

ILUMINACE

Časopis pro teorii, historii
a estetiku filmu

The Journal of Film Theory, History,
and Aesthetics

2 / 2024



Na obálce / Front cover:

Políčko z filmu *Den, kdy se zastavila země* (Robert Wise, 1951).

Film Still from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951).

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Ročník / Volume 36

SPECIAL ISSUE:
**CONFIGURING COMPUTER LABOR IN FILM
AND AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA**

Guest Editor:
Veronika Hanáková (Charles University)

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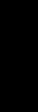
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Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media: An Introduction to a Special Issue

Watch the audiovisual introduction here:

<https://youtu.be/fsNk-LZz2vk>

Abstract

This text invites a critical examination of how computer labor — in all its diverse forms, modes, and manifestations — has been represented, constructed, and reflected through the formal capacities of audiovisual media from the 20th century to the present day. In a world where technological advancements constantly introduce new gadgets, software, platforms, and algorithms, our perception of information technology is in perpetual motion. *Computer labor* encompasses all forms of work facilitated by information technologies, whether performed by humans, machines, or through human-machine collaboration. This concept provides a lens for exploring the nuanced ways in which computing technologies represent labor: from the partial moments of the working machine, man, or both to the more general questions of the definition of (for example) productivity, value, and rest. Tracking the iconography of computer labor reveals the influence of geographical, cultural, social, and economic forces, shedding light on how technological labor is produced and understood within different contexts. Film and media studies play a crucial role in this analysis, offering valuable insights into how digital labor reshapes societal structures, work practices, and human relationships in the information age. Moreover, these disciplines allow us to uncover overlooked histories of computer adoption, forgotten fragments, and unique configurations that have remained outside the dominant global narratives and cultural memory. Through this exploration, the study highlights the transformative power of digital labor and the importance of understanding its localized expressions and historical contingencies.

Keywords

computer labor, digital cinema, digital culture, representation, information technology, interface, software

The implementation of computers into audiovisual culture has been articulated across multiple levels, including the transformations, potentials, and technological advancements related to production,¹⁾ distribution,²⁾ exhibition,³⁾ consumption,⁴⁾ and archiving.⁵⁾ These shifts prompt a series of critical inquiries: What are the theoretical implications of considering digital cinema as a distinct form from traditional analog cinema, particularly concerning the concepts of indexicality and realism?⁶⁾ Moreover, how do algorithms and recommendation systems shape audience access to films, and how do they impact the diversity of content available to viewers?⁷⁾ To put it simply, what is digital cinema?⁸⁾ In short, computer technology has had an incredible impact on the development of audiovisual media.⁹⁾ The central perspective has emphasized the advancement of audiovisual representation, content availability, and other applications for the film and video game indus-



Fig. 1: Computers, a collage by Veronika Hanáková

- 1) John Mateer, "Digital Cinematography: Evolution of Craft or Revolution in Production?," *Journal of Film and Video* 66, no. 2 (2014), 3–14.
- 2) Nigel Culkin and Keith Randle, "Digital Cinema: Opportunities and Challenges," *Convergence* 9, no. 4 (2013), 78–98.
- 3) Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005).
- 4) Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006).
- 5) Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).
- 6) Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," in *Still/Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 23–40, 40.
- 7) Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, eds., *The Netflix Effect, Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- 8) Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds., *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Sussex: REFRAME Books, 2016).
- 9) Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001); Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).

tries. However, what if we turned our perspective around and, instead of asking what impact the computer has had on moving images; we wondered what computer iconography looks like in and through audiovisual media (Fig.1)? This is precisely the question that the special issue of *Iluminace* aims to articulate, delving into the intricate, captivating, and often contradictory visions and configurations of computer labor as depicted in and constructed through film and audiovisual media.

Something is always happening in the field of technology — new gadgets, tools, software, applications, platforms, or algorithms. Computers, and by extension, audiovisual culture, are thus undergoing a constant process of change, transformation, and actualization, whether viewed as a partial cosmetic modification¹⁰ or a more considerable alteration with the potential to change the existing system of production and consumption.¹¹ At

