or borrow lines, characters, or plot elements; equivalences may also be found in the effect they have on the readers, and respectively the viewer’s, experience of perception. Speaking of adaptation as translation thus becomes the task of finding “[e]quivalence in difference” (Jakobson 1959, 233).

Moreover, thinking of adaptation as a form of translation enables us to account for the abstraction and experimental form of media art adaptation. In recent theoretical debates, the notion of translation has been extended from its linguistic realm, now “including both interlingual and intersemiotic translation” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 76). The concept has recently been applied to transformation processes between modalities, media, and cultures alike: “[T]ranslation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place” (Bassnett 2002, 6; also see Torop 2002; Marinetti 2013; Benthien and Klein 2017). In particular, the idea of medial translation leads us back to the notion of transcription. As Verrone proposes, “adaptation is, inherently, the study of transcription, which is a form of translation, in the sense that one thing is being transformed into another” (Verrone 2011, 18). Ludwig Jäger also describes this intermedial change as a process of transcription that emphasizes moments of disruption and materiality. In Chapter 2, Section 2, his notion of disruption was linked to Jay David Bolter’s and Richard Grusin’s logic of hypermediacy, which is characterized by its opacity. As discussed, these ideas already appeared in the early thinking of Eikhenbaum, who describes disruptive elements in the film experience as ‘trans-sense’ elements. These disruptive moments of foregrounded mediality, which can occur for instance in the forms of rapid montage or superimpositions, indicate the aesthetic strategy of *ostranenie*, of making strange.

Linda Costanzo Cahir also describes adaptations as translations, distinguishing between literal, traditional, and radical translations that generate “a fully new text—a *materially different entity* [...] that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, yet is fully independent

from it” (Cahir 2006, 14). The triad of literal, traditional, and radical translation echoes theories of literary intertextuality, with an equally graded triad of ‘participation,’ ‘transformation,’ and ‘tropes’ (cf. Lachmann and Schahadat 2004, 679–684). Costanzo Cahir’s idea of ‘radical translation’ again highlights the co-dependency that characterizes the relationship between hypotext and hypertext. Expanding on an idea from Naoki Sakai, Peter Brooker defines “translation [as] ‘hybridizing instance’ marked by disparity, gaps, and indeterminacy rather than equivalence” (Brooker 2007, 113; cf. Sakai 2008, 3). He combines this concept of translation with the idea of intertextual dialogism and states:

An adaptation [. . .] will stand in a set of potential intertextual or dialogic relations, not all of which will be realized or need be realized at any given time in order to afford pleasure and understanding. They may also become increasingly distanced from their ‘original’ while entering different transtextual worlds with other synchronically related texts. The moment of reading or viewing [. . .] can and frequently will reverse the chronology of source text and its adaptation, putting the second before the first. In which case the consequence of reading or viewing back to the source text will inevitably be to resituate and transform the supposedly fixed and authentic original. (Brooker 2007, 113f)

Brooker rightly claims that the order of ‘original’ and ‘derivative’ works is not fixed and is already the result of intertextual negotiations. Medial translations create changes, and these differences constitute new, perhaps hidden, constellations. In the case of media art, the fact that the artists were inspired by a literary work is often only revealed in the final credits (or not at all), therefore allowing their audiovisual work to appear as an independent artistic entity and allowing a comparative reading only as an optional (and belated) secondary approach.

### Adaptations as Deviant Derivatives

The investigation of the intertextual process of appropriation is necessarily, as Sanders puts it, “concerned with the literariness of literature,” as adaptation and appropriation offer insight into the ways in which “art creates art, or how literature is made by literature” (Sanders 2006, 1). Although her choice of words suggests that she follows the same approach as our study, her book does not explore literariness as the strategy and the effect of defamiliarizing devices.

Audiovisual art metabolizes other art forms (cf. Stam 2000, 61), an observation also made by the Russian Formalists. According to Eikhenbaum, “[c]inema seeks material in order to utilize the methods and potentialities of its own language. Literature is the richest source of this material” (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 124). Therefore, to express itself fully, film “is tapping literature” (ibid., 126) to create its own style. Eikhenbaum also asserts that this is a dynamic that does not “mean subordinating film to literature” (ibid., 124), but rather that both art forms are “unique” (ibid.) in their own potentials of expression—and these potentials are exposed in media art adaptations that foreground the process of adaptation as appropriation of another art form. Adaptations therefore gain a special status as “double or multilaminated works” (Hutcheon 2006, 6; cf. Geraghty 2008, 195). In literary theory, this is referred to as a double or multiple coding of a work (cf. Lachmann and Schahadat 2004, 678), which can be understood as a form of semantic as well as aesthetic layering, resulting in a heightened degree of opacity.

When considering adaptations in media art, it is necessary to look at them not only in relation to the literary work by which they were influenced but also as independent aesthetic entities. The transcriptive relationship between both works highlights a process of mutual exchange (cf. Stam 2000, 58). This dialogical exchange can catalyze a creative process, as “art renews itself

through creative mistranslation” (ibid., 62). David Kranz also observes this renewal through thematic and cultural change:

[A]daptations can criticize aspects of [their] sources, debate their themes, and translate them into different cultures and times in ways which alter their meanings and effects, among other relational possibilities. What’s important in comparing a source and an adaptation is not just its fidelity but the ways in which it interprets the source and uses it to create a new work of art. (Kranz 2007, 84)

The creative ‘mistranslation’ may result in opacity and in a metatextual level of self-reflexivity that emphasizes adaptations as a process of appropriation. Figurations of opacity are also accompanied by semantic layering: Adaptation in media art as an intertextual process creates “a semantic surplus that ranges from semantic complexity to semantic evaporation” (Lachmann and Schahadat 2004, 679).

Media art adaptations are aesthetic entities in their own right: They are their “own palimpsestic thing” (Hutcheon 2006, 9). Even if they only indirectly imply a relationship to a literary work, they frequently reflect on the process of adaptation itself and thus expose their status as derivation as well as highlight adaptation as a process of re-creative appropriation. Moreover, devices that defamiliarize the literary source and complicate the form of the media artwork effect a prolonged engagement with both the creative interpretation and the appropriated text. The following analyses aim to demonstrate that adaptation is not only a process of appropriation but also a device of defamiliarization. Media art adaptations are aesthetic entities that defamiliarize literary works; overall, their goal is largely not a faithful re-creation that allows for easy recognition. Instead, media art adaptations are originals: They are ‘deviant derivatives’ that force viewers to see the literary source anew.

The analyses examine the theme of appropriation of literary texts in media art from the following angles: the first subsection looks at acousmatic adaptations that establish the relationship to a literary work through the use of voice-overs; the second subsection investigates written allusions. Two subsequent subsections are dedicated to the aesthetics of superimposition, one focusing specifically on the theme of memory, the other on queer defamiliarizations. The two final subsections look at theatrical adaptations, in which an actor embodies the literary character, and at appropriations in multimedia performance and installation.

## Voice and Sound: Acousmatic Adaptations

This subsection examines three single-channel videos that use voice-overs in combination with figurative or abstract moving images, music, and sound to present a literary text fully or in fragments. In other words, these intertextual dialogs use spoken language to perform acts of both interpretative appropriation. It draws on the theory and aesthetics developed in Chapter 3, Section 1, since literature in the works by Matthias Müller and Seoungho Cho appear as acousmatic vocalizations of written, published literary texts. The spoken texts do not always correspond to the images and acoustic elements but also collide with them. Furthermore, the works make use of a circular structure of images and sounds that are repeated in similar or varying fashions.

The first acousmatic adaptation takes on a German-language poem cycle by the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl, titled *gedichte an die kindheit* [poems to childhood] (1980). Matthias Müller’s found-footage film *nebel* [mist] (DE 2000) presents the complete cycle as voice-over recitation and combines the spoken text with filmic sequences from various sources. While the adaptation is fairly experimental regarding images and montage, the voice-over and the use of

script follows the conventions of audio books and subtitling in feature films. The topics of aging and memory play a central role: The reflections on aging by the lyric persona are mirrored by the aging of analog film stock.

The footage shifts between color and black and white; tramlines (scratches that appear as black after a film has been copied) and other marks of deterioration and damage highlight the materiality of analog film. Müller integrates excerpts of home movies from his childhood, shots from the famous Hollywood movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and other footage that includes boys playing volleyball at the beach, dogs, indigenous men, or close-ups of a light bulb and of Christmas tree decorations. The voice-over by a professional speaker, Ernst-August Schepmann, reciting in a solemn, classical manner, is attentive to the pauses between the lines and the pronunciation of syllables and letters. This mode of articulation strongly contrasts to Jandl's own pronounced, sharp, and often ironic vocal performance when reciting his poems. As the poem cycle had not been translated previously, Müller commissioned the poet, performer, and translator Peter Waugh to produce an English translation that appears as subtitles in the international version of *nebel*. The subtitles in plain white letters are centered on the lower part of the screen; thus, they are not artistically presented but follow the conventions of unobtrusive subtitling used in feature film. The individual poems of the cycle are introduced and separated by white titles on a black background, imitating the format used in structuring silent movies.

Jandl's *gedichte an die kindheit* is printed entirely in lowercase letters and consists of 15 irregular poems of between two and 28 verses. The poems are numbered, and most have unadorned headings, such as "*die spuren*" ("traces"), "*die einsamkeit*" ("loneliness") or "*ein großer wunsch*" ("a big wish"). The simple vocabulary emulates nursery rhymes and the naïve language of children, but the cycle is written from the perspective of an elderly man mourning the approach of the end of his life and thus generates moments of melancholy and wry, even dark humor.

The third poem opens with the tongue-in-cheek pun "*der nebel ist das leben | wenn man es von hinten beginnt*" ("*nebel* (mist) is *leben* (life), | | if you start from the end"; Jandl 1980, 10). At first, this line reads like a nonsensical aphorism. Poeticness arises from the play with the German palindromes *Nebel* (mist) and *Leben* (life). To start from the end refers both to reading the word *Nebel* as well as to living: Starting one's life from the end would mean to age backwards, to develop towards a state of being 'foggy,' unconscious. In the second stanza, the lyric persona conveys that he will never come closer to "*meiner mutter der erde*" ("my mother the earth"; *ibid.*, 11) and then clarifies the statement with "*meiner mutter in der erde*" ("my mother under the earth"; *ibid.*). This simple semantic collision turns metaphorical verbatim speech into grotesque realism.

This inverted temporality suggested in the third poem is also prevalent in the last poem of the cycle, entitled "*die bitte*" ("supplication"), where the lyric persona beseeches God. Like all other poems, this one is presented mostly—but not always—line by line, with every verse a new screen:

## [voice-over]

lieber gott,  
*mach mich neu*  
*daß ich mich wieder freu*  
*ob bub oder mädel*  
*ob mann oder frau*  
*ist mir egal*  
*nur nicht zu alt*  
*mach mich halt*  
*bitte*  
 (*ibid.*, 15)

## [subtitles]

dear god. . . | |  
 make me anew | |  
 so that I can once more enjoy, | |  
 whether girl or boy  
 whether woman or man  
 I do not care, | |  
 but please do try to  
 not make my age too high, | |  
 please.

The speaker prays for renewal or rejuvenation (“*mach mich neu*”) to escape old age, the misery intensified by the poem’s last line and the word *bitte* (please) that lacks a full stop, as if the plea is so intense that it cannot be contained and blows up the stanza to reach God. This deviation from the norm established by the poem itself is sloppily omitted in the English subtitling.

In Müller’s *nebel*, Schepmann’s deep voice perfectly embodies the notion of old age. Although his intonation of “*die bitte*” alludes to praying, this allusion is subtle. The accompanying images illustrate the contrast between the language of a children’s prayer and the age of the lyric persona with straightforward symbolism. The sequence starts with a kitschy color close-up of a boy folding his hands in prayer. After the title insert, an old man walking with a cane appears, the images now black-and-white and superimposed with deteriorated film stock. The sequence ends with black-and-white images of a ball rolling through a puddle and then bouncing away. Although the ball could be understood as a metaphor for childhood and as a substitute for the missing full stop of this poem, its movement also picks up the cycle’s inversed temporality noted before: The original footage is reversed, as a ball first bounces energetically and then, losing momentum, comes to a halt.

In the framework of the literariness of adaptation, the footage accompanying poems five, “*die spuren*” (“traces”), and seven, “*ein roman*” (“a novel”), is particularly interesting. Both sequences are taken from the movie *The Time Machine* (1960) and show a close-up of male hands holding an open book; the images have a sepia color cast and are partially damaged with tramlines. “*die spuren*” opens with the lines “*die spuren, die ich hinterlasse, | sind in mancher schrift | geschrieben und gedruckt*” (“the traces I leave behind | are written and printed in some kind of script”) to the image of the yellowed pages of an old book being turned in slow motion, crumbling between the left hand. In the poem, Jandl both refers to and inverts the old *vanitas* topos of the ‘eternity of script’—of the poet leaving something of himself in his printed works after his death—a notion that Müller questions through the images. “*ein roman*” (“a novel”) consists of only four ironic lines:

[voice-over]

ein roman ist eine geschichte  
in der  
alles zu lang[e] dauert.  
das ist ein roman.  
(*ibid.*, 12)

[subtitles]

a novel is a story | |  
in which  
everything takes too long. | |  
that’s a novel.

Here, a poem reflects another literary genre from a child’s perspective: The rudimentary definition of a novel is based only on its length, which is performatively contrasted with the brevity of the poem. As Schepmann utters these simple words, we see the hands again, now holding a closed book that falls into pieces (Figure 5.2). By reflecting on and remediating the older medium of a book in this way, *nebel* offers a self-referential nod to the idea that every new medium contains older media, a topic addressed by other media artworks, such as Gary Hill’s video *Remarks on Color* (1994) or Masaki Fujihata’s installation *Beyond Pages* (1995).

Compared to media artist Cho’s use of literary pretexts—which will follow this analysis—Müller’s *nebel* is an acousmatic adaptation that does not defamiliarize its source. It can be considered a “poetry film” (Orphal 2014, 33) or a filmic ‘edition,’ akin to other formats of oral literature such as audio poetry (cf. Vorrath 2016; Benthien and Vorrath 2017), as it presents the full cycle unaltered and the voice-over recitation resembles that of audio books. If the first of these characteristics is justified by the occasion for the production—a cinematic homage to the eminent Austrian writer at the Vienna Film Festival in 2000—the second characteristic is an artistic choice. MacDonald’s remark on the subtitled version of *nebel*, that “the translated lines





FIGURE 5.2 Matthias Müller. *nebel*. 2000.

of Jandl's poem[s] tend to function as the visual foreground of the film and the photographed images the background—the cinematic *interpretation* of what is read" (MacDonald 2007, 25), definitely also applies to the German version, which has only the voice-over.

Because some of the footage matches the content of the poems, *nebel* could be seen as a mere illustration. Yet this interpretation overlooks the subtler layer of self-referentiality offered by Müller's film. This reflection is foregrounded in the sequences showing the disintegration of a book, and by the marks of damage and decay of the analog film material. Books and analog film are storage media that can record thoughts and moments, and although they are prone to decomposition, they could be preserved indefinitely. In the digital age, paper and celluloid are often regarded as obsolete in terms of production and distribution, yet for long-term preservation, analog film stock is (still) regarded as superior to digital data (cf. Fossati 2009, 64f). In contrast, digital texts and images seem to be 'forever new' until they suddenly break down and disappear, while analog books and films show their age through signs of wear. By using archival footage and excerpts from his own home movies—meant to preserve the memories of his childhood—Müller's *nebel* takes on the inverted temporality of Jandl's *gedichte an die kindheit* and highlights the complex life cycle of printed books and celluloid film.

**Seoungho Cho**, a Korean-American video artist, often works with literary texts—as already illustrated in Chapter 4, Section 1—which he adapts and transforms into his poetic media works. Here we discuss two of Cho's videos referencing novels from different cultural backgrounds. They reflect on the process of adaptation by displaying the very process of adaptation itself, pointing to the mutual exchange between literature and video art. Conventional feature film adaptations obscure the process of adaptation: They erase their own and their precursor's mediality in order to immerse the viewer, as if one is looking through a window onto a fictional world (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2000, 34). In contrast, Cho's videos explore strategies of opacity and hypermediacy.

In his single-channel video *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* (US 1995), Cho alludes to British author Jeanette Winterson's experimental novel *Art and Lies. A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd* (1994) in the closing credits. This paratext reveals that the video makes use not only of Winterson's novel but also of an unpublished poetic text—containing the title of the work—by the performer Tracy Leipold, whose voice is heard as part of the work. *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* consists of long takes of passersby in New York City. It also shows slow motion shots of a light bulb and of a left hand, holding an empty slide in front of a background illuminated with (illegible) script (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). These three motifs alternate with varying rhythm and speed. The image resolution oscillates between high and low, without ever allowing an undisturbed, transparent view of the scene. With their haptic quality and visual beauty, the images draw the viewers in for contemplation, while simultaneously denying an immersive viewing experience. The panorama of blurred images is accompanied by distorted sound effects created by the electronic musician and media artist Stephen Vitiello and drum samples from sound recordings by the media and sound artist Bob Bielecky. Similar to the oscillation of the image resolution, Leipold's voice shifts from the foreground to the background. At times, it almost vanishes behind Vitiello's soundtrack or is played in two simultaneous tracks, so the words disappear into a dense layer of sound.

Leipold recites passages from her poetically rhythmized text, which are heard repeatedly throughout the piece:

Leaves fill the driveway.  
 Snow fills the driveway.  
 Life times three.  
 Snow fills the driveway,  
 flew through right across your face,  
 Flew, trees, music.  
 Bottles in the garage,  
 Swinging tongues,  
 knees up around your chin,  
 cracks in the earth.  
 The earth fills the driveway,  
 shoes, mine, yours.  
 A boy on a bike,  
 too soon to remember.  
 Wipe those tears away.  
 Back to the threes.  
 Guy talks too much, girl rolls her eyes.  
 Okay.

In the last part of the video, the performer recites six sentences from Winterson's novel: "Light seen and heard. Light that writes on tablets of stone. Light that glories what it touches. Solemn self-delighting light. The train crawled on beneath the speeding light that had already belted the earth. The scientific train and the artful light." (Winterson 1995, 26) The question may be raised as to whether the mere quotation of passages from different literary texts constitutes an adaptation process in itself.

*Art and Lies* is considered Winterson's most difficult novel (cf. Andermahr 2007, 2). Raising existential questions and presenting philosophic-anthropological reflections, the text does not

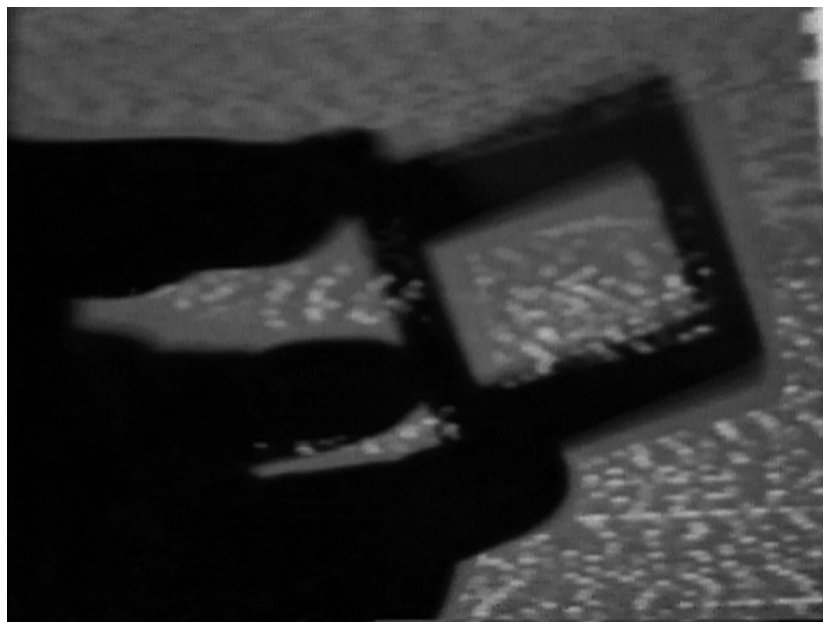


FIGURE 5.3 Seoungcho Cho. *Forward. Back. Side. Forward Again.* 1995.



FIGURE 5.4 Seoungcho Cho. *Forward. Back. Side. Forward Again.* 1995.

employ a linear narrative but depicts the rhapsodic inner monologs of Handel, Picasso, and Sappho, who recall traumatic events from their pasts during a train journey. The novel alternates between first- and third-person narration and abruptly shifts between past and present, forming a contrast to the linear, forward motion of a train. Furthermore, it plays with intermediality: Its structure of alternating monologs with short interludes, multiple perspectives, and polyvocal narration allow for a reading of the novel as an intramedial reference, or intertext, to Virginia

Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931). The characters in *Art and Lies* read the memoirs of Doll Sneer-piece—a *mise-en-abyme* of a book within a book—which is printed in Winterson's novel itself. Furthermore, the names of the characters are references to the ancient Greek poet Sappho, the Baroque composer Georg Friedrich Händel, and the 20th-century artist Pablo Picasso. Winterson's Handel character is a breast cancer surgeon, her Picasso a young female painter, and her Sappho a contemporary lesbian poet. The fictive intermedial play peaks at the end of the novel, when Handel—turned into a young castrato (cf. Winterson 1995, 197)—starts to sing the Richard Strauss opera *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Knight of the Rose*, 1911; *ibid.*, 196), and the final pages of the book contain the piece's musical score.

This complex web of structures moves novel and video closer together. Both artworks are highly self-referential, as they foreground their mediality and materiality: *Art and Lies* by using overt and covert intermedial references; *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* by using blurred images that create a haptic effect. Medial opacity, or 'looking at' the medium, is the aesthetic principle shared by both Winterson's novel and Cho's video. Cho's experiment with sharp and blurred images that restrict the viewer's access to the depicted world is comparable with Winterson's novel, which denies the reader the indulgence of an immersive fiction. The slide held in front of the camera is empty, commenting on the denial of a view through a transparent window. *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* also adopts the dialogic, polyvocal structure of *Art and Lies*. Its title comments on the novel's play with time, while the video's experiments with exposure also seem to answer the theme of the quoted Winterson passage: light. Novel and video constantly throw the recipients 'back to the surface' and direct their attention to the act of mediation. This emphasis on self-referentiality and the resulting opacity stand in strategic contrast to the transparency of conventional adaptations.

Furthermore, Cho's video can be seen as a reflection on the process of adaptation. Jäger describes the operative logic of intermedial change as transcription (see Chapter 2, Section 2). An element—in this case the quote from Winterson's novel—is isolated from its context, which leads to a disruption of transparency and redirects the focus onto the medium as disrupted operator. Transcription thus marks the transition between literature and moving image, and between disruption and transparency. Cho's video seems to focus exactly on these moments of transcription: The recited passages alternate in volume, while the image resolution oscillates, always creating new disturbances that prolong the perception. Quite contradictorily, the shared aesthetic of opacity and self-referentiality emphasize the distinctiveness of seeing and hearing. Image and sound never build a unit but rather stand apart and refer back to themselves in loops so that the viewers' attention must shift constantly. Novel, performance text, sound, and moving image compete for attention, so that the experience of the video oscillates between opacity, rupture, and transparency. *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* characterizes adaptation as a process of blending literary and audiovisual aesthetics. This points to the fact that the transition from text to moving image is not possible without alteration. The video highlights that adaptation is as much a dialogical process as a perceivable product: It makes adaptation palpable as a mutual exchange between two media and art forms.

Cho's video *Orange Factory* (US 2002) signifies its relation to its literary source—Japanese author Ryū Murakami's short novel *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (*Almost Transparent Blue*, 1976)—in the closing credits. Again, Tracy Leipold is heard, in this case reciting three different passages from the English translation of the novel. However, in this video the pitch of her voice has been dropped, evoking the effect of a male narrator—corresponding to the gender of the novel's first-person narrator who is, like the author, called Ryū. Leipold's manipulated voice sounds artificial, tired, and apathetic, like someone in a trance.

*Almost Transparent Blue* is a nearly plotless novel without a linear continuum of time and space, consisting of short, rather fragmentary episodes. One focus lies on the verbal and

physical interaction of a group of young people, another on the narrator's sensual perceptions of colors, sounds, odors, and taste. Ryū is a 19-year-old teenager who recounts his experiences and impressions of drug abuse, sex, excessive violence, and boredom. The narrative takes place during a hot, humid summer, and abject *vanitas* symbolism—decay, mold, and vomit—form a leitmotif. Murakami's novel also confronts its readers with explicit depictions of orgies verging on rape, which is absent from the references chosen for *Orange Factory*. The video focuses on how the novel depicts the wanderings of a mind on drugs and the narrator's distant and recent memories. The fragments are taken from different parts of the novel and are not presented in chronological order. The video's atmosphere switches from dismal to—between the quoted passages—more tranquil, an effect mostly generated by the content of the texts and the sound effects. The first quoted passage, for instance, is taken from the second-to-last section:

Once when I'd dropped acid in a park, I'd felt the same way I did now. I could see the trees stretching up to the night sky and some foreign town between the trees, and I walked there. In that dream town nobody passed me, the doors were all closed; I walked alone. When I walked to the outskirts of the town an emaciated man stopped me and told me to go no further. When I went on anyway, my body began to grow cold, and I thought I was dead. Face pale, my dead self sat down on a bench and began to turn toward my real self, who was watching this hallucination on the screen of the night. (Murakami 1977, 116f)

In *Orange Factory*, the narrator's memories of an acid trip, his panic and the encounter with his 'dead self' are matched with disharmonious, jumbled sounds, noise, and shaky camera images of a person who appears as a shadow against the setting sun—picking up on Ryū's experience of looking at himself from the outside. In this regard, Cho's piece is a medial translation into sound and images of the verbally described mental and physical states. The soundtrack is repeatedly reduced, turning the cacophony into a more meditative layer of sound. Distorted sound and shaky images vary in their intensity, creating an effect that is at times threatening and at others soothing.

*Orange Factory* is both an ocularization and an auricularization of the literary text (cf. Kuhn 2011, 122; see Chapter 4, Section 3), depicting the protagonist's visual and acoustic perceptions in an associational filmic style. Cho focusses on Murakami's descriptions of drug-fueled sensations, translating them into a sensuous viewing experience: a form of visual and acoustic sensitization, creating stimuli as if emulating an acid trip. The images—filmed on four different South Korean islands—show distorted views of the countryside and sea, a man walking in front of an orange sunset, and, later, a car driving through the rain. In another episode from the novel, Ryū and his girlfriend Lilly go for a drive after taking mescaline. The images and sound of Cho's videotape seem to evoke the experience of hallucinations, the shaky hand-held camera representing the subjective, first-person perspective. The passage in Murakami's book mentions a camera filter left behind and resumes self-reflexively: "That lost camera filter and the fields of flowers and the power plant all come together" (Murakami 1977, 61). As the protagonists drive past this scenery, Ryū focuses on the appearance of light, in neon signs and cars, as well as "factories with mysterious machines lined up and flames spouting from smokestacks, the winding road like molten steel flowing from a blast furnace" (ibid., 63)—a scene condensed into the video's poetic title, *Orange Factory*.

Text fragments and images correspond loosely, sometimes briefly matching and then drifting apart again. All three Murakami passages recited focus on the loss of one's self, thoughts of fusing "with the lovely orange light of the setting sun" (ibid., 117), and the absorption by the darkness

of a rainy night. The hand-held camera and reduced frame rate create motion blur on the light of the sun, the moon, and street lamps at night, allowing for the light and objects to visually merge together (Figure 5.5). The artificial movement of the setting sun in particular creates a continuum of abstract signs—lightning flashes in the evening sky, evoking also a form of artistic writing, like calligraphy. Cho creates a visual effect as if the camera itself were painting colorful, abstract, and rather psychedelic images with light and shadow. A distinctive feature of this video is the succession of seemingly short stills assembled to create a kind of (ruptured) movement. The moving image medium seems deconstructed, reduced to its basic unit: The normally hidden experience of the amalgamation of filmic ‘frames’ into a continuous flow is disrupted through the foregrounded cuts and ruptures. Movement is presented as artificially created and the work appears hypermedial. Similar to Cho’s *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again*, the images never allow a transparent view of the depicted scene. They oscillate between different states of abstraction, at times entirely foregrounding the blurred images so that the connection between object and representation is dissolved into moments of ‘pure photography:’ *zäum*’ images (see Chapter 3, Section 1). While the color in the novel’s title is blue (“a boundless blue, almost transparent,” *ibid.*, 125), the video is mainly an *étude* on orange, the color in the video’s title. The visual intensity of Cho’s orange—the complimentary color to Murakami’s blue—dominates the linguistic elements to a certain extent. Only in the last two minutes of the tape does blue fill the screen, which may be regarded as a comment on painting.

Both of Cho’s videos discussed in this section use novels as their inspiration. In both works, moods, and perceptions are foregrounded. One may therefore speak of the audiovisual transformation of a novel into a kind of audiovisual poem, using an ‘associational form’ (see Chapter 4, Section 1) that has an effect similar to poetry. The appropriation of Winterson’s and Murakami’s novels by Cho proves to be “a creative *and* an interpretive act” (Hutcheon 2006, 8)—an artistic process that interrogates literary aesthetics while probing the devices of moving image technology.



FIGURE 5.5 Seungho Cho. *Orange Factory*. 2002.

## Baring the Signifier: Written Allusions

This subsection deals with media art that references literary texts by means of written language. Drawing on concepts of the aesthetics of script in moving images as analyzed in Chapter 3, Section 2, a point of investigation is whether the works apply similar strategies of iconization—thus baring the signifier—or rather reduce script more or less to its communicative function. The relation of script to other visual elements—from realistic footage to animated drawings—is also considered. The three works discussed here display a variety of font types and phases of writing, and script seems central to the adaptation process. Each work applies different strategies: in one case, kinetic computer script refers to the cursor and to the fact of ‘liveness,’ in another case script itself is turned into the main act. It becomes obvious that the aesthetics of the works by Rick Hancox, Jonathan Hodgson, and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries are vastly different; nevertheless, they have been grouped together to illustrate the great variety of script-based adaptations of literary excerpts. Furthermore, all highlight social institutions that construct the individual’s experience, thus each can also be considered a social commentary in its own peculiar way.

**Rick Hancox’s** *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* (CA 1982) is a short experimental film based on American modernist Wallace Stevens’s poem “A Clear Day and No Memories” (1955). Its use of script is straightforward and the transformation from poem to media art can be considered an ‘edition.’ *Waterworx* presents the full poem one line after the other in computer generated, bold-face letters of identical size, centered at the bottom of the frame. This presentation breaks down the graphic layout of Stevens’s poem, a technique also used in Cho’s *Identical Time* (see Chapter 4, Section 1) and Müller’s *nebel*. Instead of presenting the poem in stanzas (and thus referring to a characteristic of written poetry), Hancox’s analog film alludes to—then still young—digital word processing technology.

The lines are built up letter-by-letter from left to right. When a line is finished, a cursor blinks at its end, thus making an invisible writer visible and giving the film a kind of uncanny ‘liveness.’ In addition, Hancox omits all punctuation marks at the end of the lines and also cuts the poem’s longer verses into halves, presenting both half-lines below each other. This slow, verse-by-verse presentation, alternating with moments that do not contain script, emphasizes the poetic utterance.

By highlighting the individual verse, the audience is prompted to correlate the poetic with the filmic images. The line “TODAY THE AIR IS CLEAR OF EVERYTHING,” for example, is combined with views of clouds in the bright blue sky above a long industrial building filmed from below. The building is in fact a waterworks: the Harris Water Filtration plant overlooking Lake Ontario in Toronto, an early 20th-century Art Deco building with a cathedral-like structure (Figure 5.6). The main title of Hancox’s *Waterworx* indicates the building’s function with a significant deviation in spelling, inscribing the filmmaker’s last name into it—an autobiographical reference, since he visited the area as a child (cf. MacDonald 2007, 22). The film consists of various views of the plant, filmed from a car driving around it. As there are no ‘reverse shots’ identifying a possible bearer of the gaze—and no signs of living beings at all—it seems as if the camera moves on its own, like a robot, through a deserted, post-apocalyptic area. The uncanny association with a robot is also prompted by disturbing interference noise that accompanies most of the scenes.

The circling movement (of the invisible car) is repeated as a formal element of composition. *Waterworx* is composed of two identical audiovisual tracks that are seamlessly joined, creating a disorienting defamiliarization that prolongs and disrupts the viewers’ perception. The only differences in the second part are the added poem lines and the elimination of some minor sound elements. In the second part, the audience has already seen the images once and has heard the accompanying soundtrack, which consists of difficult-to-understand children’s voices,



FIGURE 5.6 Rick Hancox. *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)*. 1982.

a foregrounded swooshing of wind, and fragments of the World War II song “The White Cliffs of Dover” (1942), sung by British singer Vera Lynn. An acoustic interference dominates the soundtrack, causing it to sound as if it is being played over a radio with bad reception.

The deserted images—and in particular the song—relate thematically to the poem, which starts with the line, “No soldiers in the scenery” (Stevens 1955, 475). The opening shot shows the exterior wall of a house with a water hydrant in front of it, then a ride from inside a car, driving on a street at a deserted shore, circling the majestic water plant. The film has been shot on an emblematic ‘clear day’ as the poem’s title suggests. While the ‘radio tune’ claims, “I’ll never forget,” the contradictory lines, “NO THOUGHTS OF PEOPLE NOW DEAD || AS THEY WERE FIFTYYEARS AGO” appear on the screen. Stevens’s poem deals with the absence of memories and is full of hermetic negations: “No soldiers,” “No thoughts,” a mind that “is not part of the weather,” “the air” that is “clear of everything,” that has “no knowledge except of nothingness,” and that “flows over us without meanings” (ibid.). Considering the foregrounded negations in the poem, the first part of the film can be interpreted both as a reflection on the absence of life and an absence of memory. In contrast, the second half—the part that includes the poem—can be considered as a reflection on the relationship between memory and storage media: viewers are not only required to actively interpret both poem and film, they are also “reseeing, *remembering*, the images of the waterworks and the song and the other sounds” (MacDonald 2007, 21). It is as if the typical timeline of literature to moving image adaption is inverted: Instead of finding images to illustrate words, here the images and sound precede the literary text.

When quoting the last line of the poem (“THIS INVISIBLE ACTIVITY || THIS SENSE”; ibid., 16), Hancox modifies the device of split verse and shows the half-lines separately, with different backgrounds. The artwork thus underlines its autonomy from the poem by rearranging its linguistic structure. More important here, however, is the interplay of words and images: “THIS INVISIBLE ACTIVITY” is at first combined with the last shot of Lake Ontario, before a dissolve to the frontal view of one of the first personal computers, placed on a table inside a windowless room, reveals the last line “THIS SENSE.” The computer monitor is switched off but shows a reflection of the filmmaker filming (Figure 5.7). MacDonald has rightly emphasized the complex performative use of the deictic pronoun ‘this’ at this crucial, self-reflexive turning point,





FIGURE 5.7 Rick Hancox. *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)*. 1982.

which “now refers simultaneously to the speaker’s remembering/nonremembering, the poet’s representation of it, the filmmaker’s activity in communicating his sense of the Stevens poem to us, and the finished film” (ibid.). The self-referential, *mise-en-abyme* ending of the film highlights again the recursive structure of *Waterworx*. Not only is the filmmaker shown filming, but also the view of the computer refers to the switch from analog to digital, the digitization of writing and filming, the replacement of humans by machines, and the computer as processor and memory machine: The last shot reveals the dominant that structures all other elements of the film.

**Jonathan Hodgson’s** hand-drawn animated short film *The Man With the Beautiful Eyes* (UK 1999) is an audiovisualization of Bukowski’s homonymous poem from the volume *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* (1992). The animation style is reminiscent of both comic strips and children’s picture books. Bukowski’s narrative poem is a parable presented in 18 stanzas, creating its poetic character mostly by means of iteration and variation of certain central motifs. Written in free verse, the poem’s stanzas function as ‘steps’—to refer to Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of staircase constructions (see Chapter 4, Section 3)—which mark the poem’s narrative development. By foregrounding specific descriptions or images, the shorter stanzas indicate particularly impressive occurrences imprinted on the memory of the first-person speaker. The lyric persona, a boy, remembers how as children he and his friends used to disobey their parents and play in the wild garden of a seemingly abandoned house. Only once did they meet the man living there, when he suddenly came out in undershirt and pants, barefoot, and unshaved, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. His crude appearance impressed the kids, and is supposedly the reason for their parents’ admonishment to stay away, which the children interpret in their own way:

our parents,  
we decided,  
had wanted us

to stay away  
 from there  
 because they  
 never wanted us  
 to see a man  
 like  
 that,  
 a strong natural  
 man  
 with  
 beautiful  
 eyes.  
 (Bukowski 2002, 46f)

Later, finding the house destroyed, the children intuitively conclude that their parents must have burned it down and killed the man out of jealousy and fear of his beauty and masculinity. The last stanza elevates the poem to its parabolic summit:

and  
 we were afraid  
 then  
 that  
 all throughout our lives  
 things like that  
 would  
 happen,  
 that nobody  
 wanted  
 anybody  
 to be  
 strong and  
 beautiful  
 like that,  
 that  
 others would never  
 allow it,  
 and that  
 many people  
 would have to  
 die.  
 (ibid., 49)

By using the title of the poem as the title for his animation, Hodgson follows the common practice of feature film adaptations. The source of the text is revealed only in the closing credits, where it is equalized in its status to that of the film through parallelism: “a film by | JONATHAN HODGSON”; “a poem by | CHARLES BUKOWSKI.”

Hodgson’s film refers to the poem on two linguistic levels. A male voice-over recites the poem from beginning to end, without altering a single word or line. The timbre of the voice is

deep, throaty, the intonation solemn. Rather than as appropriation, this level could be understood simply as recitation. But the film is multimodal and also contains script in a foregrounded manner. Unlike the two other works here that use computer script, the aesthetics of Hodgson's film are strongly centered on 'autographic' handwriting.

Bukowski's poem includes three lines of direct speech. In the second stanza, the parents of the boys are quoted, admonishing, "never go near that | house." (ibid., 44); in the fourth stanza the boys hear the man with the beautiful eyes shouting "YOU GOD DAMNED | WHORE!" (ibid., 45); and in the seventh stanza the man addresses the children: "hey, little | gentlemen, | having a good | time, I | hope?" (ibid., 46) In Hodgson's film, the vehemence of the parents' prohibition is visually underlined as well: The word 'never' appears in form of huge black capital letters that occupy two-thirds of the frame. But "of course," (ibid., 44) as the poem continues, the boys ignore their parents' rules—and as the voice-over speaks these words, the color of the black font is inversed to white. The direct speech of the man with the beautiful eyes is also represented through script that spreads across the screen. The fonts used for his words resemble circus advertisements and newspaper cutouts, thus using the iconicity of script to symbolize his wild, unruly personality. In addition to that, a different speaker with a distinctly American accent and an intonation reminiscent of Bukowski's own voice speaks these lines.

The instances of direct speech are not the only parts of the film foregrounded by animated script. The goldfish in the pond, for example, are not illustrated figuratively but represented by an orange shoal of the word 'goldfish' that moves as if swimming, thus reminiscent of concrete poetry (Figure 5.8). Towards the end of the video, when the "orange goldfish | were dead | there, | drying out" (ibid., 48), this device is reversed: The fish are drawn, and then replaced by shots of the words 'dead there' and 'drying out,' like an echo of the spoken words. Aside from the direct speech, only one other word is graphically highlighted in Bukowski's printed poem, an italicized description of the man's eyes: "they *blazed* | with | brightness" (ibid., 46). In the video, 'blazed' is written in black, surrounded by dashed rays of different colors animated so that they appear to blaze like flames out of the word—an effect amplified by the sound of a crackling firebrand. The adaptation here is a visual translation of the dazzling, title-giving intensity of the eyes, as if from a child's perspective—corresponding in this regard to Müller's *nebel*. The beauty of the man's eyes, too blinding to be seen, can only be approximated in language or experienced through a metaphorical illustration of the words. The metaphor of blazing eyes is brought to life in the visual medium of film, and at the same time the origin of the metaphor, the signifier, is reintegrated and preserved as script. Thus, the animated word "blazed" is marked as excessively sensual, corresponding to the powerful, enigmatic man (Figure 5.9).

While the content of the poem is uncanny, the colorful images create—for the most part—a cheerful atmosphere. Hodgson's animation does not simply illustrate the poem; it is an animation in the truest sense. Once again, through the perspective of childhood memory—which only seems to be naïve—Bukowski's poem articulates fear of the intolerant conformity imposed by extreme conservatism (interpreted by Hodgson through images of parents neurotically washing the leaves of a rubber plant or cleaning the terrace with chemical weed killer). The children in the poem decide that their parents must have killed the beautiful man because he was a social outcast. This cue is taken up by Hodgson when he integrates a sequence of adults aggressively marching to the sounds of military drums, and portrays the leader of this hate march as a man in a checkered shirt with the words 'love' and 'hate' tattooed on his knuckles, evoking images of violent extremists. There is also a suggestion of child abuse in the visuals, foregrounded by a poster hanging on a wall in a busy street that is shown both before the recitation of the poem and between stanzas 11 and 12 (thus, before the march) that reads, "MISSING | have you seen



FIGURE 5.8 Jonathan Hodgson. *The Man With the Beautiful Eyes*. 1999.