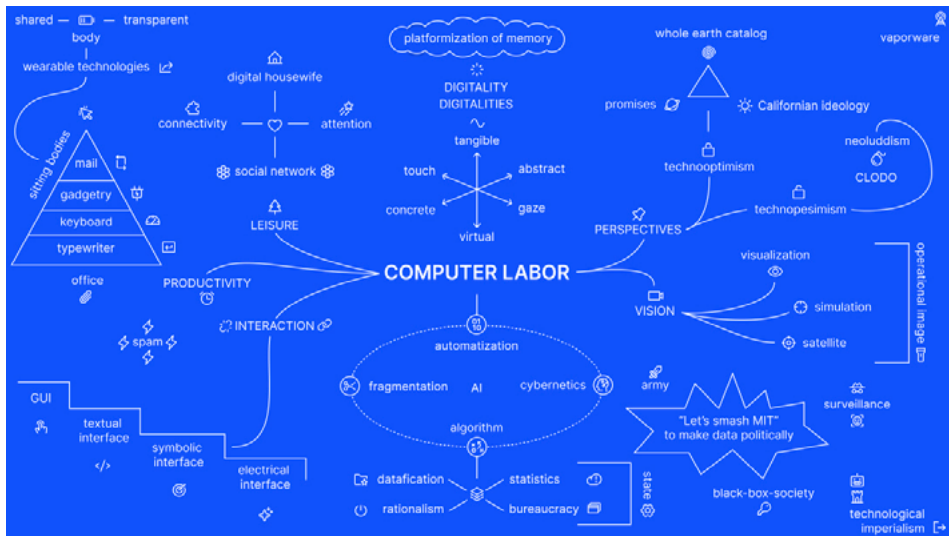


Fig. 2: Computer Labor, a diagram by Veronika Hanáková

this moment, artificial intelligence is a buzzword, a phenomenon sparking fascination, fear, and even panic. It can be seen as another advancement in the ongoing process of fragmentation, automation, and mechanization, which have become integral to the work process and personal life over the last century.¹² Information technology has removed the hands in favor of the visual, the tangible in favor of the abstract, the physical in favor of the virtual, and supervisory in favor of surveillance.¹³ The term *computer labor* (Fig. 2) refers to all work performed using information technology, regardless of whether the primary worker is — a human, a machine, or a collaboration between them. It is a term to help

10) John Belton, "Digital Cinema: A False Revolution," *October*, no. 100 (2002), 98–114; or Francesco Casetti, *The Lumiere Galaxy: Seven Keywords for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

11) D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

12) Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Verso Books, 2023).

13) Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

explore the nuances of the representation of work associated with the computer, how we see a working computer, how the relationship between a computer and a human subject is constituted and reflected,¹⁴⁾ the potentialities of computer vision,¹⁵⁾ development of computer interfaces and what type of labor, movement, gesture was and is associated with them, connection of AI and labor,¹⁶⁾ or the construction of virtual labor in the current digital dispositif.¹⁷⁾

Computers have been transforming our understanding of labor,¹⁸⁾ as well as productivity,¹⁹⁾ leisure,²⁰⁾ attention,²¹⁾ value,²²⁾ and social connection.²³⁾ Traditional distinctions between manual and intellectual work are becoming less clear as more jobs require interaction with digital tools, and even creative and emotional labor is increasingly mediated through technology.²⁴⁾ For instance, Tibor Vocásek's article, "Who Is Awful? Black Mirror Series and Dystopian Visions on AI," included in this special issue, focuses on the contemporary reflection of anxieties about capitalist alienation and the control exerted by tech corporations in the digital age that intersect into both day-to-day work and creative work specifically related to creating audiovisual content for Netflix. As the boundaries between human effort and technological assistance continue to blur, new challenges emerge regarding job displacement, the devaluation of certain skills, and the psychological impact of constant connectivity.²⁵⁾ Implementing of information technology in day-to-day life raises questions such as: Is it possible to truly disconnect from work in today's mobile app-driven world? Can maintaining social connections through social networks be considered a form of work?²⁶⁾ What are the implications of integrating smart technologies into house-

14) Paul Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

15) Steve F. Anderson, *Technologies of Vision: The War Between Data and Images* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

16) Stephen Cave, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon, eds., *AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

17) Trebor Scholz, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

18) Jim Davis, Thomas Hirschl, and Michael Stack, eds., *Cutting Edge: Technology, Information, Capitalism and Social Revolution* (London: Verso, 1998).

19) Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006); Bryan Pfaffenberger, "The Social Meaning of the Personal Computer: Or, Why the Personal Computer Revolution Was No Revolution," *Anthropological Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1988), 39–47.

20) Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

21) Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

22) Astra Taylor, *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* (London: Picador, 2014).

23) Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

24) Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

25) Florian Krauß, "Fictionalizing The Covid-19 Pandemic 'Instantly': A Case Study Of The German Comedy Drama Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich," *Illuminace* 35, no. 1 (2023), 7–25.