FIGURE 5.9 Jonathan Hodgson. *The Man With the Beautiful Eyes*. 1999.

| this CHILD.” Associatively, the poster and the aggressive mob of adults create a narrative unit, suggesting that the mob seeks revenge for the missing child.

Though Bukowski’s writings are not overtly political, they have been understood as working-class poetry that subverts hegemonic capitalist ideology. While the voice-over of the poem’s final line is heard, the animation transitions from color to black-and-white as the images zoom out from a typewriter to reveal the window of a pawnshop called “Chinaski’s.” This visual epilog is an intertextual homage to Bukowski: Chinaski is his literary alter ego, an alcoholic writer like Bukowski himself. As a bitter irony, however, directly in front of the shop lies the body of a man—perhaps a sleeping homeless man, perhaps a corpse—ignored by passersby. The man’s

death is suggested by the image that appears immediately after the recitation of the poem ends, with the last lines rendering the fear of the boys, “that | many people | would have to | die.”

Unlike the previous media art adaptations of complete poems, the Flash web animation *Samsung* (KR 1999–2003) by **Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries** (YHCHI) contains only two single intertextual references (in this case to works of the 1950s). YHCHI’s works, presented almost exclusively online and using elements of writing, music, and at times voice, are situated between digital poetry and digital art. The Seoul-based artist duo has produced a number of fast-paced text animations in which words appear in rapid succession in a browser window, filling the entire screen with a monochrome font. Most works exist in multiple versions, with different languages and individual soundtracks. For this analysis we focus on the English version of *Samsung*, which is accompanied by smooth jazz. YHCHI’s works make numerous references to film as well as literary genres, to concrete poetry or narrative genres (cf. Pressman 2008b). They use Flash, a web animation tool that quickly transmits images and font elements and instantly alternates between frames. A significant component of their visual aesthetic is the use of the distinct Mac font Monaco in capital letters. In particular, the ‘zero’ of the Monaco script—used by YHCHI instead of an ‘O’—is a decisive marker of the beginning of the digital age.

The literary reference in this computer-based work is Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955), quoting only the very first sentence with its luxurious alliterations: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins” (Nabokov 1989, 11). Included in the second half of *Samsung*, the quote’s less than prominent placement allows it to be easily overlooked. Through this quote, *Lolita* and *Samsung* enter a relationship of hypertextuality, forming a network of layers of reference. The line is extracted from its original context and its meaning is altered significantly. In so doing, Nabokov’s novel is not merely resuscitated but constitutes “a turn in an ongoing dialogical process” (Stam 2000, 64): A small element of the novel is placed into another medium with a different receptive situation, which contributes to new meanings being added to the artwork as well as the novel. The quote from Nabokov’s novel is used to link the fetish of the pedophile protagonist Humbert Humbert for the adolescent Lolita to the capitalist fetish that surrounds the South Korean conglomerate Samsung.

The kinetic text of *Samsung* can be divided into two parts. The first part is a confession of a narrator addressing a ‘you’ who does not answer. The narrator laments the meaninglessness of his or her life and work, equating both with the state of a “FRUSTRATED | AHJUMA” (which is a ‘married woman’ in Korean, as we learn from the text). The lines “IT’S ALL | THE SAME: || NØISE. || THEN | YØU DIE. || AND YØU’RE | DEAD | FØEVER.” appear to be the thoughts accompanying an existential, nihilistic crisis. The second part bears the ironic solution to the crisis: “SAMSUNG” provides meaning to an otherwise meaningless life. The text continues praising Samsung’s qualities, with the rhythm of the music sometimes matching the rhythm of the alternating sentences. As such, this part of *Samsung* resembles a song of praise, depicting Samsung as a “HERØ,” “MY | CØUNTRY’S | SAVIØR,” expressing the endless devotion to Samsung “IN DEATH | AS IN LIFE,” and affirming this praise with “AMEN.” It is in this second part that the reference to Nabokov’s *Lolita* occurs. However, the work exchanges Lolita for Samsung: “SAMSUNG, LIGHT | ØF MY LIFE, FIRE | ØF MY LOINS, | KISS ØN MY LIPS.”

The brief allusion charges the artwork with (ironic) meaning. *Lolita* contains the fictional confessions of the unreliable first-person narrator Humbert Humbert, who recalls his pedophilic obsession with the 12-year-old Dolores Haze, whom he calls Lolita. As such, the narrative situation of *Samsung* and *Lolita* is comparable: As the narrator of *Samsung* addresses a ‘you,’ Humbert Humbert addresses the “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (Nabokov 1989, 11) on several occasions throughout the book. In both situations, the addressee remains silent. The adoration of the mute addressee is, furthermore, present in *Lolita*, as Humbert compares his devotion with famous

literary love constellations from the early Italian Renaissance, including Dante Alighieri's love for Beatrice and Petrarca's love for Laura (cf. *ibid.*, 19). He uses this analogy apologetically, yet also characterizes it in terms of literary tradition. Both Dante and Petrarca fell unhappily in love with an unattainable young woman, and both lament her premature death and transform their passion into literature. In *Lolita*, the reference to classic literature is made by the literature professor Humbert Humbert who identifies with the poets to justify his immoral passion.

This highly ironic reference to *Lolita* in *Samsung* occurs just before the conglomerate Samsung becomes the object of excessive elevation and adoration. It sexually charges the relationship of the narrator to Samsung, and aligns with the aforementioned literary tradition. Unlike other artworks by the artist duo, *Samsung* does not feature the stark contrast of a black font on a white background but a rather dull black and blue, corresponding to the content in the first half of the text. The novelty and sense of revelation through the discovery of Samsung are expressed aesthetically. The monotonous black-on-blue Monaco font is visually disrupted by the appearance of the word **SAMSUNG** in neon orange, reminiscent of luminous advertising, which creates a stark contrast. This points back to the idea established in Chapter 3, Section 2: The design of the words, their iconicity, can provide meaning. In *Samsung*, the neon-orange title word literally breaks through the bleak black-and-blue everyday life of the narrator. The shining word **SAMSUNG** appears more than 30 times within this short text piece and is the only word to vary significantly in size (Figure 5.10).

Referencing Samsung as the object of adoration is a critique of the Samsung conglomerate as symbol of multinational capitalism: Samsung is headquartered in Seoul, the home base of YHCHI and the location of their first solo exhibition in 2004 (cf. Hyesoo 2005, 73). The Samsung group is repeatedly explored as a topic in YHCHI's work. Even the name of the artist duo may be a play on words, referring to 'Samsung Heavy Industries.' YHCHI is concerned with the prominence of Samsung in South Korea and in *Samsung* renders a capitalist obsession, following the principle of newness and the promise of improvement that guides the electronics industry.

Nabokov's novel, like the work *Samsung*, is highly attuned to sounds; it is dense with rhymes and wordplay. *Samsung* mirrors this quality, rendering text with a spoken quality through the speed and rhythm of alternation and by using italics to indicate repetitions. Moreover, the excessive use of the word **SAMSUNG** increases the spectator's awareness of the materiality of the



FIGURE 5.10 Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. *Samsung*. 1999–2003.

word. ‘Samsung,’ a two-syllable alliteration, an assonant ‘kiss on the lips,’ opens a dimension similar to Humbert Humbert’s savoring of the alliteration within Lolita’s name in the opening of the novel: “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (Nabokov 1989, 11). Just as the pronunciation of Lolita’s name is a “trip of three steps,” the second syllable of Samsung forms a ‘kiss’ on the speaker’s pursed lips—just like Shklovsky’s ‘sweetness of verse on one’s lips.’ *Lolita*’s narrator indulges in the sound and pronunciation of Lolita’s name, making it a sensual experience. ‘Samsung’ likewise becomes a sensual experience. The devotion to Samsung is emphasized in the disembodied digital writing that appears on the computer screen. Like all of YHCHI’s works, *Samsung* consists of a text that is presented sentence by sentence, at times even word by word. YHCHI’s animations stood out because of denying user intervention—as such violating the norm of the internet, interactivity—, which forced viewers to give up control and give in to *Samsung*’s power. This defining feature, often discussed in research literature (cf. Hayles 2008, 125; Pressman, 2008a, 47), has curiously been abolished, now allowing viewers to skip through and pause the artwork.

The second intertextual reference in *Samsung* is not to literature but to a famous performance text: John Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” (1959). This text is also a cue that triggers a set of associations, here with regard to the artwork itself. The one-sentence reference to Cage’s is a subtlety that only recipients with very specific knowledge would pick up on. YHCHI chose the central performative sentence that opens the lecture and then appears again with variations within the highly self-referential text: “I have nothing to say | and I am saying it” (Cage 1973, 109). Cage’s lecture explores and exposes ways of performative speaking and not speaking, both of which are, paradoxically, executed simultaneously in the quoted phrase. With its strict composition, creating a dense rhythm and containing many deliberate caesuras and silences, the lecture is a performance based on (analytical) language but aiming at musicalization. This is similar to the aesthetics of YHCHI, who also segment text into small rhythmic units and combine them with music. With the Cage reference, the artist duo enters into an art theory debate that addresses interart questions and the *paragone* debate between old and new media. At the very beginning of *Samsung*, the narrator refers both to himself and his (art)work and concludes that he has nothing to say. Contrary to Cage, who uttered these sentences in front of an audience and thus executed a (paradoxical) speech act by claiming to speak and not to speak at once, YHCHI chose a monolithic script to transport this message. It is thus turned into a different kind of paradox: that of the muteness of script, of only being able to ‘speak’ in a figurative way. The same is true of the viewers: They are addressed by kinetic script yet are not allowed to ask questions or answer the powerful ‘speaking’ instance.

## Aesthetics of Superimposition I: Reflecting Memory

The next two subsections focus on works by three different artists that employ linguistic multimodality (the use of both written and spoken language in the intermedial presentation of literary pretexts). They use devices of multimodal defamiliarization, for instance, a double presentation of a text in different contexts or giving controversial textual information simultaneously via images and sounds. In thematizing loss, displacement, and alienation, the works are also united by a form of cultural criticism. They employ devices of aesthetic estrangement in order to address experiences of alienation.

The short video *mentiras & humilhações* [Lies and Humiliations] by the Brazilian artist **Eder Santos** (BR 1988) refers to the poem “Liquidação” [Liquidation] (1968) by the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. The poem, consisting of only seven lines, soberly describes the sale of a house and moving out of it. He makes use of dichotomies and contrasts by referring to

tangible and intangible elements of the house, such as its furniture (“os móveis”), its memories (“as lembranças”), and nightmares (“os pesadelos”; Drummond de Andrade 1968, 49). The double structure continues on the level of time; past and future meet in line three, presented in two parts in the video: “All the committed sins | or those about to be” (“todos os pecados cometidos ou em via de cometer”). The poem also evokes a contrast in the qualities of onomatopoeic sound, juxtaposing the hard plosives of “bater de portas,” the slamming of doors, with the soft nasal vowels of “vento encanado,” the wind blowing. Bit by bit it personifies the house with “sua vista do mundo | seus imponderáveis” (“Its view of the world | | Its inconsiderateness”). The intimate atmosphere and the personal value of the house—defined by the rich memories of its inhabitants—are shattered by the staccato rhythm of the last spoken line “por vinte, vinte contos” (“For twenty, twenty bucks”)—the very low price for which the house was sold. The English translation by Aécio Santos indicates a shift to a more colloquial vocabulary, which also clashes with the evocative diction of the first lines.

Santos’s video adopts the bifold structure described. It consists of a first part, called “mentiras”/“Lies,” and a second part, entitled “humilhações”/“Humiliations.” The Portuguese titles are presented in large pink letters and the English titles are displayed above the Portuguese words in orange italic type with the initial letters capitalized. The first part opens with colorful light being projected onto a plant in white vase standing on a tallboy. Unlike the second part, the first does not contain language but instead presents images of a house with phantom-like apparitions superimposed onto the interior. The white, spacious house with its wrought-iron bars and grills is adorned with flourishes, arched doorways, large windows, beautiful traditional decor, and black-and-white patterned tile floors. Accompanied by the sound of an out-of-tune piano and the noise of someone boiling water in the kitchen, the first part seems to represent the embellished memories of something lost (Figure 5.11).

The transition from the first to the second part is introduced by the rattling sound of a film projector—not only a medial reference, but also a signifier of loss, as if the younger medium of video commemorates the older medium of analog film. The hand-held camera lingers once more on the objects, now depicting framed family portraits on the wall, porcelain figurines and vases, and then shifts to explore the texture of the curtains. An elderly woman is shown, sitting alone and lonely in her apartment. The camera films her as if she were another inanimate object. Throughout the second part, an older woman’s voice—suggesting the old woman who is seen before the speaking begins—recites Drummond de Andrade’s poem in Portuguese, while the English translation appears in yellowish, translucent subtitles. The voice sounds technically modified with some



FIGURE 5.11 Eder Santos. *mentiras & humilhações*. 1988.



reverberation and echo, as if it is coming from a faraway place. The effects of the voice and the script form another contrast: The voice conveys the rhythm of the poem, while the demure text depicts the poem as matter-of-fact. An electronic soundscape—again by Steven Vitiello—and a melancholic keyboard melody form the acoustic background. The house of the recited poem is no longer the woman's home. Instead, she is surrounded by her belongings and the memories attached to them. Revealing a bleak view of the skyscrapers surrounding her anonymous, dark, cramped apartment, the video is a dismal portrayal of the passing of time and the reverberation of distant memories in the present.

Since Drummond de Andrade's poem "Liquidação" is recited twice in the second half of the video, a motif of redoubling is introduced, suggesting that there may have been more than one house to leave (or more than one anonymous housing block to move into). The house turns into a palimpsestous sign, as a site of memory and storage, as well as a mnemonic device—just as in poetry, where repeating the same lines twice devalues it, suggesting a hint of indifference toward its content, which matches the general tone of the poem and its 'transactional' title. The repetition emphasizes the traumatic loss, and implies an unwillingness to let go. The title of Santos's video, on the contrary, raises many questions that remain largely unexplored: What are the 'lies'? What are the 'humiliations' that someone experiences here? The second part of the title may be associated with the woman sitting in her small, dark, and lonely new home, experiencing a form of degradation. The signifying of the first half as lies, however, remains enigmatic. Santos's double title suggests a loose narrative reading of the video, whose scattered linguistic and visual signs the viewer must associatively combine.

The single-channel video *Sombra a Sombra* [Shadow to Shadow] (US 1988) by U.S.-American artist **Daniel Reeves** works with the intertextual presence of six poems by the Peruvian modernist poet César Vallejo—to whom the work is also dedicated—in their English translation. One full stanza from two different poems appears in written form, framing the beginning and end of the work; all the other portions of the poems are recited in a voice-over by the Chilean-American media artist Juan Downey, speaking in American English with a slight Spanish accent. Initially, the recitation of Vallejo's poetry combined with the images may seem sentimental; on closer examination, the video reveals a striking complexity.

*Sombra a Sombra* is a collage of images and poems containing three fragments—in all three cases, the last of four stanzas—and three complete poems, of which two are split into two parts. In this multilaminated adaptation, the quoted poems are not only partly presented in direct relation to the images, but they are also assembled to create a dialog with each other. The video images loosely correspond to the poetic images evoked by the recited passages, as in the following sentence taken from "La violencia de las horas" ("Violence of the Hours," 1924; although published in a poetry collection, this text contains only full narrative sentences, one beneath the other): "The musician Méndez died, tall and very drunk, who [sol-faed] melancholy toccatas on his clarinet, at whose articulation the hens in my neighborhood [went] to sleep, long before the sun went down" (Vallejo 2007b, 331). In *Sombra a Sombra*, the warm mention of the deceased drunk musician is made as two shots of empty bottles appear, followed by the shot of chickens. The defamiliarizing effect lies exactly in this near-match. The images are evocative, but not illustrative of what is recited. Rather, the video translates the poems into the language of film, following the principle of 'equivalence in difference.' In the words of Eikhenbaum, the viewers combine images and lines through their inner speech. This loose correspondence also places the images as dominant, so they are not an illustration of the poems but rather turn the audible poem into the soundtrack to the images. The video rejects the primacy of the literary work over the video but brings both together in the sense of Eikhenbaum's notion of a "natural meeting of film and literature" (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 124).

Reeves translates Vallejo's Peruvian scenery into the rough Spanish landscapes of the Alpujarras and the Pyrenees. The background music, which strongly determines the atmosphere of the piece, consists of panpipes, harp, marimba, guitar, and Gregorian chants. Particularly the panpipes but also the slow, steady drums give the video a folkloristic touch, creating a sound similar to traditional Andean music. Therefore, the landscape is deceiving: the soundscape suggests a South American location, and the Spanish locations are revealed only in the closing credits. The impressions of empty landscapes and abandoned houses and villages correspond to Vallejo's renderings of loss and loneliness. Thus the images share the overall themes of Vallejo's quoted poetry (although some contemporary phenomena are displayed as well, for instance the sight of nuclear plants in the otherwise scenic countryside, adding an element of alienation and dystopia, cf. Elwes 2005, 128). Decay and death, a theme in the poems, find their equivalents in ruins, a columbarium, the blur of motion around a shadowlike figure moving in abandoned sites, as well as in the constant fading of objects, such as a red rose that appears and disappears. Both Santos and Reeves use apparitions in their videos that add an element of magical realism to their works.

The selected poems by Vallejo are distinguished by a melancholic sensibility towards human mortality. This is reflected most prominently in "The Violence of the Hours," which begins with the line "All are dead," followed by nine stanzas where deaths of close family members and people from the village are listed: "Lucas died, my brother-in-law in the peace of the waists, who I remember when it rains and there is no one in my experience" (Vallejo 2007b, 331). Only the epigrammatic last stanza reads differently: "My eternity has died and I am waking it" (ibid.). Thus the anticipation of death and destruction that Reeves emphasizes through his visual footage is inverted momentarily. The recitation of the last four short stanzas, including the two quoted here, is accompanied by footage of graveyards. When the voice-over recitation reaches the last stanza, a typical southern European columbarium is shown—it seems as if the reflecting subject would anticipate its own demise. Then, however, the columbarium is surreally tripled and transformed into a montage of an aqueduct-like building, with three rows of windows opening to an open view onto water and the horizon. Furthermore, when the recipient sees the graves, he has already heard Downey reciting Vallejo's emblematic untitled poem, published posthumously, starting with the line "No one lives in the house anymore" ("[No vive ya nadie en la casa]," 1923–1929/1939), where it reads:

A house lives only off men, like a tomb. That is why there is an irresistible resemblance between a house and a tomb. Except that the house is nourished by the life of man, while the tomb is nourished by the death of man. That is why the first is standing, while the second is laid out.

All have departed from the house, in fact, but all have remained in truth. And it is not their memory that remains, but they themselves. [. . .] The steps have left, the kisses, the pardons, the crimes. What continues in the house are the foot, the lips, the eyes, the heart. Negations and affirmations, good and evil, have dispersed. What continues in the house, is the subject of the act. (Vallejo 1980, 27)

This anthropomorphic notion of a house living 'off men,' of receiving, accumulating, and even saving as if memorizing the life lived in it, its inhabitants' bodies and movements, stands in sharp contrast to all the abandoned houses and villages shown in the video.

*Sombra a Sombra* makes use of binary structures and juxtapositions typical of poetry. It takes its leitmotiv from the first poem, which functions like a prelude: Words in a yellow serif font appear against the black background to the sound of slow drums that provide a rhythm to the lines that

follow. This last stanza from Vallejo's untitled poem is presented by Reeves bit by bit, in groups of one to five words (marked here by breaks in brackets):

On this rainy night, [ | ]  
 already far [ | ] from both of us, [ | ] all at once I jump. . . [ | ]  
 There are two [ | ] doors, swinging open, [ | ] shut, [ | ]  
 two doors [ | ] in the wind, [ | ] back, and forth, [ | ]  
 shadow                      to                      shadow. [ | ]  
 [sombra                      a                      sombra.]  
 (Vallejo 1993, 227)

Reeves also changed the two capital letters at the beginning of lines one and three to lowercase, thus evoking continuity and further subverting the idea of versification. In addition, he eliminated the huge empty spaces between the words in the last line and he added this line in Spanish as well, giving the work its allusive title. In the video, Vallejo's words are not all center-justified in mid-screen; rather, certain words are right aligned. Thus, the video not only alters the print layout but also slows the viewer's perception process, opening space for interpretation. Since the two words that are not centered are 'doors' and 'shut' (line three), the uneven distribution of script between center and side performatively executes the movement of swinging doors, alluding to someone who has just left, which is further emphasized through the simultaneous drum beats. The bilingual positioning of the poem's last line—appearing twice, once in each language—not only alludes to the tropes of 'original' and 'translation' but also prefigures the dominant of the video: shadows. Unlike the earlier transitions, the words "sombra a sombra" do not appear after "shadow to shadow" but seemingly directly from within them, like an act of overwriting.

Similar to this prefiguration in script, the artwork uses many crossfades that combine the images according to the principle of the associational form foregrounding elaborate techniques of image manipulation as 'attraction.' Some images are repeated, while others are variations on the theme of shadow and, necessarily, light as its opposite. The binary structures continue on the level of close-ups of details, such as insects crawling on a cactus and wider angles depicting landscapes and the setting sun. Time is juxtaposed through alternating time lapse and slow-motion shots, the latter being dominant in this rather long, elegiac work of 16 minutes. This is most vivid in the opening shots of the video that follow the initial poem: The top half of the screen is filled by a sunrise in time lapse, while the bottom half superimposes flowing water in slow motion. The clouds in the sky appear to move towards the viewer, while the water moves in the opposite direction (Figures 5.12 and 5.13).

*Sombra a Sombra* is concerned with the structure and composition of images, leaning towards abstraction by focusing on the surface of things, such as the reflections of the sun on flowing water. The trees are without leaves, exposing the structures of the black branches against the background. Moreover, the video makes use of poetry's excessive structuring. The images appear fragmentary not only in their content—such as the shattered pieces of glass or a broken plaster cast of a Christ figure—but also in the constant filming through windows, doors, and keyholes, or by tracing the shadow of a window frame that looks like a grid. The emphasis on the fragment constitutes the dominant, echoing Vallejo's poetry, which "is nowhere entirely free from a formal violence of fragmentation that mediates and mirrors the poetry's contents" (Clayton 2011, 2). Michelle Clayton further labels Vallejo's work as "[p]oetry in pieces" (ibid., 3), which resonates with Reeves's fragmentary editing.



FIGURE 5.12 Daniel Reeves. *Sombra a Sombra*. 1988.



FIGURE 5.13 Daniel Reeves. *Sombra a Sombra*. 1988.

Windows and doors are devices of estrangement in Reeves's video. Approximately halfway through the video, the camera focuses on the empty windows of a ruin. The constant rhythm of the editing is interrupted as two windows turn into screens. On these screens, images of a person walking, a swan, the moon, and people in a landscape appear. Most of the time the

images are identical on both screens, with small deviations depicting the same content from a different angle or as a reflection. The video builds up its own norm of symmetry, only to disrupt it. This sequence ends with a visual *mise-en-abyme*, when the ruin itself appears in the windows of the ruin. In this sequence, *Sombra a Sombra* reverses the notion of the screen as window into window as screen—referring to Leon Battista Alberti’s renaissance concept of painting as a ‘window to nature’ that has influenced image and film theory as well as media theory by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin—and further explores the notion of transparency and opacity. The (virtual) window not only ‘frames visibility,’ but it also suggests a definite perspective (cf. Friedberg 2006, 1f). The windows in Reeves’s video, however, do not reveal what would naturally appear behind them, but instead show clear, identifiable images of objects and people. They are semi-opaque, depicting content whilst remaining non-transparent. The video fully embraces opacity in a sequence toward the end. The entrance to a ruin—an empty door—is once again turned into a screen. Yet instead of depicting clear, identifiable images, it only shows image ‘noise,’ vaguely representing spinning, flickering doors or windows. It is again a *mise-en-abyme* structure—a door in a door, or an image within an image—that is reinforced by the subsequent zoom into the door. The flickering, spinning images appear to grow larger and move toward the viewer, creating an effect of vertigo in the face of an abyss. These moments of estrangement disturb the seemingly picturesque, straightforward imagery prevalent throughout the majority of the video. It is the visualization of the process of transcription, resulting in disruptions. The symbolic value of the depicted objects is exchanged for a foregrounded materiality of the video images.

As Patricia Zimmermann states, “Reeves’s single-channel videos push the possibilities of camera-vision to unfold transcendence by both seeing anew and re-visioning again, often in slow motion images, layering of images, or associative montage connected through dissolves” (Zimmermann 1998, 11f). Her idea of a new vision fits well with Shklovsky’s notion of seeing as if for the first time—but also of questioning what we see. However, this new way of seeing does not apply only to Reeves’s video but also to the translated poems by Vallejo. In this regard, *Sombra a Sombra* is also a reflection on the process of translation from one language to the other. In the English version, Vallejo’s poems seem rather straightforward, only occasionally giving a sense of the poem’s rather cryptic imagery in the original language. The recited lines center on the content. What is missing in the spoken words is, for instance, the device of graphic layout of enjambments that foreground the visual silences revealed by the printed poems. This increased transparency is contrasted with the video’s images that shift between symbolic evocations and material opacity. It seems as if the video uses the translation in the voice-over to state only the poems’ content. The original poems’ form, however, is translated into the video’s fragmentary image design. Downey’s Spanish accent is the audible trace of the translation process, pointing to the process of making the familiar strange to the Spanish speaker in the same step as making the content more accessible to the non-Spanish speaking audience.

## Aesthetics of Superimposition II: Queer Defamiliarizations

The U.S. artist **Tom Kalin** frequently draws inspiration from literary sources. His project *Behold Goliath, or The Boy with the Filthy Laugh*, to date comprised of five short videos, uses excerpts from a novel and three short stories by the Jewish American author and literary critic Alfred Chester. All of the videos in this series foreground the multimodality of language and share similar aesthetic strategies, and two of them—*Every Evening Freedom* (US 2002) and *The Robots of Sodom* (US 2002)—are used here as examples. Kalin’s videos incorporate short excerpts of two

of Chester's short stories—"Behold Goliath" and "In Praise of Vespasian"—that are quoted verbatim. The videos are composed of dense montages of eclectic, superimposed (found footage) film elements. Computer voices—personified in the closing credits as Agnes, Bruce, Fred, Kathy, Ralph, and Victoria—speak the excerpts in disharmonic polyphony. Simultaneously, parts of the spoken sentences float across the screen as white or colored kinetic typography. In one sequence, text is represented as one of the filmic layers when a word processing program is filmed. The fast pace of the moving script as it appears and vanishes results in an aesthetics of withdrawal and belatedness. In addition to the text presentation, *Every Evening Freedom* has a stirring soundtrack of staccato violins that gives way to a male choir, while the soundtrack for *The Robots of Sodom* consists of unobtrusive acoustic music. In both videos, the representation of literary text constantly challenges and disrupts the viewer's attention—which must shift between listening and reading, reading, and viewing—rather than facilitating understanding. Employing superimposition as the dominant aesthetic device results in a "stimulus overload" (Lehmann 2006, 95), or what could be described as a disruption of acoustic and visual multiple lamination.

In 12 individually titled vignettes, Chester's short story "Behold Goliath" sketches the childhood memories and urban encounters of the protagonist, Goliath. Kalin's *Every Evening Freedom* excerpts the fourth vignette, titled "Entertainment," in which Goliath reflects on the city's nightlife: "Like any other great city, this one offered its populace more than merely every-evening freedom; it offered a variety of slaveries to which the freedom might be put" (Chester 1964a, 54). The juxtaposition of "freedom" with "slaveries" indicates Goliath's perception that the multitude of amusements catering to pleasure-seeking nine-to-five workers is nothing but another form of slavery meant to distract the office slaves from their own alienated existence. To communicate a sense of Chester's idiosyncratic writing, the following sentences are worth quoting:

This was necessary, Goliath knew, because he who has given away his soul between nine and five cannot usually bear to face it (or does not know where to find it) between five and nine. The city offered distractions, glorious dreams. One could descend from the unreality of an office to the unreality of a street and thence to the unreality of a night club, a theater, a public meeting, a music hall, a religious activity, a library, a brothel, a circus, a gambling casino, a street filled with whores and whoresses, a picture gallery, a queer bar, a luna park, or most frequently the rectangular darkness of the national church with its two-dimensional gods in technicolor. Those who had been unable to encounter themselves throughout the day thronged these places at night that they might escape themselves a while. (ibid., 54f)

The name "Goliath," of course, derives from the Old Testament, and beyond overt references to religion, the line "he who has given away his soul between nine and five" (ibid., 55) also bears a biblical cadence. *Every Evening Freedom* is by no means a direct visualization of Chester's vignette. The 'distractions' listed in "Behold Goliath" are echoed by a distracting aesthetic that foregrounds the materiality of the signifiers over the signified. The superimposition of recurring images—a man practicing yoga on a beach, power lines filmed from a moving vehicle, a man reading in a hallway—combined with kinetic text continuously undermine any attempt to focus upon a single visual layer. In stark contrast to Chester's dominant theme of city nightlife, most of the footage in the video shows small town, rural, and beach scenes shot in bright sunlight. Only occasionally do text and image approximate one another, for instance in the reference to "religious activities" heard while a man is shown attending a grave, or when the phrase "two-dimensional gods in technicolor" is combined with an iconic portrait of the actress Grace Kelly.

Chester's vignette could be understood as describing a prototypical scenario of devouring automatization, echoing Shklovsky. Both regulated work and organized amusements enslave the souls of modern men. This topic of automatization—mixed with religion—also prevails, even more obviously, in the first of two Chester excerpts used in *The Robots of Sodom* from “In Praise of Vespasian”:

The great buildings of Sodom are shaped like tombstones, and the island is populated almost entirely by robots. Man created the robots in his own image, and he created the island in the image of a cemetery. Like Man and God, the robots are omnipotent and omniscient—except in four ways: they cannot be anything but robots, they cannot love, they cannot know they are robots, and they cannot know they cannot love. (Chester 1964b, 171f)

Kalin did not choose one of those many scenes from “In Praise of Vespasian” that focus on the protagonist's homoerotic encounters but instead selected obscure sections with rather abstract observations like the one quoted here. The vignette from “Behold Goliath” deals with the topic of the alienation of workers, who are depicted as soulless slaves. The excerpt from “In Praise of Vespasian” can be read as an allegory of a fundamental alienation, depicting apathetic robots, unaware of their identity as well as their inability to love (caused by a suppressed homosexuality).

Of the two videos, *The Robots of Sodom* provides a less confrontational viewing experience due to its calmer soundtrack. Most of the images are also superimposed, and include street scenes of New York City—played in reverse so that pedestrians appear to walk backwards—rolling waves, power lines, a revolving airplane, animated drawings of naked men walking hand in hand and two naked women dancing together, as well as several shots that show a naked man with a Mohawk and another naked man who is wearing a devil mask while walking through the woods and swimming in the sea. Again, the connection between image and text is associational, a constructed effect of what Eikhenbaum called the “inner speech” of the viewers (see Chapter 2, Section 2). The stimulus overload in Kalin's video hinders this inner speech as the superimposed images obstruct a clear view, and the juxtaposition of the polyvocal voice-over and script distracts from the content. This formation, habitualized through the everyday consumption of moving images, is deautomatized. Their capacity for recognition thwarted, viewers are instead constantly forced to see and hear while actively looking for connections between the bedeviled visual and acoustic information and their intertextual relations to Chester's texts. Kalin's videos thus foreground adaptation as a process of both creation and reception.

In addition to faithful quotations from the text, there are also subtle cues of engagement that only come to the fore when the viewers are familiar with Chester's work. As is typical of Chester's works, homosexuality is celebrated in both of the referenced short stories. The literary magazine *Partisan Review* even rejected “In Praise of Vespasian” for publication, objecting not to “the subject [of homosexuality] or its detail” but its “rhapsodic treatment” (Field 2000, 93). Because the excerpts selected for the videos omit Chester's passages on secret one-night stands (“Behold Goliath”) or orgiastic encounters in public urinals (“In Praise of Vespasian”), when taken out of context they could seem like mere critiques of human alienation in modern society. The video's images, however, retain the queer specificity of Chester's writing. *Every Evening Freedom* features at least three sequences that can be read as possessing a homosexual subtext. In footage showing a man reading a newspaper, another man in uniform walks by in the background. This unspectacular scene becomes coded as homoerotic a few shots later when men in a public building are filmed through a framing wall of a hallway. In the passage of “Behold Goliath” quoted earlier, ‘decent’ public places (library, music hall, theater) are blended

with ‘louche’ establishments (nightclub, brothel, queer bar, gambling casino). This eclectic mix could be understood as an equalizing disdain: Anywhere people spend time after work is just a means to escape sad reality. Yet Kalin’s images preclude this interpretation, marking these sites of urban diversion as the coordinates of homoerotic cruising. A library is, in this line of thought, also a potential brothel, a marketplace of homosexual desire—if one wants to and is able to decipher the signals. The queer subtext is most obvious in the sequence that combines the written words “a queer bar” with footage of two men in uniform leaning against a wall, seemingly ready for an erotic transaction (Figure 5.14).

In *The Robots of Sodom*, the collision between text and image—a collision that opens up a poetic space—is even stronger. The text fragment that is both audible and visible describes a dystopian island ruled by hateful robots. But who are the robots of Sodom? Like the name “Goliath,” “Sodom” is a biblical reference, the name of a city destroyed by God as retribution for its inhabitants’ sin. ‘Sodomy’ became a discriminatory metaphor for homosexuality, entering notoriously into juridical discourse, where ‘sodomy laws’ refers to laws that criminalize sexual acts. In “In Praise of Vespasian” the island of Sodom is indeed an island of ‘sin,’ an island of lust, not of love, where the protagonist, Joaquin, at first afraid of its residents, eventually finds himself amid a raucous, rampant orgy of robots. Within Chester’s story, the robot episode is so short it seems like an ornamental interlude, an excuse for yet another anarchic, exuberant description of sex.

Despite the copious collage of voices, animated text, and superimposed images, as well as accurate quotations from appropriated excerpts, *The Robots of Sodom* seems blind to Chester’s story line—and yet, it is not the literary text that is subverted but the meaning of ‘Sodom.’ As mentioned earlier, the soundtrack is peaceful, with the feeling of ease created through the music standing in stark contrast to the descriptions of the hostile Sodom. Footage of New York City, defamiliarized through superimposition and being played in reverse, alternates with images of a naked man in the forest and the sea. Nature and city are thus the visual motifs used in the video, alluding to the idea of good nature versus bad civilization—even the expulsion from paradise. Animated drawings, included only in the beginning of the video, depict not Adam and Eve but same-sex couples. In *The Robots of Sodom*, the city of Sodom does not simply stand for New York City or civilization in general but—if one reconsiders the theme running through Chester’s texts—for a homophobic society that promotes hate disguised as the fear of God. Kalin’s



FIGURE 5.14 Tom Kalin. *Every Evening Freedom*. 2002.



films teach the viewer how to read them: Inner speech is de-automatized while the images and the specific montage retain a ‘queer’ specificity.

Kalin’s video *Every Wandering Cloud* (US 2005) weaves an even more elaborate tapestry of intertextual references. Not only does it combine text excerpts from Wilde’s poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1898) and Chester’s essay “Letter from the Wandering Jew” (1971) but also its densely layered, superimposed filmic images recall the early stages of cinema. As in the videos analyzed above, as quoted literary excerpts fade in as visual text and in some instances are recited in voice-overs. Those voices are whispered or technically distorted, and sometimes different male and female voices recite the texts together, thus impeding the process of listening—but overall, and especially in comparison to the videos of the *Behold Goliath* cycle, the overstraining of perception is attenuated. The title of the video refers to a line in Wilde’s ballad and also alludes to William Wordsworth’s famous poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” (1804).

The video starts with a black screen on which two squares appear side by side, mimicking cinematic projection: On the left side of the screen, a horizontal close-up fades in showing green grass, and a vertical strip depicting the surface of water appears a few seconds later. This ‘prologue’ is followed by a sequence of drawn animations showing a naked woman getting in and out of bed, taking a bath, and sitting down on a chair while smoking. Simultaneously, the first words of the video appear in white capital letters, and male and female voices read the following lines: “Wake. || Wake up. . . || Get out of bed, || you sleepy head. || Awake.” The affectionate idiom ‘Get out of bed, you sleepy head!’ suggests a call meant for the audience. It is a call to pay attention, to ‘be alert’ in the Russian Formalists sense (Figure 5.15).

Though the images match the content of the text, they are not merely illustrations. They are the first drawings in the video that are—as the ‘alert’ viewer may see and the closing credits disclose—derived from the photographer Eadweard Muybridge’s groundbreaking study *Complete Human and Animal Locomotion* (1887). His invention of a special photography technique for recording animals and humans in motion and of the zoopraxiscope, a pre-cinematic device, made Muybridge a pioneer of moving-image technologies. Other sequences include drawings of animals (a flying eagle and dove, a walking elephant, a puma, and a horse) and naked men and women dancing or practicing different sports. The drawn animations sketched after Muybridge’s evoke a peaceful, almost paradisiacal atmosphere or state of being—especially as



FIGURE 5.15 Tom Kalin. *Every Wandering Cloud*. 2005.

combined with the acoustic soundtrack—and stand in stark contrast to other dominant found footage images used in the video as well as to the quoted texts. While the animated drawings of human bodies feature strength, youth, and *joie de vivre*, the literary texts reflect on despair and death.

The tone and style of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” are not typical of the *décadence* author Wilde; it has been compared to medieval street ballads, although it adapts this genre with a different emphasis. Incarcerated for his homosexual acts, Wilde wrote the long poem after his release from the prison in Reading, Great Britain. During his incarceration, a man was executed by hanging. The ballad depicts and reflects on the brutality of the execution and of prison labor. The stanzas used in the video refer to the execution and the horror of Reading Prison, but are still among the poem’s less explicit depictions. The first quoted stanza follows the ‘sleepy head’ line, and is transposed in white script over images of a naked man and birds, as well as over footage from the Hollywood film *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), starring Joan Blondel:

I never saw a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
And at every drifting cloud that went  
With sails of silver by.  
(Wilde 2000, 195)

Similar to the presentation of other Wilde quotations in the video, each verse is indented and centered on the screen with the words in capital letters and broken up irregularly into two or more lines (also see the cover of this book). This alteration not only hides and defamiliarizes the composition of the poem and its versification, but it also allows the viewers to actually read the text, forcing them to mentally reassemble the foregrounded lines. Even though the foregrounding draws attention away from the underlying images, the moderate pacing enables viewers to connect text and image. This very drive to find a connection also operates as a disruptor whose power depends on the viewers’ background knowledge. For example, in a sequence that uses footage from *Gold Diggers of 1933* as one of the visual layers, a man and a woman light each other’s cigarettes while standing on a sidewalk while the line “WHICH PRISONERS | CALL | THE SKY.” is superimposed over the footage (Figure 5.16). Their interaction is erotically charged, as in the later film noir, in which seductive *femmes fatales* are often killed in the end. This scene’s connections to Wilde’s poem are obvious only to viewers who are familiar with the ballad or at least its context: The fellow prisoner who was executed and to whom the poem is dedicated was a man who killed his wife—a fact that is explicitly addressed in the poem, but only indirectly hinted at by the appropriated film excerpt in Kalin’s video.

Through numerous images of a lofty sky with tiny white clouds Kalin picks up a leitmotif in Wilde’s poem. The memorable line that describes the sky from the perspective of the prisoners as “tent of blue” is an enigmatic symbol for both the desired freedom and divine Heaven. In the following sequence, three different voice-overs recite two stanzas. The contrast of white lettering against a black background and nearly black film images makes the text’s foregrounding even more pronounced. One male voice whispers and the others—technically distorted and perhaps computerized—speak in hasty rhythms that do not match that of the text, as though the viewer’s inner voice must compete with the audible voices in order to concentrate on the text. While the human voice makes use of the poem’s rhythm, the computer voice dissects it into small arbitrary units, similar to the computer font in Hancox’s video. By means of contrast, the ‘failing’ recitation

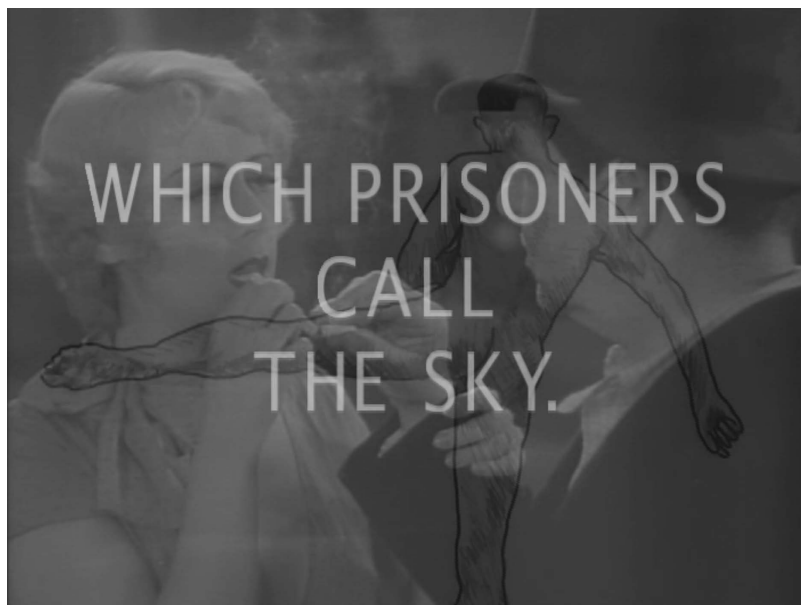


FIGURE 5.16 Tom Kalin. *Every Wandering Cloud*. 2005.