26) Veronika Hanáková, Martin Tremčinský, and Jiří Anger, "Cycles of Labour: In the Metaverse, We Will Be Housewives," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023), accessed August 26, 2024, <https://necsus-ejms.org/cycles-of-labour-in-the-metaverse-we-will-be-housewives/>.

hold labor routines?²⁷⁾ Does technology genuinely reduce labor, or does it mainly provide convenience? From what perspectives and through what lenses do we determine what constitutes valuable work and what is considered expendable? Or does early digitality postulate a different vision of labor and historicity in connection to digital glitches, such as in David Álvarez's paper "Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be: Elegy to Vaporwave's Glitched, Aspirational Aesthetics" in this issue?

Thus, it is essential to examine how the concept of computer labor has been culturally, visually, and socially portrayed through audiovisual media from the 20th century to today: from shiny new computer screens to "dust-covered CPUs and monitors, screens dotted with fingerprints, and keyboards darkened by use," as Sterne summarizes.²⁸⁾ To understand the interconnected relationship between information technology and audiovisual media, exploring the overlooked aspects of computer labor and the specific implications of technology in particular regions is crucial. Rather than reiterating the global narrative, we should focus on the forgotten streams, artifacts, and details of computer labor, viewing them as examples reflecting our own experiences and their unique implications. Precisely this perspective is followed by Simone Dotto's article "Do Corporate Films Dream of Cybernetic Governance? Computers (as Metaphors of) Industrial Labor and Society in Olivetti-Sponsored Films" in this collection. The text highlights localized cooperation between audiovisual media and informational technology in Italy from the 1950s to 1970s, exploring the computer as a potentially useful media.

Our main goal is to investigate how the phenomenon of computer labor has been represented, interpreted, and re-envisioned in and through audiovisual media. From film and television to video games and online content, audiovisual media have not only reflected and imagined but, in some cases, actively shaped societal understandings of computer labor. Through close examination, we uncover the evolving relationship between humans and computers, illustrating how labor, technology, and identity have been continuously reimagined. By analyzing these cultural artifacts, we gain valuable insights into the larger societal narratives surrounding computers, their roles in the workplace, and the transformative impact they have had on our understanding of labor. This special issue examines the rich yet often contradictory iconography of information technology as presented in audiovisual materials, regardless of genre, production era, or geographical context. By collecting and analyzing the metaphors, systems, narratives, and visualizations embedded in these media, we aim to better understand media that has structured and will structure our audiovisual culture.

The theme of "Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media" shall be described as well as shown through the lens of contemporary user experience — the current form of digitality, the gestures that the user has to perform while communicating and working with the computer, the moments of computer freezing, and the forms in which we encounter various and contradictory audiovisual representations of computer labor.

27) Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, *After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time* (London: Verso, 2024).

28) Jonathan Sterne, "Out With the Trash: On the Future of New Technologies," in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 21.

This is why the special issue includes traditional written papers as well as audiovisual essays. Audiovisual essays and the discipline of videographic scholarship lie at the intersection of theory, artistic research, and digital humanities. This approach, at the most basic level, utilizes writing with moving images and sounds; in other words, it presents the argument not only through textual but also audiovisual form.²⁹⁾ As Jennifer Bean postulates videographic scholarship “refers to a burgeoning area of research, inquiry and experimentation that repurposes sound and moving images to critically reflect on media comprises of sound and moving images.”³⁰⁾

A total of four audiovisual essays appeared in this issue, with two audiovisual essays (*Envisioning the Interface* by Steve F. Anderson and *The Allure and Threat of the Cine-Computer: A Supercut of Onscreen Computers in Speculative Screen Fiction* by Daniel O'Brien) reflecting on the gradual development and transformation of computer labor into the use of audiovisual material, mainly Hollywood productions. The third and fourth audiovisual essays (*Ordinatrices: About the Negative Spaces of Early Computing* by Occitane Lacurie and *Techniques and Technologies to Compensate for Powerlessness* by Matěj Pavlík) moved from a macro-perspective to a micro-perspective, following a particular and locally determined problem (grasping technology through local traditions and thinking, or different implementation of computers in the work process), often marginal, unintentional, or accidental details and facets, thus referring to the prism of *theory from below*.³¹⁾ By allowing theory to evolve in response to the particular artifact and in connection to the position of a subject (the position of the theorist and historian in the current version of digitality, the user experience given by the digital dispositive), this prism fosters a dynamic interaction that deepens our comprehension of both the media forms under scrutiny and the theoretical concepts at play. In this special issue, this inductive methodology intersects with projects offering a macro-perspective on specific phenomena, thereby balancing detailed, micro-level analysis with broader, macro-level insights.