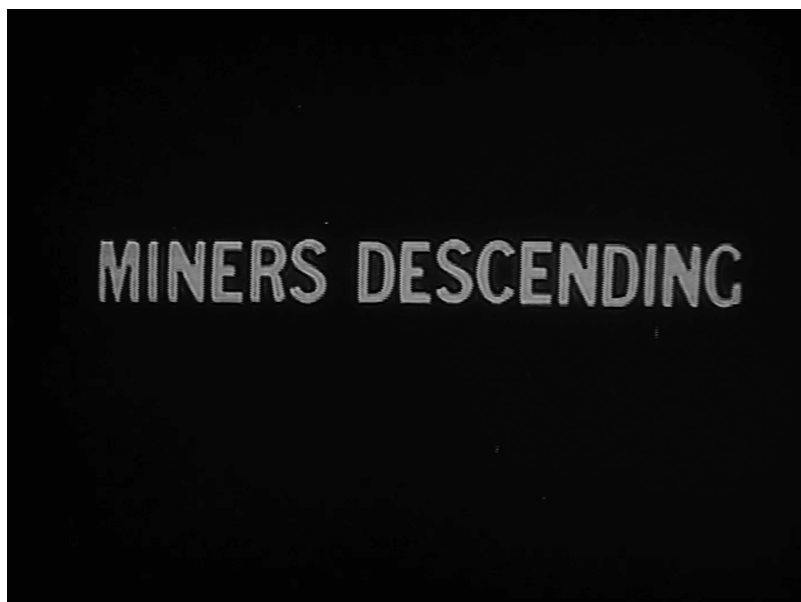


FIGURE 5.17 Tom Kalin. *Every Wandering Cloud*. 2005.

of the computerized voice-overs highlights the musical—or lyrical—quality of poetry in general. The element of sound characteristic of poetry can only fully unfold one when a poem is read aloud; here it is brought to the fore through the estranging voice-overs.

However, estrangement is also a technique used by Kalin to deal with the brutal content of Wilde's verses that describe how the fellow prisoners were forced to watch the execution of "[t]he man who had to swing" (ibid., II/5, 198). While 'swinging' can be considered a euphemism

for the brutal act of hanging, the poem overtly thematizes the terrible helplessness that the prisoners, forced to witness the painful demise of the man condemned to die, suffer: “Something was dead in each of us, | And what was dead was Hope” (ibid., III/31, 206). Kalin chose a black background when quoting stanzas II/5 and II/6, describing the hanging from the perspective of multiple observers’ voices. The withdrawal of visual footage in this short section in favor of monochrome black demands that recipients rely on their own imagination to visualize the scene. The use of clean, white, sans serif type immediately accommodates readability and deceptively acts as a source of disruption.

In the next sequence, the voice-overs are replaced by the acoustic song “Posed by Models” (1980), by the Welsh band Young Marble Giants, creating an atmosphere of ease. Again, words are presented on a black background: “THE PIT HEAD” and “LOCKING THE LAMPS.” After a short fade to black, a black-and-white shot of miners in a wooden elevator cab follows another white-on-black text insert: “MINERS DESCENDING” (Figure 5.17). More lines are superimposed on images of miners and drawings derived from Muybridge, such as “WORKING THE COAL FACE,” “FEMALE INDUSTRY,” “SORTING, SCREENING AND LOADING,” and “COAL TRAINS LEAVING.” Although the type font and its arrangement looks similar to the script used earlier, these texts are obviously of a different nature: They are shorter, less poetic, more descriptive (or documentary), and more directly connected to one of the image layers. Yet, only the closing credits of the video reveal that the footage was “stolen” from the film *A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner* (1887). Without this information, only a background knowledge of film history will allow viewers to identify the text in this sequence as text cards from a film of the silent era. Though the typical flickering of frames in the first shots reveals that the images are sourced from analog film, the type font looks similar to that of the previous literary text inserts and can thus deceive viewers. The juxtaposition of different discourses creates an effect of estrangement—sneaked into, framed by, put into the dialog with poetry, the pragmatic language of the intertitles may even seem poetic itself. In addition, this inclusion highlights that written text in film has a long history, and that what was once a necessity has now, after it has become obsolete, turned into an artistic device. Kalin’s video is considered ‘art’ as opposed to, for instance, a mainstream blockbuster; the references to the history of cinema, however, situate the video in this history and questions ideas of a teleological development of film.

The peaceful instrumental music and the drawings of animals and joyful people form a contrast to the images of depleted, hard-working miners. Although some title card texts read “PAY TIME,” “LIGHT AFTER DARKNESS,” or “A COSY FIRESIDE,” this suggestion of a comfortable life seems a nasty promise, especially from today’s perspective. Again, an intertextual reference can be drawn to Wilde’s ballad, so that the simultaneous appropriation of different artistic genres—the poem and the film—fosters a new reading. In several of the ballad’s stanzas, Wilde meticulously describes the cruelty of prison labor. Though these are not included in the video, viewers familiar with the poem may understand that the video highlights the work of the miners as exploitation similar to the exploitation that took place in prisons—especially as the poem and the silent film date from the same period. The miners are like the prisoners, enslaved to work for others, deprived of freedom and daylight, and kept away from a life in which they are not alienated but free to live the life of happiness depicted in the drawings.

Interestingly, the drawings that seem to be the dreams of prisoners and miners appear quite differently in the sequence that quotes Chester’s “Letter from a Wandering Jew.” Similar to the other videos, the quoted text is only a very short excerpt from an essay of 53 pages. The fragment is taken from the very last page:

Aren’t you tired of listening to me? I am. If I had any tears left, I would cry myself to sleep each night. But I haven’t, so I don’t. Besides, it is morning that comes twisting and torturing

my spirit, not nights of dreamless sleep. Morning, another day. I open the shutters and I am assailed by the long day unstretching itself like a hideous snake. (Chester 1992, 260)

Written in 1971, the year Chester died in Jerusalem, but published only two decades later, the essay depicts the author as the mythical figure of the ‘wandering Jew’ and literally describes his desperate search for a new home after he had been exiled from Morocco. In his highly provocative reflections on gayness and his Jewish identity, with numerous sarcastic comments on the Holocaust (“But every cloud must have its silver lining, as the man in the gas chamber sang,” *ibid.*, 229), he does not sugarcoat his alienation or his drug and alcohol abuse—a witty, albeit bitter grotesque. As Edward Field puts it in the foreword to Chester’s essay collection: “With a sour, don’t-give-a-shit tone, not too far from Charles Bukowski, he did not try to pretty up his feelings, and snarled and snapped unreasonably at his imagined persecutors” (Field 1992, 17). The excerpt in the video does not indicate any of the essay’s content, nor is it indicative of its overall style. The rhetorical question suggests that the “Letter from the Wandering Jew” is a letter indeed—and perhaps it was, as he apparently sent the text to his agent (*cf. ibid.*)—but the rest of the text does not read like a letter at all, as it never addresses a reader.

In Kalin’s video, the quoted text is recited by a highly distorted female voice-over and faded in as written text. It is the only sequence that uses a different font and, apart from the very beginning, the only one that breaks up the sentences into individual words (Figure 5.18). The lines appear disjointed on different portions of the screen and are printed in small white letters with similar but barely legible pinkish letters below, like a faint shadow or echo. An irritating violin soundtrack additionally twists and tortures the viewer’s perception, aesthetically underlining the despair expressed in the text. The Muybridge animations—as well as further footage of a rough seacoast and the summery sky—suddenly do not seem like a desirable dream but instead the very nightmare of “the long day unstretching itself like a hideous snake.” In a state of desperation, life itself, even its possible beauty, is a prison—or, returning to the dialog with Wilde and the film of the miners, the dream of what cannot be reached is an assailing snake. This sequence shows how the perception of images can change based on what they are combined with. Both Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and Chester’s



FIGURE 5.18 Tom Kalin. *Every Wandering Cloud*. 2005.

“Letter from the Wandering Jew” are among the last texts that each author wrote. Written by gay outcasts, both texts were composed in a state of despair. Put into conversation in Kalin’s video, they speak about alienation itself. *Every Wandering Cloud* addresses the social experience of alienation by using estrangement as an aesthetic device.

### Theatrical Appropriation: Personifying Literary Figures

This subsection deals with two vastly different artworks by Gary Hill and Mike Kelley. In both single-channel videos, male figures appropriate a central character of a literary text and play with the concept of ‘personification.’ They employ an understanding of appropriation that comes close to Ricœur’s concept of ‘making one’s own what was initially alien,’ an ‘actualization’ that is both acquisition and interpretation. In both works, references to and transformations of the literary pretexts are complex and highly performative. The literary works in question—famous texts by Maurice Blanchot and Sylvia Plath—deal with individuals who suffer a psychological crisis and experience states of alienation. The appropriation not only estranges the language used by technical means, such as distortion, but also presents the (conceptual) subjectivity of the performer—the artist himself in one instance, an actor in the other.

**Gary Hill’s** video *Incidence of Catastrophe* (US 1987–1988) is an in-depth examination of the French writer and philosopher Maurice Blanchot’s first novel, the highly self-reflexive and experimental *Thomas l’obscur* (*Thomas the Obscure*, 1941). The length of the video—the running time is almost 45 minutes—and the fact that it lacks a coherent plot can already be considered ‘strange’; the temporal experience is thus one of the main features of the work. Hill’s video has not only been considered a “non-linguistic translation” (Thériault 2000, 135) but also a “transcreation” (Machado 2000, 165) of the novel. Both terms stress the work’s autonomy, rejecting the notion of fidelity while exploring the links between Hill’s adaptation and Blanchot’s novel. Michèle Thériault has emphasized the video’s dialogic relation to *Thomas l’obscur*, stating that the “video must be seen to exist alongside Blanchot’s work” (Thériault 2000, 135). She further focuses on the trope of translation in the context of adaptation. With reference to Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin, she characterizes Hill’s video as having the instability and processuality of translation (cf. *ibid.*, 136f): “Hill and the viewer remain suspended in the *space of translation*” (*ibid.*, 145). This liminal character points back to Jäger’s concept of transcription: *Incidence of Catastrophe* can in this way be regarded as caught in a state of disruption, in the transition from one state of assumed transparency to the next. This disruption is evident on the level of language. The “disrupting presence of language” (*ibid.*, 147) is perceivable throughout the video: In its written form, the fragments of a page are foregrounded by a camera that seems almost tactile in its close examination of the letters and shapes, yet blocks an unhindered reading. The sense of the words remains oblique. The same applies to spoken language, in that the incomprehensible, obscure material of language is laid bare, pointing to the “‘outside’ of referential discourse” (*ibid.*, 142). The disruptions of language in Hill’s video—the words’ opacity—point to an exploration of the qualities of literary language (cf. *ibid.*, 140).

The video adapts themes, motifs, structures, and devices from Blanchot’s narrative, which amalgamates modernist trends of the early 20th century. In *Thomas l’obscur*, Blanchot adapts the psychological content, formal, and narrative experiments, and the philosophical ideas of Surrealism, Existentialism, and the *nouveau roman*. Like Hill’s video, Blanchot’s book does not consist of a coherent plot but is loosely presented as a dream narrative of the title character. This depiction of this dream is marked by frequent inconsistencies and gaps. A stream-of-consciousness technique is applied, blurring the distinctions between dream and reality, thinking and perceiving, present and past (cf. Theisen 2009, 624).

The protagonist Thomas's experience of the sea and of swimming is a leitmotif of Blanchot's novel, and this "water imagery" (Sarrazin 2000b, 80) is translated into the aesthetic of Hill's video. In the opening sequence, images of tides breaking over sand banks fill the entire screen (Figures 5.19 and 5.20). The soundtrack is equally intense, producing an audiovisual impression of losing ground, of being swept away by the flood. The following sequence introduces the video's dominant: Viewers see and hear book pages being turned, a media-reflexive motif also used in Müller's *nebel*. Extreme close-ups of the pages are crosscut with images of ocean waves that flood both the readable text and the material texture of the book. Here, the rising water may be considered a metaphor for reading, since the letters do not dissolve but remain readable even under water: the video in this way evokes the state of being immersed (in water, in a reading experience) yet does not create an immersive viewing experience itself. The camera focuses on single words, phrases, and pages in such detail that one may even recognize the 1973 English translation of *Thomas l'obscur* by Robert Lamberton. Hill's video depicts a male protagonist reading Blanchot's novel. This is another reference to the narrative, where the title character is reading the book in which he himself appears as the protagonist. In *Thomas l'obscur*, the self-referential element is the act of reading. The video, in which Hill himself performs as the literary figure, amplifies the referential structure exposed by Blanchot: the video is a "*mise en abyme* of the *space* of writing and reading" (Thériault 2000, 135f). The protagonist is situated *vis-à-vis* an increasingly physical text, in which he is about to drown. It is as if Hill appropriates the topos of 'reading addiction,' first identified in the late 18th century as a result of the new popularity of the novel and mostly attributed to women, who were considered to be at risk of losing themselves in the fictive cosmos and thus of becoming dangerously isolated from society. His protagonist embodies this feminized notion of excessive reading.

Compared to Hill's character's incessant reading, Blanchot's Thomas reads only in one, albeit highly significant, scene, during which he has the feeling that the words are coming alive and are in fact observing him. It is a scene that mirrors Hill's own experience with Blanchot's book, when he recounts that while reading, he had "the rather strange experience of the book reading me—we were reading each other somehow" (Hill in Lestocart 2000, 233):

[Thomas] was reading with unsurpassable meticulousness and attention. [. . .] The words, coming forth from the book which was taking on the power of life and death, exercised a gentle and peaceful attraction over the glance which played over them. Each of them, like a half-closed eye, admitted the excessively keen glance which in other circumstances



FIGURE 5.19 Gary Hill. *Incidence of Catastrophe*. 1987–1988.

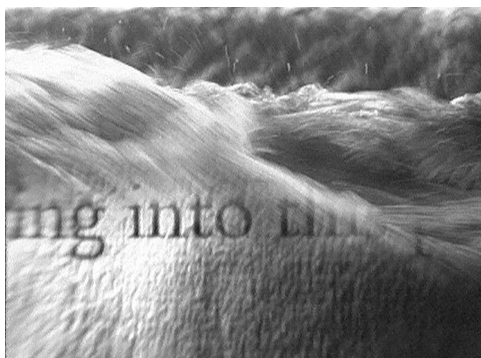
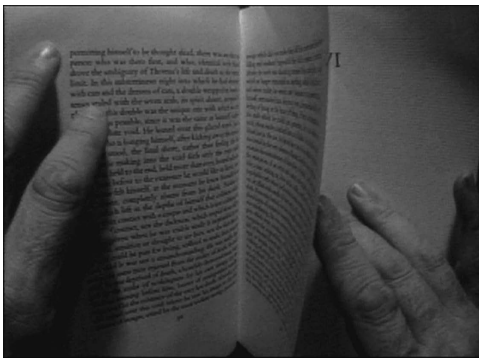


FIGURE 5.20 Gary Hill. *Incidence of Catastrophe*. 1987–1988.

it would not have tolerated. [. . .] The pleasure in fact became very great. It became so great, so pitiless that he bore it with a sort of terror, and in the intolerable moment when he had stood forward without receiving from his interlocutor any sign of complicity, he perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living being, and not simply by one word, but by all the words that were in that word. [. . .] For hours he remained motionless, with, from time to time, the word ‘eyes’ in place of his eyes: he was inert, captivated and unveiled. And even later when, having abandoned himself and, contemplating his book, he recognized himself with disgust in the form of the text he was reading. (Blanchot 1973, 25f)

This central passage of the novel is visually represented in the video and ‘read’ by both the camera and the protagonist, the latter depicted as desperately longing for an understanding of the highly complicated text. Contrary to the Thomas figure in Blanchot’s novel, Hill’s protagonist is continuously engulfed by his book, which includes its very materiality that is explored both by the camera and his hands.

Throughout the video, the protagonist becomes more and more tormented by the book, not by what it says, but by what it represents physically and by its material threat. It “drive[s] him into a world of nightmares, it becomes a forest of verbal signs where the character gets lost or drowns, a forest that cuts him, penetrates his body so violently that he becomes incapable of controlling himself” (Machado 2000, 165) (Figures 5.21 and 5.22). In one particularly intense scene, the protagonist tries to find his way through dense undergrowth in the dark of night, which might symbolize the impenetrability of Blanchot’s text. The acoustic dimension—for example, an intense rushing and roaring of the sea supplemented by the sound of heavy book pages being frantically turned or loud industrial, urban, or even warlike noises—dominates the ominous atmosphere. Both script and textuality and violent and impermeable nature penetrate the protagonist’s realm of experience as he becomes increasingly incapable of differentiating between dreams, hallucinations, and reality. Visions, hallucinations, and the prevailing darkness hinder the continuous reading and the protagonist’s capacity to understand. Hill’s Thomas is repeatedly depicted as dead or seemingly dead: for instance, he lies outside an old cottage, his body shown at first through a dusty window full of spider webs. The (presumably) dead body is then contrasted with the same body sleeping, lying in bed, dreaming; when he wakes up he immediately starts to read the book, only to fall asleep again and vice versa.



**FIGURE 5.21** Gary Hill. *Incidence of Catastrophe*. 1987–1988.



**FIGURE 5.22** Gary Hill. *Incidence of Catastrophe*. 1987–1988.



Hill uses his own voice in many of his other media artworks—in *Mediations* and *Around & About*, for instance (see Chapter 3, Section 1). Unlike those works, the protagonist in *Incidence of Catastrophe* is forced into an incessant, mute conversation with his book and with the nature that surrounds him. It is therefore significant that he himself does not articulate verbally until the very end of the video, where he tries to speak but gradually loses his linguistic capacity altogether. Spoken language enters during a sequence that centers on a dinner party. The protagonist is again engulfed in reading the book, isolated even when in the company of people. The scene depicts a group of seven people having a festive dinner around a table, chatting about the food and wine and discussing a guest's mysterious experience in the woods of being “inundated with sight and sound.” In contrast to the protagonist's passivity and muteness, the dinner guests talk and interact without interruption, while the floating camera rotates, slightly above ground level, around the group sitting in an interior space and surrounded by darkness. Their voices create a noticeable reverberation, as if under water, which adds a slight uncanniness or dream-like quality to the scene. Suddenly, the conversation stops, and a female speaking from off-camera asks, “Have you swum today?” followed by general confusion and a painfully long silence. This sentence is an indirect reference to the novel, where the question if he had swum or been swimming appears twice (cf. Blanchot 1973, 19 and 79). Later on, the dinner table collapses. The protagonist continues his solitary reading of the book but then mysteriously falls backward with his chair, pulling down the tablecloth and all the dishes—a scene that is repeated later, when all the food and tableware sink together with the man into the depths of the ocean. In another part of this sequence, the party itself is ‘sinking’ into madness, regressing into a ‘pre-civilized state’; people lose their clothes, crawl on the floor, play with food, and utter senseless sounds or syllables.

The closing passage of the video contains a clear climax—or rather anti-climax—of the loosely woven narrative. The protagonist becomes sick, fantasizes, and—as surreal images take hold of him—nervously observes his estranged face in the mirror, then vomits and seems to sink



FIGURE 5.23 Gary Hill. *Incidence of Catastrophe*. 1987–1988.

again into the ocean until his body lies in the sand amid low tides. Blanchot's homodiegetic narrator also speaks of a terrible illness caused by reading a book alone at night in his room:

The illness is in one of the senses: Thomas suffers from a flood of meaning, he is inundated by experiences. Each physical and sensory event, from the sensation of being in water, to the language he hears at the dinner table on to the act of reading, overwhelms him. Meaning is disintegrated as it's being constructed; the mind, like the body, is apt to drown, sink in the initial pages, until it breaks down completely. (Sarrazin 2000b, 79f)

An irreversible "disintegration of speech" (Cooke 1992, 18) occurs, corresponding to the dissolution of the printed text through water on the visual level and leading to glossolalia on the acoustic level. In the closing sequence, the protagonist huddles in his own excrement in a fetal position on a bathroom floor, regressing into the state of an inarticulate baby, babbling incomprehensible sounds, while a bizarre wooden stick, fixed to the camera, pokes at different parts of his body as if it were the corpse of an animal (Figure 5.23). This stick could symbolize the general attempt of the camera to not only observe but also touch or even penetrate. In the final scene, the book pages become colossal walls, closing around the naked figure. The text of Blanchot's novel passes over the walls, "as if it had literally taken possession of the body and was dragging it down with it in its disaster" (Lageira 2000, 38). The *mise-en-abyme* has come full circle: "If the lying man opened his eyes, he would see a mirror that is a text" (Belting 1994, 47)—a text that consists of nothing but references to itself.