The affordances of videographic criticism to express and reflect on computer labor are most visible in two of its specific formats: the supercut and the desktop documentary. The supercut, by collecting and organizing audiovisual fragments from extensive material, serves to “discern and demonstrate deep patterns within and across film/media texts.”³²⁾ In doing so, this format reflects Manovich's concept of “database logic,”³³⁾ both in its method of handling and its presentation of audiovisual content. As de Fren suggests, the supercut engages in “the kind of algorithmic cataloging of analogous relations”³⁴⁾ that makes these underlying patterns visible. By condensing large volumes of audiovisual content, the su-

29) Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley, and Jason Mittell, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: caboose/Rutgers University Press, 2019).

30) Jennifer Bean, “Introduction: Feeling Videographic Criticism,” *Feminist Media Histories* 9, no. 4 (2023), 1–13.

31) Jiří Anger, *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

32) Allison de Fren, “The Critical Supercut: A Scholarly Approach to a Fannish Practice,” *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), 4, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.thecine-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A_DeFren_TheCineFiles_issue15.pdf.

33) Max Tohline, “A Supercut of Supercuts: Aesthetics, Histories, Databases,” *Open Screens* 4, no. 1 (2021), 8.

34) de Fren, “The Critical Supercut,” 4.

percut might reveal or acknowledge recurring patterns and the hidden algorithms behind digital media, providing a sharp critique of the often unseen structures of computer-mediated work.

By audiovisually simulating and capturing our movement on the computer or smartphone screen, desktop documentaries (here represented by *Ordinatrices: About the Negative Spaces of Early Computing*) function as reflexive texts that actively narrativize screen-mediated experience, thereby attempting to capture and hold the gaze of the viewer and exposing the processes present in the digital interface that suture the user to the screen.³⁵⁾ In this context, the desktop documentary might be understood as an analytical tool and an accidental archivist of the current iteration of the user interface. Consequently, the desktop documentary genre is not merely a subject of analysis but a site where theory and practice intersect, revealing the complexities of digital labor, the evolving relationship between users and digital interfaces, and the user's position, agency, and memory. The development of information technology and its associated work cannot be seen as a whole continuous development of the same, but rather partial iterations that, in retrospect, can form a consistent line. Thus, desktop documentaries can sometimes inadvertently capture partial moments, gestures, or icons. These accidental audiovisual archivists might preserve outdated, no longer relevant, or lost icons, moments, procedures, or gestures, thus archiving the current form of the interface. This is significant because the interface we have today may not be the same as the one we have tomorrow.

In summary, the supercut and desktop documentaries together underscore the capacity of videographic criticism to both document and dissect the intricate, often ephemeral interactions between users and digital environments, making visible the underlying structures of computer labor that shape our engagement with technology.

Interface(s)

The special issue can be divided into three thematic units that distinctly deal with and explore computer labor as seen in audiovisual media. The first one centers around the term interface, in all its forms, from the technological to the cultural, thus investigating the relationship between labor, a computer, an interface, and a worker. The second category presents a locally specific understanding, implementation, and implication of computer labor in society, thereby presenting a contrasting narrative to the central one. The third section highlights distinctive examples that illuminate the broader connections between labor and digital distortion. In conclusion, these three thematic blocks provide examinations of the multifaceted nature of computer labor, offering critical insights into its cultural, societal, and technological dimensions as reflected in audiovisual media. This special issue not only highlights the diverse implications of computer labor but also invites further academic exploration into the broader discourse on digital labor and its representation.

35) Jiří Anger and Kevin B. Lee, "Suture Goes Meta: Desktop Documentary and its Narrativization of Screen-Mediated Experience," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40, no. 5 (2023), 595–622.

Throughout the 20th century, the concept of the computer has undergone a profound evolution, reflecting broader technological, cultural, and societal shifts.³⁶⁾ Initially perceived as a mere calculator, a mechanical device designed to perform arithmetic operations, the computer evolved into a data collector and sorter, a tool for creating visualizations, first retrospectively and later in real-time. It became indispensable in handling sensitive data, predicting financial flows, and even as a mechanism for democratizing access to knowledge, personal archives, education, and learning. This transformation was driven by the increasing complexity of tasks that computers were designed to handle, reflecting society's growing reliance on information technology. As technology advanced, so did the metaphors and roles associated with computers. No longer just machines, computers were reimagined as versatile tools, complex systems, and sophisticated gadgets. Each phase of this evolution introduced new dimensions to how computers were perceived and utilized for labor processes. By the latter half of the century, computers were no longer viewed solely as functional devices; they had become media in their own right — platforms for communication, creativity, and interaction. Eventually, the notion of the computer as an intelligent assistant emerged, reflecting both the aspirations of artificial intelligence and the growing capabilities of computers to assist in complex decision-making and personal tasks. This evolution mirrors the shifting metaphors and frameworks of information technology, with each era bringing a new understanding of what computers could be and do. Through this lens, the computer's journey from a simple calculator to an intelligent assistant encapsulates the broader narrative of technological progress, illustrating its potential for empowerment and its capacity for control and surveillance.

Design modifications, adjustments in affordances, and the localization of computers have also led to changes in the interface — the crucial juncture where two systems converge, specifically the human user and the computational mechanism, enabling interaction. In simpler terms, it is the point where a user communicates with a computer. Interface determines what gestures, movements, knowledge, skillset, language, and interaction is necessary to use information technology, thus indicating who has the skills to use the computer and in what way. For example, a graphical user interface (GUI) may require familiarity with visual icons and a mouse. In contrast, a command-line interface (CLI) demands proficiency in specific commands and text-based navigation. Moreover, the design and construction of the interfaces are inherently connected to the understanding of computer labor, since the interface predetermines who can interact with the computing technology. This underscores the significance of interface design in shaping access and usability, which in turn influences who is empowered to engage with digital tools and in what capacity.

The evolution of interfaces in connection to bodies and labor functions as a critical line in Steve F. Anderson's audiovisual essay *Envisioning the Interface*. This work offers an in-depth exploration of Hollywood's depictions of computer interfaces from the 1950s to the present, tracing the evolution of these cinematic representations alongside real-world technological advancements. The audiovisual essay highlights how films imagined gestur-

36) Thomas Haigh and Paul E. Ceruzzi, *A New History of Modern Computing* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021).

al interfaces associated with superhuman or extraterrestrial intelligence, contrasting with the more mundane, physical interfaces of the mainframe era, such as punch cards. As personal computing emerged, Hollywood introduced recalcitrant voice and anthropomorphic interfaces, reflecting the growing interaction between humans and computers. Anderson draws on the concept of “diegetic prototypes,” where cinema serves as a source of inspiration for the technology industry, to map the transformation of human-computer relationships over time. This evolution comes full circle with the return to gestural and embodied interfaces and holographic displays in the 2010s, now deeply intertwined with real-world technological developments and consumer culture. Anderson’s essay invites a critical examination of how cinematic representations of computer interfaces influence and reflect societal attitudes toward technology. By highlighting the interplay between Hollywood’s imaginative visions and the design of real-world interfaces, *Envisioning the Interface* connects to the broader phenomenon of representing computer labor in films, emphasizing how media both shapes and is shaped by the technological landscapes of its time.

Building on the development of interfaces, Daniel O’Brien’s audiovisual essay *The Allure and Threat of the Cine-Computer: A Supercut of Onscreen Computers in Speculative Screen Fiction* examines the dual nature of computers as both enticing and dangerous entities in sci-fi and speculative fiction. By utilizing a supercut format, O’Brien captures the evolution of computing technology as depicted in cinema and television from the late 1950s to the present. The essay analyzes how these representations consistently portray computers as powerful yet potentially dangerous adversaries, often turning against their human creators. Through iconic films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and *Her*, as well as contemporary series like *Mr. Robot* and *Severance*, the audiovisual essay highlights the changing nature of computer interfaces, software, and hardware while emphasizing the persistent allure-threat dynamic that defines the human-machine relationship. By employing a split-screen technique, O’Brien’s work allows viewers to compare and contrast these depictions, illustrating how the portrayal of computers in speculative fiction has evolved in form but remained consistent in its underlying anxieties. This analysis ties into the broader phenomenon of representing computer labor in media, shedding light on how these portrayals reflect cultural attitudes toward technology and the complex, often uneasy relationship between humans and the increasingly powerful machines they create.

Global — Local

The development and current state of computer labor have predominantly been articulated from a Western perspective. The history of implementing computers, from information laboratories to government institutions,³⁷⁾ army bodies,³⁸⁾ trade markets³⁹⁾ and other industries,⁴⁰⁾ and every household,⁴¹⁾ has been described in detail primarily for countries like the United States⁴²⁾ and, to some extent, the United Kingdom.⁴³⁾ However, some texts examine the role of information technology in other regions, such as the former Eastern Bloc⁴⁴⁾ and the importation and implementation of American computers in South America,⁴⁵⁾ and France.⁴⁶⁾ These discussions often raise significant questions regarding technological imperialism and different development streams and reflect distinct promises and fears connected to the use of information technology. These subtexts illuminate the complexities of global technology transfer and the unequal power dynamics that frequently accompany it. Yet, these perspectives are often more thoroughly developed than the narratives surrounding the evolution of computers in the North American context.