The title of Mike Kelley's single-channel video *Superman Recites Selections From 'The Bell Jar' and Other Works by Sylvia Plath* (US 1999) points to an intertextual engagement between two fictional universes: the world of the comic hero Superman and the world of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). As the title indicates, Superman is the protagonist who performs selections from Plath's writings. The title reads like a theater announcement: a famous public figure recites well-known literary texts. At first, this seems like a clash between popular culture and 'serious' literature; between a male superhero and a fragile, 'hysterical' woman. One could even extend the paratexts that might inform the video's reception to the artists themselves: Kelley, the visual artist with exuberant works often appropriating techniques that have traditionally been considered female handicrafts such as knitting, and Plath, the tragic, somber poet. Both Kelley and Plath committed suicide. That is to say, the names of the artists and the titles of the works alone provoke a multitude of cultural references.

Kelley's video was originally part of the exhibition *Kandor-Con 2000*, a title that evokes 'comic-cons' (comic book conventions), and Kandor, the fictional capital of Superman's destroyed home planet Krypton. Kandor was shrunk and put into a bottle by a villain, but the bottled city was rescued by Superman, who retained it in his secret Fortress of Solitude. As an amalgamation, *Superman Recites Selections From 'The Bell Jar'* is a medial hypertext that "transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends" (Stam 2005, 31) Plath's texts and the Superman story at the same time. It is neither a 'campy' deconstruction of the male superhero nor a parody of a feminist author.

*The Bell Jar* is a first-person narrative. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, a young, scholarship-winning woman from a lower-middle-class background, recalls her internship at a fashion magazine in New York City and her subsequent nervous breakdown, suicide attempt, and hospitalization, during which she is diagnosed with a psychosis and subjected to insulin shock as well as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The titular metaphor of the bell jar illustrates Esther's alienation and isolation from the world. Plath's novel, frequently read as an auto-fictional text

and celebrated as a painful classic of feminist literature, ends with what is often interpreted as Esther's rebirth, as it suggests that she will be released from the hospital. Yet the narrative remains ambivalent—and this is foregrounded by Kelley's appropriation.

Kelley's video opens with a black screen and an instrumental soundtrack that is reminiscent of the acoustic accompaniment to outer space images in science-fiction films. The black screen then fades to a waist shot of an actor (Michael Garvey) in a Superman costume who stands center frame behind a huge bell jar mounted on a pedestal. Superman and the bell jar are cast in a spotlight, with the rest of the image pitch-black (Figure 5.24). The camera zooms to a close-up of Superman's eyes, then cuts to his face, now filmed through the bell jar, as he recites the first line: "I've tried to picture my world and the people in it through the distorted lens of a bell jar." While Superman speaks this sentence, the camera moves down a few inches so that one can see an architectural model of a city with skyscrapers placed under the jar. Filmed through the glass, Superman's facial features appear distorted, mirroring the content of the sentence, as though he is literally describing his action performing the words. Contrary to viewers' likely expectations, the line is taken not from *The Bell Jar* itself but from a biographical note by Lois Ames accompanying the first American edition of the book, which quotes a letter written by Plath's mother in which she recalls how her daughter explained the idea behind the narrative (cf. Ames 1971, 295). After this opening, Superman recites in total eight short passages from *The Bell Jar*, among them the following three, describing a psychic state of alienation:

[1] Through the slits of my eyes which I don't dare open too far, lest the full view strike me dead, I see the machine and the masked person, I can't tell if it's a man or a woman behind the machine, and other masked people.

[2] Then something leaps out in a blue flash and shakes me till my teeth rattle.

[3] Something bends down and takes hold of me and shakes me like the end of the world. Wheeeeeeee. It shrills through the air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubs me till I think my bones will break and the sap flies out of me like a split plant. AAAHHHHH.



FIGURE 5.24 Mike Kelley. *Superman Recites Selections From 'The Bell Jar' and Other Works by Sylvia Plath*. 1999.

These first terror-filled passages are taken from the sequences in which Esther recollects her experiences of ECT, albeit in a rearranged order, with minor eliminations and the narrative's original past tense converted into the present tense (cf. Plath 1999, 225 and 151). This temporal transformation enacts Superman's appropriation of the novel—he does not simply recite, but speaks the text as his own.

In some instances, Kelley's video is ostentatiously self-reflexive. For example, while the actor speaks the line, "darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard"—curiously used by Plath both in *The Bell Jar* and in her poem "Face Lift" (cf. *ibid.*, 226; Plath 1981b, 156)—the lights are dimmed fully. When he speaks of light, falling "without letup, blindingly" (cf. Plath 1981a, 150), viewers are instantly confronted with a completely white screen. Such 'speech acts' are presented in an exaggerated manner, highlighting the artificiality and 'magic' of the transformed reality. The actor's gesticulation, vocal expressiveness, and declamatory style add to the impression of a theater production, but harsh edits as well as effects such as audio reverberation, slow motion, and images of the bell jar revolving through the air emphasize that it is not a video performance but a media artwork subject to post-production work. Both the theatricality of the performance and video effects emphasize the spoken words. For example, when Superman screams "Aaaaah-hhhh!," his mouth is shown in extreme close-up. This is also the case when he recites: "And I scream, or a scream is torn from my throat for I don't recognize it, but hear it soar and quaver in the air like a violently disembodied spirit" (cf. Plath 1999, 152). The close-up, a photographic and filmic device par excellence, intensifies the expressed emotion and also serves to visually foreground the disembodied scream torn from the throat. Filming only the performer's mouth in large format, while it utters sounds, is an alienating technique also found in early video performance, such as Vito Acconci's *Open Book* (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

For the last recitation from *The Bell Jar*, the camera shows Superman's face from below, slowly zooming out until he is seen in full height, level with the skyscrapers of the architectural model (Figure 5.25). A slight echo is added to his voice, giving the impression that Superman is standing inside the bell jar. Again, the images match the spoken words: "Wherever I sit—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I will be sitting in the same glass bell



FIGURE 5.25 Mike Kelley. *Superman Recites Selections From 'The Bell Jar' and Other Works by Sylvia Plath*. 1999.

jar, stewing in my own sour air” (cf. *ibid.*, 195). Interestingly, in the novel, it is the first time Esther uses the metaphor of the bell jar, and all other excerpts used earlier in the video appear in subsequent passages in the book. By changing the chronology and placing the most desperate quote at the end, the video’s dramaturgy challenges an optimistic reading of the novel. It specifically negates a passage in which after one of the shock treatments Esther describes how the bell jar has finally lifted and she can breathe again—a passage also quoted earlier in Kelley’s video (cf. *ibid.*, 227).

The second Plath text quoted in the video is her poem “A Life” (1960). It is recited in full and comprises exactly the second half of the video, though after stanza four, Kelley alters the succession of the last four stanzas. As in the reading of *The Bell Jar*, the images at times also illustrate the poetic imagery from “A Life.” For instance, when Superman recites the opening lines of stanza two—“Flick the glass with your fingernail: | It will ping like a Chinese chime in the slightest air stir” (Plath 1981a, 150)—he flicks the bell jar resoundingly. In contrast to the dramatic reading of the first part, where *The Bell Jar* serves as hypotext, here the actor tones down his performance. He stands next to the bell jar, simply reciting the text, carefully touching the glass or rocking the jar in his arms, and for the length of two stanzas nothing is visible except his shadow in profile on the wall, gesturing and declaiming the text like a performer in an Asian shadow play. Kelley chose a different setting or angle for nearly every one of the poem’s stanzas. For example, while Superman recites stanza three, he rocks the bell jar in his hands and the camera moves irregularly, creating a fundamental disruption in perception, typical of people in disturbed psychic states but also corresponding to the poem’s simultaneous topic of (interrupted) ‘sea waves bowing.’ Stanzas four and six are recited while Superman stands next to the pedestal, opening his cloak so that the bell jar is theatrically framed by a ‘red curtain.’ Viewers see the architectural model under the bell jar and hear lines such as:

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle  
 About a bald hospital saucer.  
 It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper  
 And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.  
 She lives quietly  
 (*ibid.*)

In this sequence of the video, Plath’s poetry itself is foregrounded as strange and enigmatic. It is rather difficult to understand its meaning, with poetic images such as “bald hospital saucer,” “private blitzkrieg,” or, in the next stanza, when it states that the nameless woman continued to live quietly “like a foetus in a bottle” (*ibid.*).

Plath’s poem can be roughly divided into two parts: Whereas the first part is an inter-medial *ekphrasis* that describes a type of artwork—most likely a tapestry with a complex iconography—the second part describes the woman’s thoughts as indications of her state of mind. In Plath’s version, the poem ends with the image of a revenant, depicted in cryptic yet perhaps utopian lines of a “drowned man, complaining of the great cold” who “[c]rawls up out of the sea.” Due to the inversion of the final two stanzas, Kelley’s version ends with a desperate outlook:

With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle,  
 The obsolete house, the sea, flattened to a picture  
 She has one too many dimensions to enter.

Grief and anger, exorcized,  
 Leave her alone now.  
 (ibid.)

Again, the artist emphasizes a pessimistic reading. The motif of loneliness persists. Superman speaks this stanza while kneeling behind the bell jar, his face terribly distorted through the glass, as at the beginning of the video. After his last line, the screen fades to black.

Confronting the two literary worlds, the video highlights similarities in themes that might not have been revealed otherwise, and it is this merging that effectuates the process of defamiliarization. Superman and Esther Greenwood share striking similarities. Both are characters alienated from the worlds in which they live. Superman assimilates into human society by ‘dressing down’—concealing his indigenous garb—into the guise of Clark Kent. Plath’s protagonist, conversely, must ‘dress up’ into femininity, struggling to fit into the role forced upon her as she fashions herself into what society considers to be a good woman. She “is continually frustrated in her attempts to resolve her anxieties about class, gender, and sexuality through clothing” (Pelt 2015, 18). By appropriating Esther’s words, the video shows that her experience is not singular, not confined to a hysterical woman who has to be broken via shock treatments in order to be reassembled according to the restricting norms of society. Decontextualized from the framework of ECT, which can be recognized only by those who have read the book, the passages spoken by Superman—the blue flashes, noises, and screams—can be understood as referring either to the destruction of Krypton or to the transformation from Kent to Superman. Plath’s novel ends with enough ambivalence to allow readings that range from rebirth to the foreshadowing of death. The reversed chronology of the novel’s fragments in the Kelley video endorses the second interpretation: There is no escape from the bell jar.

Superman’s recitation of “A Life” constitutes a melancholic reflection on the situation of the miniaturized people who are forced to live in the bottle that he looks at from a god-like perspective. In the Superman stories, the Fortress of Solitude is a place of respite from the world of humans. In a feature film, the montage of disparate scenes might feel like an interruption accentuating the artistic medium. The background for the video is not feature films, however, but comic books, in which it is common for highly diverse images to converge in the sequence of panels. The visual style of the video, in effect, alludes to comic book storytelling itself. *Superman* is a prime example of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls “narrative across media” (cf. Ryan 2004), as stories featuring the Superman character exist in multiple versions and adaptations and include comic books, films, television programs, radio plays, and video games—continuing from its invention in the 1930s to the present. Within the *Superman* universe, Kelley’s video is a hypertext among countless others. But through the amalgamation with Plath’s literary texts, through Garvey’s provocative performance as well as the many editing techniques applied, the work also stands out as a striking, original, and complex artistic creation.

### Poetics of Quotation: The Literary in Performative Installations

In this last subsection, two dense and complex media artworks are discussed. As in the previous subsection, these artworks interweave written and spoken literary language with images and sound. However, their refashioning is even more entangled as well as associative, and both artists extensively comment on their appropriations of the literary works and emphasize the subjectivity or even ‘idiosyncrasy’ of their approach. In these works by the artists Joan Jonas and Nalini Malani the act of appropriation and re-creation enables an extensive intertextual dialogism, as

in the artworks discussed earlier. Through an encompassing “creative and metamorphic process” (Nicklas and Lindner 2012, 6), they show that adaptations are autonomous audiovisual artworks. Furthermore, they present a unique ‘poetics of quotation’ by weaving spoken or written text excerpts into a multidimensional audiovisual cosmos full of transcultural references. The artists situate the literary in a performative media space, engulfing the viewers and letting them experience both the genesis and performance of media art in its temporal-spatial mode.

The American multimedia artist **Joan Jonas** has emphasized the closeness of her art to poetry. Literary authors from different epochs and cultural contexts have inspired Jonas’s works, among them David Antin, Jorge Luis Borges, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), William Carlos Williams, and the Brothers Grimm (cf. Simon 2010, 159–161). Jonas considers her works in general as audiovisual adaptations of the genre of poetry (cf. Jonas in Schneider 2010, n.p.). Her *Reading Dante* (US 2008–2010) relates to a literary work, namely the most famous medieval Italian epic poem, Dante Alighieri’s *La divina commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*, 1321). Jonas’s artwork exists in different versions as both performances and an installations. Here, an official video documentation provided by her gallery (Gavin Brown’s enterprise) is referenced, as is an installation of *Reading Dante III* (2010) shown at the Henry Museum, Seattle, in 2014. Since the focus is on media art and not on live performances, the following analysis discusses the installation.

Dante’s *Divina commedia* is an epic poem that narrates an imaginary one-week voyage of the first-person protagonist in three canticles that represent the realms of the beyond in the Catholic cosmos: hell, purgatory, and heaven. Dante’s poem about the three realms is highly allegorical. For his detailed description of the systems of punishment and gratification, depicted as ‘circles’ that the protagonist enters consecutively, the poet makes use of pre-existing literary and theological representations of the afterworld. Its most prominent features are the (heterodox) amalgamation of Christian and pagan motifs and characters as well as an eccentric synthesis of science, theology, and poetry. Jonas has drawn on all three parts, although most text excerpts heard in the piece have been taken from the first part, “Inferno.”

The title *Reading Dante* can be understood in two ways: It refers, on one hand, to the factual reading and reciting of parts of the epic poem by different persons within the piece; on the other hand, ‘reading’ implies an act of its exegetic or interpretative appropriation. Just as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* has been read and appropriated by different cultures across centuries, Jonas translates it into her own cosmos. She investigates its transtemporal, transcultural relevance by composing footage shot in different locations and different periods. Among them are a wooden house in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (Jonas working with children); New York City (nighttime street scenes, filmed in the 1970s); Dante readings at Orchard, a New York City art space; and Mexico City (images of the *zócalo*; a lava field surrounded by a monument).

The act of reading is depicted similarly to Hill’s *Incidence of Catastrophe* in that people are shown reading, here in different locations and situations. However, in *Reading Dante* reading is not silent and immersive but rather it is a performance before an audience. The reading never comes to an end but is a continuous engagement—a form of appropriation, albeit one that does not aim to make familiar. This appropriation corresponds to the ongoing reading of Dante, showing how each new reader, each new reading adds to the web of interpretations and reading experiences. This multitude of encounters is expressed by the depiction of various performers reading an excerpt from *The Divine Comedy*. All excerpts are presented orally, creating a shared space of storytelling and reflecting on how Dante’s epic poem has been passed down through generations by multiple speakers.

The spoken excerpts from *The Divine Comedy* are presented in four different ways: First, the artist herself recites passages in English. Since hers is the frequently heard, pre-recorded,

acousmatic voice, these stanzas acquire a sense of omniscience (cf. Chion 1999, 24), like that of the ‘global conscience’ of the multi-channel installation. This is enhanced by the fact that Jonas both repeats and anticipates the stanzas of other speakers. Second, a male speaker with a sonorous, trained voice recites passages in the original Italian, first as a voice-over and later sitting on a stage. Third, other male performers read parts in English while sitting on a stage, facing the camera. Fourth, amateur performers read short English text passages while sitting in a window at Orchard, a non-profit artist-run exhibition and event space in New York City, located on Orchard Street in the Lower East Side (2005–2008). In these scenes, the readers face the interior so that the day and evening streetscapes form the background. The amateur performers follow occasional off-scene directions by Jonas, who issues commands such as ‘speak up.’ Among the performers is a small girl, Uchenna Enwezor, the daughter of the Nigerian-American curator Okwui Enwezor. Jonas chose several artist colleagues to appear in *Reading Dante*, therefore the piece follows the concept of collective reading as a dialogical artistic appropriation (Figure 5.26).

Just as each reading represents a new interpretation, Jonas’s artwork itself represents another reading that incorporates previous readings. Yet in an effort to distort what readers (and viewers) may have come to assume about Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Jonas employs defamiliarizing devices: In particular, multimediality as the central feature of *Reading Dante* opens up a cosmos of “allusions, references, images, objects, sounds” (Lee 2015, 311) that challenge the viewer’s perceptual channels. The documentation of *Reading Dante III* is about 45 minutes long and contains one successive track of the four channels of the installation. Since the four projections are of different lengths and are each presented as loops, the constellation and combination of moving images and sound varies significantly. This aesthetic strategy of “de-synchronization” (Crimp 1983, 8) as well as a “de-centralization of the live” (Daderko 2013, 132) has been typical of Jonas from her early works onward. At times, acoustic material is presented simultaneously with visual elements,



FIGURE 5.26 Joan Jonas. *Reading Dante III*. 2010.



creating a polyphony or even cacophony. The artwork makes use of aesthetic overabundance, as Dean Daderko suggests:

In Jonas' idiosyncratic exploration of *The Inferno* by Dante, views into a furnace suggest the fires of hell, Cerberus is a collaborator in a green dress wearing a fox-like mask, and the rings of hell are suggested by the projected video image of feedback loop that creates a diminishing visual echo. Recorded sounds animate this environment: the voices of individuals invited to read Dante's words in English and in Italian; a broad variety of vocal modes—from operatic arias to screams—recorded during the theatrical presentation of the work; and instrumental orchestration [. . .]. Three of the video channels weave footage shot during the theatrical performance with other imagery including drawings, film, and live feeds. The fourth shows Jonas repeatedly drawing and erasing images on a chalkboard. (ibid., 100)

As this description illustrates, Jonas uses means that appear cryptic and unclear in their relationship to the literary source. Simultaneously employing text, images, and sound causes estrangement of both the literary source and the viewer's perception. Moreover, the work avoids creating a closed universe, a comprehensive interpretation of Dante, but rather introduces element after element to keep the dialog alive.

A reflection of this ongoing dialog, which is yet another factor of estrangement, is the creation of complex layers that result from Jonas's processual approach: She considers the medial transformation of her works in the form of recurring installations, drawings, videos, and sculptures as 'translations' or 'transmissions' (cf. Simon 2010, 159). The process of transformation increases the density of the artwork's intertextual web. Each subsequent version incorporates video documentation from previous performances and productions, contributing to additional layers of meaning: "The installations are translations of the performances. They include single-channel videos that were made—as all my videos are—considering the structure particular to that medium. But time in performance is structured differently" (Jonas in Simon 2010, 164). Jonas here refers to the medium's specificity in time and space, which is also a topic in art criticism with regard to her work.

Jonas shifts between both installation and performance to target the viewer's experience of medial difference. Her multimedia installation *Reading Dante III* also contains a set of variable elements whose relationship changes with each presentation of the artwork: "four channels of video, two paper-covered hanging lamps, a floor lamp, two desks, two long benches, a chalkboard easel, and three wall drawings presented in a room whose walls are painted dark slate gray" (Daderko 2013, 100). These elements are integrated in the process of layering, as the beginning of the performance demonstrates. *Reading Dante III* begins with a short scene in which Jonas is off stage and recites the first stanza of the first canto in the acclaimed English verse translation of the *Inferno* by the poet Ciarán Carson (the edition used throughout her work): "Halfway through the story of my life | I came to in a gloomy wood, because | I'd wandered off the path, away from the light" (Dante 2002, 1). A little later, an on-stage male performer reads with a clear, articulated voice from the Italian original (with English subtitles in a white font). Both voices are accompanied by shots of a stage with a veiled female figure in front of a large screen that displays black-and-white drawings of a forest. Jonas stands at the right side of the screen with a large open notebook pressed to her body, drawing black lines, accompanied by elegiac piano music. Such a mediatized stage happening is exemplary of Jonas's layering technique: The video shows both a 'video screen' modified by the movement of the live performer in front of it and a 'paper screen' modified by the live drawing of the artist (Figure 5.27).

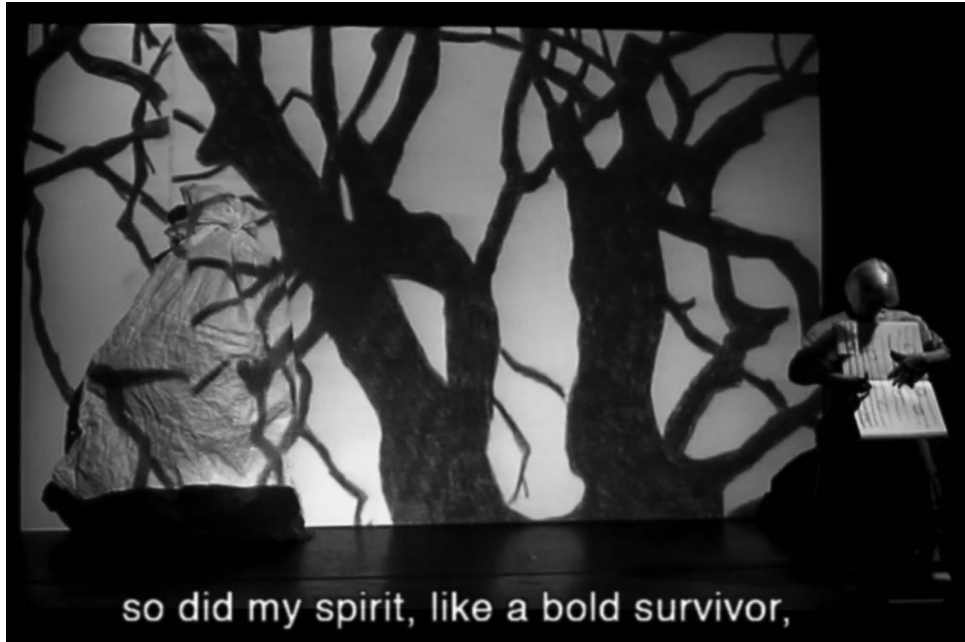


FIGURE 5.27 Joan Jonas. *Reading Dante III*. 2010.

As another layering strategy, Jonas often appears in a shining white garment that functions as a projection surface for video. In so doing, Jonas highlights her reading process of Dante, the subjectivity of her approach, by marking herself as ‘projection surface.’ The very beginning of *La divina commedia* is the soundtrack to this visual representation. In these stanzas, the lyric persona recounts the beginning of a voyage—characterized in the very first line as a journey of ‘our’ life. In vivid words, the poem’s opening describes entering a terrible, dark, and wild wood, fear and disorientation, and the subsequent calming of the mind. Through the declamation of the medieval Italian stanzas, Jonas’s work accentuates its literariness as well as its strategy of estrangement: Recipients may perceive the words’ tonal quality and the pleasant sound of Dante’s famous *terza rima*—a rhyme pattern creating a continuing chain of correspondence—rather than their meaning. With the shift from English to Italian and back to English again, the topic of linguistic translation is foregrounded and enables a reflection on linguistic versus medial translation. This processual ‘reading as translation’ also integrates the viewer, who has to ‘read the artist’s reading.’

Jonas’s reading of Dante is more associative than straightforward. After the Italian recitation ends, Jonas and her co-performer Ragani Haas appear in front of the video screen and start screaming at each other. This short, intense sequence is vocally reminiscent of the tortures of hell described in the *Divine Comedy* or a mimesis of the “roaring oh so loud” of a “fearsome lion” that the lyric persona confronts right after the stanzas quoted earlier (Dante 2002, 3). This scene is followed by that of a hand-drawn dragon ‘flying’ in a wild, black-and-white sky. Again, layers are integrated, as this short animated scene is a ‘direct feedback performance,’ which eventually becomes obvious when the whole stage is in view: The artist is using a stick to move a paper dragon over a table on which a drawing is placed; a video camera captures the action from above. Another shot from the beginning of the video is of a man in the Orchard window bashfully reading a short section in an amateurish style. Jonas then recites an impressive passage from the

third canto as a voice-over, where the lyric persona hears the pain of the damned: “[H]owls, shrieks, grunts, gasps, bawls, | a never-ending terrible crescendo, || rising to vast compulsory applause, | revolving like sand or locusts in a storm, | turning the air black as funereal gauze” (Dante 2002, 16). As she speaks, viewers see and hear recordings of a bizarre doll show in a puppet museum.

In terms of the concept of dialogical appropriation, Jonas depicts the process of reading as a process of mirroring or reflection. Among the most impressive and disturbing images in this installation are those of a surreal-looking lava field in Mexico. In one sequence, Mexican artist Galia Eibenschutz moves around the field, surrounded by a gigantic circle of vast concrete monoliths that make up a monument, eventually holding two rough-cut, hand mirror-shaped glass panes in her hands and in front of her face. The projection of Eibenschutz’s recorded performance is presented on a stage with Jonas and her co-performer, Haas, standing in front of the screen and moving disk-like objects on bars (Figure 5.28). Although the objects used in this scene are not mirrors, they serve a mirroring function. The mirror is one of the central props in Jonas’s art, and it is emblematic of her artistic approach of different media, epochs, and cultures that mirror each other. The mirrors also suggest fragmentation, pointing to the fragments of readings that make up the ‘whole’ of Dante’s *Commedia*, as each new reading contributes to the variety and diversity of interpretations.

*Reading Dante* blurs cultural and historic boundaries: The images from Mexico are crosscut with the footage of a shadow play that the artist choreographed in a church in Como, Italy. Considering that the medieval writer Dante also amalgamated and configured disparate cultural systems, both his literary and Jonas’s artistic strategies can be compared to one another with

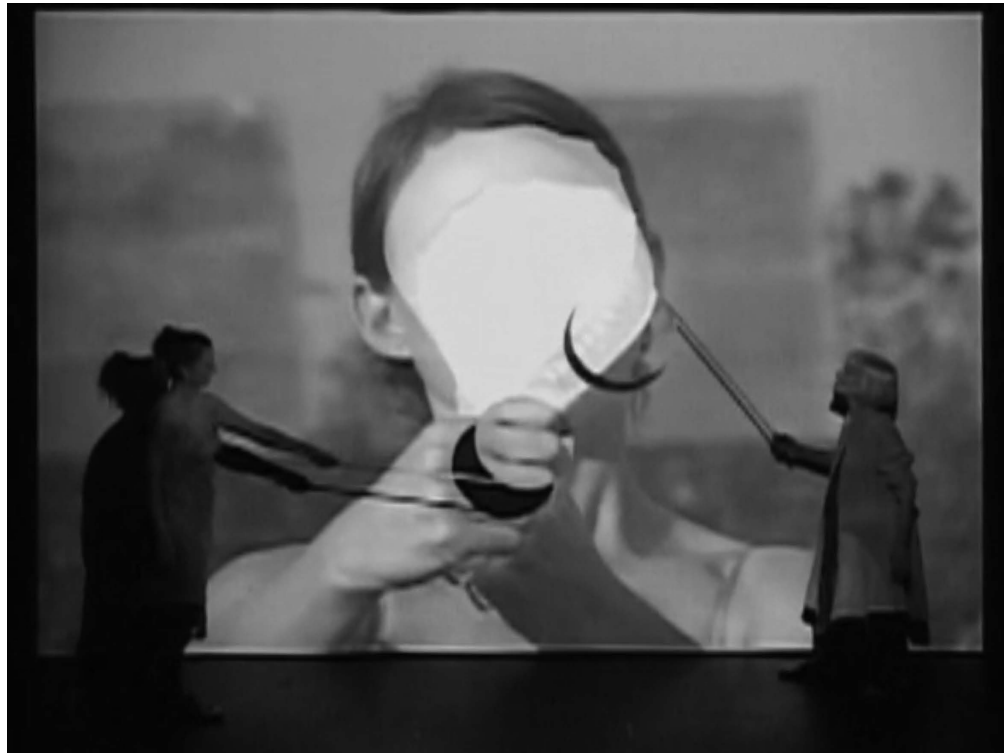


FIGURE 5.28 Joan Jonas. *Reading Dante III*. 2010.

regard to their extreme hybridity. Jonas's *Reading Dante* reveals a form of adaptation not found in the previously discussed works: an ongoing performative endeavor, successively building a multi-faceted artistic cosmos; a recursive, layered, cyclic, and processual actualization of an epochal medieval poem, deploying both high-tech and manual artistic devices. Brazilian-American artist Karin Schneider has remarked that although Jonas's work continuously "refers to literature and language, it has a melancholic quality that perforates this solid block of culture" (Schneider 2010). With regard to *Reading Dante*, one may speak of a perforation that is less destructive than creative and explorative: In Hutcheon's terms, it is clearly an emphasis of 'adaption as process,' instead of 'adaptation as product.'

The last media artwork discussed in this book is especially dense in its adaptation and refashioning processes: Indian artist **Nalini Malani's** installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* (IN 2012). The monumental work has been exhibited in very different settings. The initial installation for Documenta 13 in Kassel (2012), in an enclosed exhibition hall, was totally different from a subsequent presentation, when the work was projected onto the exterior walls of the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh (2014). The following analysis centers on its first presentation, in which the installation filled a large darkened space in the Documenta-Halle, which visitors entered through a sloped passage.

*In Search of Vanished Blood* consists of six simultaneous video projections and a shadow play created by five huge hanging and rotating Mylar cylinders that present reverse paintings by the artist. "Video/shadow play" is a genre designation the artist coined for her works (cf. Christov-Bakargiev 2012b, 9). The video/shadow play is highly self-reflective with regard to the sampled media: For example, the Mylar cylinders used as the artwork's key devices are placed in the center of the exhibition room, exposing instead of hiding the artwork's apparatus. The cylinders are themselves an intermedial fusion of several pre-cinematic devices, such as the magic lantern (cf. Huyssen 2013, 17) as well as the praxinoscope and the zoetrope. The shadow play itself has a long tradition, especially in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, and Thailand. It uses shadows, puppets, and gestures in an ancient form of storytelling without words, a form of 'light writing.' Combining contemporary and archaic projection practices, *In Search of Vanished Blood* creates its own archive of (pre)cinematic devices from different cultures. The use of shadow play can be regarded

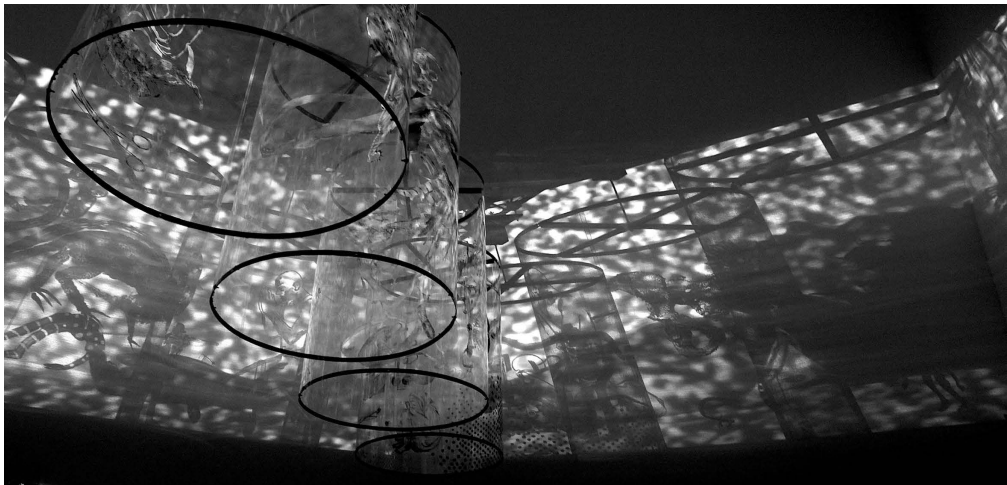


FIGURE 5.29 Nalini Malani. *In Search of Vanished Blood*. 2012.

as a device of disruption. As Andreas Huyssen has stated, it is used in order “to create a flash of recognition in the Now,” (ibid., 14) yet instead of shocking, “it is rather geared toward disrupting the automatism of allegedly autonomous vision, transparent knowledge, and public opinion in its aesthetic construction” (ibid., 65). The cylinders are lit by video projections while layers of superimposed images and writing appear on the four walls like a monumental frieze of moving pictures: a diaphanous web of imagery. These layered rotating images cover a large spectrum of motifs, such as indigenous people, soldiers, animals, botanical illustrations, and many images from Hindu and Western mythology. On an acoustic level, the installation contains a soundtrack of synthesizer, drums, sitar, female voices, and sounds reminiscent of industrial production or a typewriter. The viewer is offered a highly immersive experience in which his or her own shadow becomes part of the installation.

*In Search of Vanished Blood* was inspired by numerous literary works of the 20th century from diverse genres and historic and cultural contexts. These references were listed on a sign at the entrance of the exhibition space at Documenta. According to the artist, language is the “leitmotif in the piece” (Malani in Christov-Bakargiev 2012a, 32). Works noted as especially important include the Urdu poem “Lahu Ka Surag” (“In Search of Vanished Blood,” 1965) by the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Christa Wolf’s German narrative *Kassandra* (*Cassandra*, 1983), and the Bengali short story “Draupadi” (1978) by Indian writer and activist Mahasveta Devi. Additional works noted as influencing the artwork are Rainer Maria Rilke’s German novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910), Samuel Beckett’s English drama monolog *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), and Heiner Müller’s German play *Hamletmaschine* (*Hamletmachine*, 1977). All intertexts are used in English translations, fortifying English as the *lingua franca* of media art. The artwork directly quotes the works by Faiz, Devi, Beckett, and Müller, while the others are alluded to indirectly (see the printed text of the text performance in Bal 2016, 436f).

Malani’s video/shadow play layers these texts in modalities of script and voice that are matched by the layering of video images comprising both the images on the turning cylinders and the shadows they create. The artist remarks: “By bringing in various quotes, texts, stories, and images, exploring intertextuality, I have always been trying to bring a link into the language I use, between the viewer, myself and the image” (Malani in Christov-Bakargiev 2012a, 26). Historically, geographically, and thematically, the literary texts stand apart, yet they are brought together in an intertextual dialogism. Malani calls this artistic strategy a “kaleidoscope of cross-referential reflections” (Malani in Kissane and Pijnappel 2007, 40). Mieke Bal goes even further when speaking of a practice and “poetics of quotation,” resulting in a semantic ‘thickening’ “that cannot be reduced to a chronology, where an older text or image is quoted by a later one” (Bal 2016, 35 and 85).

Similarities among four of the literary works lie in their ambition and their critical stance toward a political regime or situation. Faiz’s poem, for instance, was written in response to the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 and the mass killings resulting from the riots during the partition of India in 1946–1947. The poem’s English translation by Agha Sahid Ali gave the multimedia work its title. Malani’s installation addresses the partition of India, focusing especially on the sexual violence against women during the conflict and its aftermath, a theme that previous artworks of hers have also treated (cf. McEvelley 2007, 15). Other issues thematized in the work are the tenuous state of widows in India and the Hindu pogroms against Muslims in the early 1990s. However, the artwork does not focus only on concrete incidents of violence but also weaves historical and contemporary conflicts into a multidimensional image and sound archive, in part clashing with the seemingly beautiful, enchanting images and setup of the installation that draw in viewers.

Many elements of the literary texts have been transformed into images and sound. The deciphering process largely depends on the viewers' literary backgrounds and the individual degree of associations. Another dimension of transformed language is the projection of American Sign Language—the nouns 'murder' and 'democracy' can be deciphered only by those who know this specific language. Malani uses a linear black-and-white style to depict the signing hands, a reference to 19th-century printers' manicule signs. The reference to sign language has a deeper meaning: "It's like words are falling over deaf ears and the only final way of communicating is perhaps hand language" (Malani in Christov-Bakargiev 2012a, 31), as the artist remarks. Hand language, narrating by (re)counting with the digits, again refers to much older forms of oral storytelling.

In accordance with the literary works by Wolf and Devi, the artwork depicts the female position as essentially oppressed by patriarchal power (cf. Spivak in Devi 1981, 387f). Cassandra, the Greek mythological prophetess of Wolf's narrative, who is condemned to see the future but to never be believed (cf. Wolf 2013, 198), takes center stage in the work, embodied subtly as a young woman on whose face sign language symbols flicker like warnings. Malani wants Cassandra to finally be heard; she even gives her her own voice: "This is Cassandra speaking," Malani's voice-over claims. A chorus of young female voices answers 'Cassandra,' articulating themselves "in the name of the victims." Speakers above the cylinders transmit the prophetess's singular voice, while the choral voices (italicized in the following quote) are transmitted by speakers installed in the periphery of the exhibition space, thus creating a vocality reminiscent of Greek theater staging:

This is Cassandra speaking. *In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims.* I eject all the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into poison. I take back the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb. *Down with the happiness of submission. Long live hate, rebellion, and death.*

The rebellious chorus characterizes Cassandra's speech as originating from "the heart of darkness," quoting the title of Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella. The chorus addresses "the capitals of the world [i]n the name of the victims," while Cassandra claims to reject the sexual violence she endured. However, the quoted lines are not from Wolf's narrative but from Ophelia's final monolog from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, exchanging only the subject of the first phrase (and other minor things), since in the play, Ophelia claims to be Electra ("This is Electra speaking"; Müller 1984, 58). Malani's artwork thus fuses Wolf's Cassandra and Müller's Ophelia—the latter created in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* (1603) and fused by Müller with Electra, an ancient heroine and title figure of a play by Euripides. Both tragic heroines—Ophelia and Electra—lose their minds at the end due to unbearable violence and treachery (in Müller's version, this leads to Ophelia's schizophrenic identification with Electra).

While the excerpt of Müller's adapted play is heard, Faiz's poem is projected as script. There are therefore two modalities of language at once as well as two literary authors 'speaking' simultaneously of different violent incidents. It is as if Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia are brought to the fore: authors and cultures, echoing, and speaking with each other, in the form of "another's speech in another's language," constituting "a special type of double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 1981, 324). In Malani's installation, the oppressed female figure is empowered through references as avenger, audibly foregrounded through the duplication of her voice. At the same time, on one of the walls, the veiled face of a young woman appears. The visual sequence can be read as another nod to *Hamletmachine*, as Ophelia speaks these lines while two doctors "wrap gauze around her and the wheelchair" in which she sits and after her monolog

remains “*motionless in her white wrappings*” (Müller 1984, 58; cf. Huyssen 2013, 63)—an image that Malani picks up with the bandage-covered face. Malani might also be referring to a famous surreal motif from Rilke’s *Malte*: of changing and ‘worn off’ faces that he observes on the streets of Paris, especially that of a woman on a bench who had “completely fallen into herself, forward into her hands” so that she lost her face there and turned “faceless,” as the first-person narrator observes in horror (Rilke 1990, 7).

In Malani’s installation, the lines of Faiz’s poem scroll down in black printed lines on the gauze-covered face of a young Indian-looking woman, whose features are barely visible: “The text moves, and although the movement is slow, it is rather unusual to read when the letters move upwards, away from us. We are bound to someone else’s pace” (Bal 2016, 91) (Figure 5.30). Bal analyzes in detail how the poem and the veiled face physically interact in the installation, leading to the appearance of a “face-poem in movement,” in other words, to “the moving image of a face that is a poem, a poem that is a face” (ibid.). Taking into account the name of the poet, this analogy is emphasized even further, as its sound resembles the English word, so that the ‘face-poem’ is, at the same time, a ‘Faiz-poem.’

The poem is marked by a fundamental negativity, a claim of absence:

There’s no sign of blood, not anywhere.  
I’ve searched everywhere.  
The executioner’s hands are clean, his nails transparent.  
The sleeves of each assassin are spotless.  
No sign of blood: no trace of red,  
not on the edge of the knife, none on the point of the sword.  
The ground is without stains, the ceiling white.

This blood which has disappeared without leaving a trace  
isn’t part of written history: who will guide me to it?

[. . .]

From the beginning this blood was nourished only by dust.  
Then it turned to ashes, left no trace, became food for dust.  
(Faiz 1991, 63)

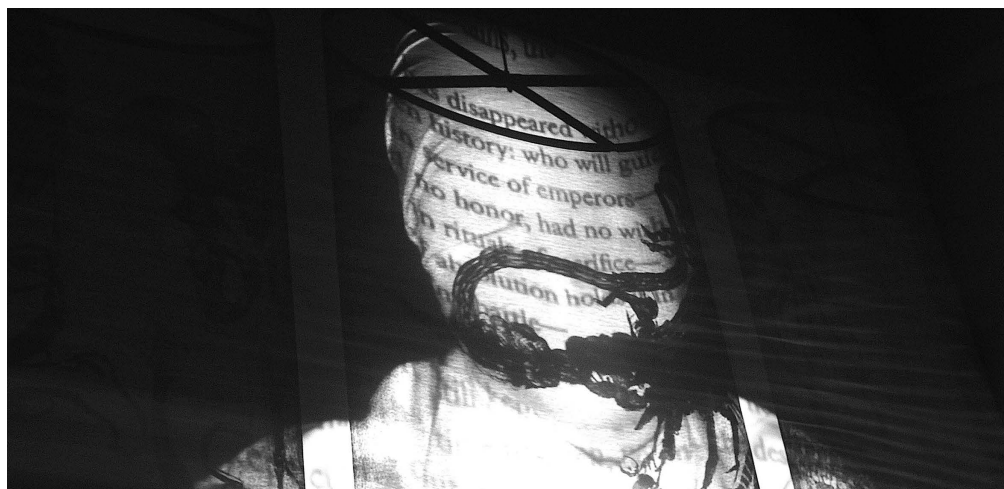


FIGURE 5.30 Nalini Malani. *In Search of Vanished Blood*. 2012.