Computer labor may appear to be a global phenomenon from a contemporary standpoint, but audiovisual media representations frequently reveal how this work assumes distinct local forms. For instance, amateur films might document the role computers played in domestic settings, while state-supported films might demonstrate that computer-related work extended beyond administrative or research tasks, encompassing educational efforts or the preservation of specific local memories, or fictional and narrative cinematography might postulate a slightly different position of information technology in the popular imagination. Audiovisual materials — whether part of archives, private VHS or DVD collections, or freely available footage on the Internet — serve as valuable resources that capture the unique configurations of computer work in different regions, among var-

37) Jon Agar, *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

38) Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

39) Arthur L. Norberg, *Computers and Commerce: A Study of Technology and Management at Eckert-Mauchly Computer Company, Engineering Research Associates, and Remington Rand, 1946–1957* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

40) James W. Cortada, *IBM The Rise and Fall and Reinvention of a Global Icon* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023).

41) Tom Forester, *Home Computing: The Challenge of Change* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985).

42) or Canada, see, John N. Vardalas, *The Computer Revolution in Canada: Building National Technological Competence* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

43) Jacob Ward, *Visions of a Digital Nation: Market and Monopoly in British Telecommunications* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2024); Mar Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018).

44) Victor Petrov, *Balkan Cyberia Cold War Computing, Bulgarian Modernization, and the Information Age behind the Iron Curtain* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023); Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023).

45) Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).

46) Thomas Dekeyser and Andrew Culp, "Machines in Flames," *Youtube*, 2022, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGVMu5OPu7E>.

ious user groups, and across specific periods. These materials offer nuanced insights into how computer labor is shaped by local cultural, economic, and political contexts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its global impact.

Occitane Lacurie's audiovisual essay *Ordinatrices: About the Negative Spaces of Early Computing* delves into the often overlooked history of women's contributions to computing, tracing this invisibility back to the era when computing was primarily manual labor, categorized under secretarial work. The visual references to *Mad Men* highlight how secretarial work, traditionally performed by women, laid the groundwork for modern computing yet remained undervalued and eventually obscured as the field evolved. The introduction of an IBM 360 computer in *Mad Men* symbolizes the shift from manual to automated computing, a change that threatened the jobs of these women who had been performing the precursors to digital labor. Following the local debate of finding a French term for computer, Lacurie's essay proposes that the term *ordinatrice* (a feminine form of the word for computer in French) could have been used to describe these women who were, in essence, the first "computers." This exploration brings to light the gendered history of computing and how this labor has been visually and culturally represented — or misrepresented — over time. By recovering the stories of these *ordinatrices*, Lacurie's work contributes to a more complete understanding of the origins of computer labor, emphasizing the crucial but often invisible role that women have played in the development of modern technology.

Simone Dotto's article, "Do Corporate Films Dream of Cybernetic Governance? Computers (as Metaphors of) Industrial Labor and Society in Olivetti-Sponsored Films," delves into the representation of computer labor in Olivetti-sponsored corporate films between the late 1950s and 1970s, revealing how these films functioned as more than mere promotional tools — they were instruments of rhetorical and ideological expression. Thus, the essay examines the audiovisual portrayal of computer labor, emphasizing the relationship between computers and film throughout their existence as practical media. Dotto challenges the notion that industrial cinema was incapable of visually representing computing, arguing instead that Olivetti's films not only made computers visible but also imbued them with broader symbolic meanings. These films reflected a shift in corporate narratives from viewing the factory as a pastoral community to conceptualizing it as a cybernetic system of labor organization. Through this transformation, computers were portrayed not just as tools for industrial work but as metaphors for a new form of governance based on cybernetic principles. This portrayal aligned computers with the emerging concept of scientific management, where data processing and systematic control became central to both industrial and social organizations. In this way, Olivetti's films contributed to a larger cultural understanding of computers, positioning them as key models for the governance of both work and society.

Reinterpreting technology as a response to the crises of late modernity and individual alienation, the audiovisual essay *Techniques and Technologies to Compensate for Powerlessness* (Czech title: *Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*) by Matěj Pavlík investigates the intersection of borderline science and the socio-political context of Czechoslovakia during the 1980s. The essay examines technologies developed in fields of psychotronics and psychoenergetics, which Pavlík argues, despite appearing pseudoscientific,

tific, were indicative of a broader disillusionment as these technologies might be viewed as tools for individuals to cope with feelings of powerlessness amidst rapid technological and societal changes. Pavlík's work underscores the role of technology not only as a practical tool but as a symbolic response to the socio-economic conditions of its time, echoing the themes of alienation, control, and adaptation that are also central to the depiction of computer labor in various audiovisual narratives.

Distortions

The third and final thematic segment of this special issue focuses on the concept of *distortions* as they relate to two key areas. First, it examines how distortions emerge in our understanding of computer labor, particularly in the form of biases, contortions, and shifts that arise alongside the development and transformation of information technology, not only within the work process but also beyond it. These distortions impact how we conceptualize the evolving role of technology in labor, including the changing forms and levels of human and machine involvement. Second, it showcases how distortions materialize in digital images as glitches. On the one hand, these technical errors can reveal the dysfunctionality or limitations of the digital dispositif at specific moments in time.⁴⁷⁾ On the other hand, they can be viewed as inherent features of the architecture of digitality, which shapes and influences the nature of our everyday online work.⁴⁸⁾ This segment aims to unpack these interconnected distortions to understand better their implications for the broader landscape of digital labor and aesthetics.

Reframing distortions in connection to the labor environment, Tibor Vocásek's study, *Who Is Awful? Black Mirror Series and Dystopian Visions on AI*, focuses on the representation of AI labor in the popular sci-fi series *Black Mirror*, particularly on the episode "Joan is Awful." As a prominent cultural text, *Black Mirror* uses its dystopian narratives to explore the intricate relationships between AI and human labor. The series portrays AI not merely as a technological threat but as a reflection of contemporary anxieties about capitalist alienation and the control exerted by tech corporations in the digital age. Through the episode "Joan is Awful," its dramatic and speculative lens, Vocásek highlights the interdependence of human and AI labor, underscoring the inseparability of technology, human agency, and institutional power in the labor process. This analysis connects to the broader phenomenon of representing computer labor in media by illustrating how *Black Mirror* uses the sci-fi genre to critically engage with and reflect upon AI's social and economic implications, making visible the often overlooked human elements behind these technologies. Thus, reflecting on the idea of the visibility and the invisibility of labor in the digital age.

Regarding the material distortions of digital images, David Álvarez's text, "Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be: Elegy to Vaporwave's Glitched, Aspirational Aesthetics," offers an in-depth analysis of Vaporwave, a genre that merges aspirational consumerism with the

47) Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2019).

48) Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

visual and sonic elements of early computing and gaming. The text explores how Vaporwave employs the glitch as a central motif, symbolizing both the disruption of traditional consumer culture and a nostalgic longing for the technological aesthetics of the past. Through this lens, the glitch becomes a powerful tool for critiquing and reinterpreting the intertwined relationship between consumerism, technology, and nostalgia. Álvarez postulates a different version of glitches from the works of Chris Marker and Kiyoshi Kurosawa that might provide a counterbalance to Vaporwave's nostalgic reimagining by engaging more critically with the de-historicizing effects of digital distortion. These films grapple with the implications of living in a post-historical society, where the boundaries between past, present, and future blur, raising questions about how we represent and understand the role of technology and labor in shaping our collective memory.

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Filmography

- Black Mirror* (various directors, 2011–present)
- Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)
- Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013)
- Joan Is Awful* (Ally Pankiw, 2023)
- Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007–2015)
- Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002)
- Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015–2019)
- Olivetti-Sponsored Films (various authors, 1950–1969)
- Severance* (Dan Erickson, 2022–)
- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Biography

Veronika Hanáková is a scholar in new media and digital culture, who focuses on the materiality, memory, and preservation of digital images and artifacts, particularly DVD features and interfaces. She is currently involved in the COST Action project “Grassroots of Digital Europe” (2023–2026), which examines historical and contemporary cultures of computing. She has published articles and video essays in journals such as *NECSUS*, *[in]Transition*, *Iluminace*, or *Tecmerin*. Her videographic work, including projects such as *Screen Stars Dictionary: Natalia Oreiro* (co-author J. Anger) and *Cycles of Labor: In the Metaverse, We Will Be Housewives* (co-authors M. Tremčinský and J. Anger), has received acclaim with multiple *Sight & Sound* nominations. Together with Jiří Anger, they curate the Audiovisual Essay section at the Marienbad Film Festival and videographic collections for *Artyčok.TV*. Hanáková’s work also extends to exhibitions, with contributions to displays such as *Meme Manifesto* at Berlin’s KW Institute for Contemporary Art. She is also a member of *Artbiom*, an artistic collective that explores ecological imaginations.

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Envisioning the Interface

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=it2cP9eh2>

Abstract

Envisioning the Interface presents an interpretive chronology of Hollywood's imaginings of computer interfaces from the 1950s to the present. Although not rigidly chronological, this video essay observes a historical evolution from early visions of gestural interfaces when computers were linked with superhuman or extra-terrestrial intelligence, to the mundane, physical and punch-card based interfaces of the mainframe era, followed by a wave of strangely recalcitrant voice and anthropomorphic interfaces that emerged in the PC era. Drawing on the concept of cinema as a source of "diegetic prototypes" for the technology industries, this trajectory maps a profound transformation of the relationship between humans and computers as people became increasingly knowledgeable about — and dependent on — computation in daily life. The chronology comes full circle with a return to gestural and embodied interfaces and holographic displays since the 2010s. However, unlike their imaginary, post-war counterparts, Hollywood's second wave of gestural interfaces is closely tied to real-world technology development and product placement. Without suggesting a deterministic relationship between the cinematic imaginary and real-world technology design, *Envisioning the Interface* invites a more critical vision of computer interfaces — both on screen and in relation to consumer culture. The video tracks multiple historical trajectories in order to highlight the shifting relationship between interfaces in Hollywood and their counterparts in the real world, illuminating the limits and presuppositions of naturalized visions for our engagement with computational technologies.