The lyric persona, who remains unidentified and thus a kind of projection surface itself, claims not to see any traces of violence, that they have all vanished through time and are not part of “written history.” Visitors to the installation read these lines on the clean white gauze covering the young woman’s face; the practice of bandaging, however, directly refers to physical injury, and therefore to (possible) wounds underneath. Thus “the words create an image of possible access—precarious, ambivalent, but still, potential—to the searched-for blood” and the projected poem “give[s] shape to this ambivalence” (Bal 2016, 96). While the sequence with the ‘face-poem’ is starkly black and white, the work in general is exceptionally colorful—in particular in use of the color red, dripped by Malani with watercolor on the inside of the Mylar foils and remaining there as undissolved stains and puddles. The visual absence of blood in the poem sequence is thus followed by its belated visual presence. However, the uncanny absence of visual traces is simultaneously ‘corrected’ by the loud voice of Cassandra, embodied by Malani, articulating herself both as a victim of physical violence and in the name of other victims. The media artwork thus claims the isochronic absence and uncanny presence of violence: Through the rotation of the images, the fluid and fleeting paint layers, the script elements and shadows, as well as the flashing of light (reminiscent of a search light), the constant erasure of violence—the emblematic ‘vanished blood’—is made palpable within the reception process.

Wolf’s Cassandra is characterized by a self-reflexivity that allows her to appropriate even the most ineffable, cruel atrocities into her interior monologs. Malani expresses her fascination with this mythic-postmodern figure:

There’s an image that is absolutely astounding and that Christa Wolf talks about in detail: when Cassandra is incarcerated by her father in a basket. She only sees the circle of sky through the basket. Her limbs are in a foetal position. She is going to be taken to the home of Agamemnon and she will finally be killed. She knows it all. She has no control anymore because someone else has the control. (Malani in Christov-Bakargiev 2012a, 29)

Malani refers to two passages in Wolf’s narrative: one recounted in past tense, the other in the present tense, where Cassandra is corralled in a large wicker basket in the “grave of heroes” (Wolf 2013, 185; cf. 114 and 186f). Similar to Hill, Malani depicts the catastrophic with an image of embryonic regression—which is not quite the case in Wolf’s work, where the protagonist is able to stand in the basket (cf. *ibid.*, 186). In Malani’s work, however, this scene is not represented visually or linguistically, but the depicted loss of control is transformed into abstract images and sound.

The overall theme of Malani’s multimedia installation is violence motivated by politics and religion, and the invisibility of its traces within historiography. The main sufferers of these conflicts are women: They are reified and become barter objects of male power; they suffer abduction, physical and sexual violence, and brutal desecration. In accordance with Wolf and Devi, Malani depicts the female position as oppressed by patriarchal power. This is presented acoustically and visually in the installation, through drawings and video images of female bodies and faces, onto which drawn human shapes and other motifs are projected. Animals being chased—a running dog, taken from Muybridge’s late-19th-century animal locomotion studies (cf. Muybridge 2016, 576f; Bal 2016, 90)—can be understood as an allegory for Devi’s politically persecuted protagonist Draupadi Mejhen, who, fighting to defend her land, is captured and suffers a brutal mass rape at the hands of the police (cf. Devi 1981, 401). Wolf also compares humans at war to beasts; in particular, the Greek warrior Achilles, whom Cassandra repeatedly calls ‘the brute’ in her inner monological reflection. Malani appropriates Draupadi’s



fate when she recites a significant part of Devi's narrative (with slight alterations; see Devi 1981, 401):

She was apprehended at 6.53 pm.  
 It took an hour to get her to camp.  
 "Make her," he said.  
 Something sticky under her arse and waist.  
 Only the gag has been removed.  
 Incredible thirst.  
 She senses that her vagina is bleeding.  
 How many came to make her?  
 Sees her breasts and understands that indeed,  
 she has been made up right.  
 Her breasts a bitten raw.  
 The nipples torn.  
 How many?  
 (Malani in Bal 2016, 437)

Both Devi's and Wolf's texts are third-person narratives focused on the protagonist. By referring to central passages on the terror and violence that the female protagonists suffer, the artist gives their inner monologues a voice, externalizing their thoughts and feelings.

Malani constellates cultural conflicts into a multidimensional texture of sound and image. Her video/shadow play may be described, as Huyssen has aptly stated, as "a kind of writing in images and sounds" that possesses a "hieroglyphic dimension" (Huyssen 2012, 57). The shadow play here gains a central function on a figurative level: The shadows fall over the fleeting images and then script signs cover them, deleting the images again and again in a looping, rotating movement. The figure of Cassandra as a seer whose knowledge about violence is not heard, whose cry remains silent, can be read as an allegory of this installation; the superimposition of layers of voice and sound obscures her statements. The shadow play also gains a central function on the level of media reflexivity and remediation: By employing a dynamic of opacity and transparency, the work both constantly foregrounds and eliminates its own (hyper)mediacy. The layering of images, sound, and language is a device of complicating form. Rendered opaque by the layering of linguistic modalities, Malani's installation is both difficult to read and to hear and read at the same time. The synchronicity of signification levels presented in a nonhierarchical manner is an important feature of Malani's video/shadow play. As Chaitanya Sambrani has remarked, "reading her work is not simply a matter of collating and footnoting all the references it contains; rather, the work is so animated by an excessive referentiality that it ultimately transcends the limitations of those references" (Sambrani 2007, 35). Literariness is not only an excessive complication of language; it also is the experience of an aesthetic surplus.

The complex transformations of literary texts into the time-based audiovisual art discussed in this chapter create something fundamentally new (or 'other') that cannot be viewed as a (secondary) adaptation or remediation. Rather, the media artworks are autonomous artistic creations, often establishing only loose intertextual and intermedial ties to the pre-existing literary works. A certain aspect of the concept of remediation may nevertheless be relevant: The media artworks create opacity with regard to the literary text used due to their aesthetic alienation and layering. The layering of signs and media also reflects on acts of reading and translating. Language is foregrounded in some works as 'literary,' not least through the exposure of printed

book pages, as in Müller's and Hill's videos. This stands in opposition to the majority of works discussed in this part, which eliminate the specific typography of printed literary texts in favor of autonomous, ornamented script-images or, taking an opposite tack, in favor of plain non-conceptualized computer script or an emphasis on oral language, spoken mostly as voice-overs but occasionally by prominent figures from the literary and cultural universes, such as Kelley's Superman and Esther Greenwood. Media artworks adapting literary texts often follow specific impulses such as a medial reflection on memory (as in Santos's or Reeves's videos) or even that of 'queering' defamiliarization—as in Kalin's multilaminated works. Other works are highly subjective treatments of specific works (like Jonas's Dante series and Hill's artistic intervention with Blanchot) or a whole conglomerate of references, as in Malani's video/shadow play. In any case, media art's 'poetics of quotation' is inventive and at first glance often remains opaque to many viewers. By engendering their own audiovisual literariness, the artists who created the media artworks discussed here are not merely 'translating' literature into another medium: The results are 'transcreations.' In media art, appropriation as event of interpretation becomes palpable.

# 6

## CONCLUSION

Media art is not literature—but whenever a television set shows a man shouting a single word over and over again, a film is composed of nothing but flickering words, a video projection portrays a female bust with two mouths telling fairy tales in two languages, or a superhero recites a novel by a feminist author, we are faced with the literariness of media art. Literariness proves to be a powerful frame for the poetics and effects of aesthetic language in media art. Many works gain their poetic force not only through visual or acoustic means alone but also by employing estranged and estranging language. Video, film, and installations overwhelm their audiences with speech and writing, adapting or deforming literary genres and texts. In so doing, they shed new light on art, culture, and even academic disciplines. Media art disrupts habitualized modes of engaging with the world in a way that startles viewers and invites them to take a second look. The concepts of Russian Formalism are effective not as a comprehensive explanation of how art functions in isolation but rather by emphasizing how artworks are embedded in social discourse and framed by cultural backgrounds. At times, this reveals unexpected political dimensions within a seemingly aesthetically oriented topic, as made obvious in discussions of works by, for instance, Louisa Babari and Célio Paillard, Aldo Tambellini, or Tracey Moffatt.

Media art tests and ignores traditional conventions of artistic genres and invites viewers to playfully investigate boundaries and their norms. Viktor Shklovsky declared that the purpose of art is to revitalize perception in order to counter the automatization of recognition, an automatization that devours everything. As such, art must not be beautiful or adhere to specific norms of composition; on the contrary, it has to be cumbersome, an intriguing riddle, a stone over which one stumbles. The perspective of literariness takes the obstreperousness of media art seriously. Combined with the Russian Formalists' concept of *ostranenie*—making strange—and their idea of 'complicating form,' literariness sensitizes viewers to a work's peculiarity. The acknowledgment of an artwork's strangeness spurs viewers to look for the devices that create this effect, which in turn enables viewers to construct layers of meaning. Literariness is neither an essential characteristic nor an arbitrary impression.

In terms of media art, the concept of literariness does not refer to a specific school or epoch nor does it prescribe a specific set of rules. It both accounts for the background of each individual artwork and also respects their viewers' backgrounds, calling for varying interpretations instead of one norm of perceiving the world. In this, media art and literariness are exceptionally non-normative. To address the viewer, media art uses what has been effectively described as

*zaum'*—a language that is pure material and transcends sense to create new sensorial stimuli. In regard to poetry, it goes beyond sense to make new sense of the world. Viewers are kept alert by shifts from transparency to opacity and vice versa; the pragmatic and aesthetic functions of language alternate just as vision and sound oscillate between immersion and haptic confrontation. Language itself, whether spoken or written, becomes palpable.

Media art foregrounds the materiality of language on different levels. On one hand, it exemplifies the literariness of oral speech, a dimension often overlooked by literary studies that primarily focus on the printed text. On the other hand, it emphasizes the motion and fluidity as well as the iconic qualities of script, characteristics that are not commonly dealt with in literary studies, too. Both modalities appear as ephemeral and continuously shifting between meaning and materiality. The palpability of language—or artistic material in general—is startling and alienating, and may even be experienced as frustration. These effects pave the way for an intellectual reexamination, a hermeneutic appropriation that can decrease the feeling of strangeness even without ever allowing the viewer to fully understand or subordinate the experience of a work through an encompassing interpretation. Recognition is turned into a conscious seeing of otherness. Media art primarily aims for a sensorial disruption through the overload of cognitive capacities and then seeks to stimulate an intellectual process of re-examining habitualized ways of perception. The perspective of literariness dissolves binaries between materiality and meaning, the phenomenological domain and the realm of interpretation.

Chapter 2 developed the theoretical foundation for the analyses that followed: the concept of literariness in all its facets. Literary language is a deviation of prosaic language by means of excess structuring, alienating perspectives, and in general the use of devices that make language palpable as material. Literariness aims at hindering comprehension and at prolonging perception. In its most extreme, poetic language favors form over content, or content is just one element of form, and language refers to itself, literature, to its own becoming. We highlighted the relationship of literariness to concepts from other disciplines, such as the Neoformalist approach to film or the observations of postdramatic theory. This demonstrates that literariness is not limited to the analysis of literary language alone but has the potential to take a transmedial perspective that is rooted in the Russian Formalists' writings. Whenever artistic devices are used that highlight the materiality of a medium, disruptions occur that can lead to an aesthetic experience.

The media artworks in this book have been grouped according to parameters of literary studies: voice and script (Chapter 3); poetry, drama, and prose (Chapter 4); and references to specific works of literature (Chapter 5). This arrangement proved more fruitful than a mere chronological order that would have focused on technological innovations. In our analyses we discovered many unexpected correspondences with regard to aesthetic approaches and devices among works from highly different cultural and historical backgrounds. The analyses disclosed literary elements, forms, and conventions in many unforeseen ways—be it rhythm and rhyme in a factual text dealing with a U.S. president's state visit, as in Korpys/Löffler's *The Nuclear Football*, or the use of the dramatic device of messenger's report in sung dialogs about ordinary car accidents as in Hajnal Németh's *CRASH—Passive Interview*.

Without negating the fact that the respective state of technology fundamentally shapes both the artworks' aesthetics and their reflexive stance towards media, the analyses did not focus on historical development. It became clear that works produced in the 1970s and 1980s are often more minimalistic, based on only one linguistic device such as the repetition of words, whereas later works tend to be more narrative, often combining several layers of signification, and are frequently based on a more 'spectacular' set-up. The complexity of earlier media art is also often based on different artistic intentions than later works, when, for instance, exploring the relation of language and the body or language and its technological modes of transmission. The book

grouped small numbers of works under shared headings, which allowed for comparison and correspondences but placed a decisive focus on the detailed investigation of each individual media artwork and its aesthetic devices.

As the encounter with a wide range of media artworks here has shown, however, aesthetic experience does not equal aestheticism. Even if artists excessively foreground voice and script, examine the possibilities of media technologies, or use the background of literary genres, this is more than an artistic play or the attempt to increase the appreciation of new art forms by referring to established art forms. As diverse as the artworks discussed in this book may appear, they share not only a playfulness with forms—and, in particular, language—but a readiness to critically examine cultural discourses. Even outdated and often questioned concepts, such as literary genres, prove illuminating when viewed through the lens of literariness. It became obvious throughout the course of this study that aesthetic rules are both unstable and, more importantly, never neutral, going hand-in-hand with other discourses. Instead of establishing genres as rules that define art, they become productive backgrounds for dismantling the implications of (socio) cultural norms. Not only does language have the power to affect readers and listeners, it is itself an instrument of power. When Martha Rosler, for instance, stages her video performance *The Kitchen Alphabet* using the format of a television cooking show, she both uses the alphabet as a linguistic system to structure her performance and exposes the violence inherent in a television genre. Rules are used to unmask the social violence of orders.

Likewise, the appropriation of literary texts has revealed itself as a process of highlighting the otherness of the appropriated work. Works such as *Incidence of Catastrophe* by Gary Hill, *Reading Dante* by Joan Jonas, or *In Search of Vanished Blood* by Nalini Malani are appropriative, idiosyncratic ‘readings’ of literature. In media art, superimposition is not only an artistic technique of manipulating images, it is a device that exposes both the expectations that generic rules create as well as their obvious or hidden sociopolitical contexts. This process has unmasked the subtexts that usually go unnoticed, especially in the works of Mike Kelly and Tom Kalin. Literariness and estrangement are productive approaches for reading ‘against the grain,’ helping to make sense of media art’s disruptions of communication that shift awareness to cultural practices that are intertwined with the medium yet often remain invisible.

Video art, experimental film, and multimedia installations are by now a staple in museums and biennials, presented alongside more traditional art in a white cube or black box. Framed by the context of art history or cinema as well as alluding to literature, a single academic discipline alone cannot sufficiently describe or create an understanding of the forceful attraction of these works. Media art can be overwhelmingly complex or, on the contrary, extremely minimalistic. Consequently, one approach is clearly not sufficient to address every dimension and fully capture what it is that makes it so strange. Literariness proves to be a fruitful concept in many ways: Engaged in a general aesthetics of art, it allows for a connection to a kaleidoscope of theoretical approaches from multiple disciplines that explore both linguistic and visual potentials of defamiliarization. And just as the turn of a kaleidoscope forms new impressions, the shifts among perspectives from literary, film, and media studies allowed us to zoom in on specific angles of a specific artwork. So rather than being a frame that considers all artworks equal, literariness accounts for the diversity yet individuality of each artwork. At the same time, literariness is precise: It is not the only possible way to discuss the works, but the knowledge of literature and the terminology of literary studies help to identify and understand cues that art history or film studies alone might not be able to grasp. As Magdalena von Rudy’s use of teichoscopy shows, artworks may require the specific terminology developed by literary studies to pin down exactly what it is that constitutes the strangeness of what we perceive. It also shows that a literary

approach alone is insufficient, since this particular work, on another level, also references Hollywood cinema.

Media art not only challenges our assumptions about art and culture, but also about the scope of academic disciplines. It invites exploration, testing, and pushing beyond disciplinary boundaries. In other words, media art itself calls for the revitalization of academic perception. It is not only the arts that may mutually elucidate each other; an opening up of the disciplines may also bring undiscovered knowledge to light. The exploration of the literariness of media art has demonstrated the general need for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. Such an approach to research does not haphazardly fuse a mix of concepts into an undefined pulp. Rather, it brings to the table specific knowledge to help recognize complex structures—in other words, it helps to point to similarities in difference. In the future, it might be interesting to explore the scope of the concepts of literariness and estrangement, to better understand and investigate their limits and see how they may serve other disciplines and subject areas as well.



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## FORMAL REMARKS

Our research includes several theoretical texts that have not yet been officially translated into English. For the sake of readability, we decided not to indicate each of our own translations in the text itself. We translated all direct quotes from German-language research literature listed in the bibliography. In addition, we consulted scholars in other language departments to provide translations of a few other quotes. The same holds true for text excerpts from media art in an original language other than English (in such cases we usually provide both the original and a translation). When we refer to artworks, books, or exhibitions that have no official English title, a translation of the title is given in square brackets without italics or quotation marks. Since the authors of this study do not speak Russian, we had to rely on research literature and the available translations of Russian Formalist texts. In a few cases, we were forced to quote texts by Russian Formalists ‘second hand,’ as neither an English nor German translation of the respective texts exists in print. In the case of especially important quotes, alternative translations are at times used and provided. For each of the Russian Formalists, several transliterated versions of their names exist. We used the most common English spelling within the text and in the bibliography for pragmatic reasons. Only when we quote Russian Formalists or Prague School Structuralists do we provide the original dates of the publications (in brackets).

A further note is necessary with regard to the transcriptions of oral language: Several of the media artworks in our discussions employ oral language but in only a few cases do published scripts of those texts exist. Whenever oral language is quoted without a bibliographical reference, we did the transcription ourselves, without using a formal, linguistic transcription method but by simply transforming oral language into script. This forced us at times to make certain decisions, such as whether to print the quote as running text or in verse, and the same holds true with regard to punctuation. Generally, in quotations, one vertical bar (‘|’) marks the breaking of lines or paragraphs, while two vertical bars (‘||’) mark the beginning of a new stanza as well as a new ‘frame’ in a moving image artwork.

Earlier versions of some of the analyses in this book were published by Claudia Benthien (in languages other than English for the most part). For this book, they were modified and expanded by the co-authors, and they are thus not identical with their first printed versions. Published analyses exist for the following media artworks: Vito Acconci: *Full Circle*, Tracey Emin: *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, Jochen Gerz: *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung*, Mona Hatoum: *Measures of*

*Distance*, Freya Hattenberger: *Pretty Girl*, Gary Hill: *Around & About, Incidence of Catastrophe*, and *Mediations*, Christian Keinstar: *Ohne Titel*, Korpys/Löffler: *The Nuclear Football*, Nalini Malani: *In Search of Vanished Blood*, Cia Rinne: *archives zaroum*, Magdalena von Rudy: *Regnava nel silenzio*, and Peter Weibel: *Agentexte*. The bibliographical references for these earlier versions are the following articles published by Claudia Benthien (in chronological order):

- “Nutzloser Heiligenschein/Useless Halo.” Translated by Thomas Dunlap. *KEINSTAR. Christian Keinstar 00–05*. Exhib. Cat. Lukas Feichtner Galerie, Vienna. Vienna: n.p., 2006. 2–7.
- “Medialität, Materialität und Literarizität der Stimme in der Videokunst.” *KulturPoetik. Zeitschrift für kulturgeschichtliche Literaturwissenschaft/Journal for Cultural Poetics* 11.2 (2011): 221–239.
- “The Literariness of New Media Art—A Case for Expanding the Domain of Literary Studies (with Analyses of Recent Video Art by Keren Cytter, Freya Hattenberger and Magdalena von Rudy).” *Journal of Literary Theory* 6.2 (2012): 311–336.
- “Literarizität in der Videokunst—am Beispiel von Gary Hills Single-Channel-Arbeit ‘Mediations’.” *Akten des XII. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses, Warschau 2010: Vielheit und Einheit in der Germanistik weltweit* 10. Edited by Ryozo Maeda, Yun-Young Choi, Anton Kaes and Rolf G. Renner. Bern i.a.: Lang, 2013. 19–25.
- “Literarizität in der Medienkunst.” *Handbuch Literatur & Visuelle Kultur*. Edited by Claudia Benthien and Brigitte Weingart. Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2014. 265–284.
- “The Subjectification of Disaster in Video Art: ‘Incidence of Catastrophe’ by Gary Hill.” *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation, and the Assessment of Risk*. Edited by Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf. Berlin, Munich, and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2015. 171–186.
- “Visuelle Polyphonie. Cia Rinnes archives zaroum als mediale Transformation Konkreter Poesie.” *Übersetzen und Rahmen. Praktiken medialer Transformationen*. Edited by Claudia Benthien and Gabriele Klein. Paderborn: Fink, 2017. 123–139.

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