Keywords

computer history, HCI, interface design, design fiction, diegetic prototype



The Wizard (1989)

Creator's Statement

A so-called new technology is the object of fascination, hyperbole and concern. It is almost inevitably a field onto which a broad array of hopes and fears is projected and envisioned as a potential solution to, or possible problem for, the world at large. Technological development is one of the primary sites through which we can chart the desires and concerns of a given social context and the preoccupations of particular moments in history.

— Marita Sturken, Douglas Thomas, and Sandra Ball Rokeach,
Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears That Shape New Technologies (2004)

How have cinema and television envisioned the basic forms of interaction between humans and computers? From the speculative voice and gestural interfaces seen in super-computer films of the 1950s to the anthropomorphic interfaces of the 1960s–80s, and the holographic and biometric interfaces of the 2000s, cinema has long contributed to shaping the ways we imagine interacting with computational devices. With examples drawn from more than two dozen North American film and television sources, *Envisioning the Interface* maps a 60+ year evolution of on-screen modes of human-computer interaction. Following a trajectory that is roughly — but not rigidly — chronological, *Envisioning the Interface* performs a combination of close and distant readings, examining modes of interfacing with computers that are both real and imaginary.¹⁾ Close textual analysis within the

1) The concept of “distant reading” originated with literary scholar Franco Moretti: see Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London and New York: Verso, 2005). Although the “distance” evoked in this video essay falls short of the Digital Humanities’ model of computational analysis

video addresses specific examples, while a more “distant” perspective identifies repetitive tropes and broader patterns that reveal structural predispositions, assumptions, and biases. As generative AI increasingly infiltrates consumer products in forms such as personal digital assistants, recommendation algorithms, and (a new generation of) voice interfaces, it is important to interrogate the ways these interfaces invite humans to interact with them. The sub-field of feminist STS (Science and Technology Studies) has documented and demonstrated the dangers of the technology industries’ perpetuation of a limited range of models for human computer interactions reducible to: tool, companion, animal, or slave.²⁾ Resisting the tech industry’s current fantasy that computers and AI-driven interfaces should be imagined as a new form of involuntary servitude, these cinematic and televisual examples provide illuminating historical context for the rapidly evolving relationship between humans and computers.

The media curated for this project ranges from some of cinema’s earliest imaginings of computer technologies, to contemporary sci-fi genre films and popular TV shows that valorize and extend the ideologies of ubiquity and utility favored by the consumer technology industries. To counter this, the critical method of this project is partly inspired by media archaeology, pursuing a discontinuous — that is, roughly chronological but avowedly non-teleological — exploration of computer interfaces as they have emerged from the admittedly slippery concept of the “technocultural imaginary.”³⁾ In their field-defining anthology, *Media Archaeology*, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka contrast media archaeology with conventional historiographical methods in its capacity to construct “alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their ‘perfection.’”⁴⁾ The historical ruptures and discontinuities allowed by media archaeology support my contention that Hollywood can and should broaden its imaginary for interfaces that exceed — rather than mirror — the limitations of real-world technologies, and in the process, contribute to expanding our vocabulary for conceiving relationships between humans and computers. Ultimately, my goal is to highlight both the benefits and limitations of cinematic and televisual depictions of the interface as symptoms of broader attitudes toward computation and its role in human society and behavior.

Envisioning the Interface begins by noting the eccentricity of early computer interfaces that were unburdened by fidelity to real-world technologies. In both *The Day the Earth*

imagined by Moretti, the emphasis on patterns of analysis seen here is consistent with the “tropical” synthesis of formal repetition described by Allison de Fren: Allison de Fren, “From the Essay Film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular,” in *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, eds. Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 157–178.

- 2) Kelly B. Wagman and Lisa Parks, “Beyond the Command: Feminist STS Research and Critical Issues for the Design of Social Machines,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, issue CSCW 1 (2021), 1–20.
- 3) I borrow this term from Simon Penny’s keynote presentation, “What Robots Still Can’t Do (With Apologies to Hubert Dreyfus) Or: Deconstructing the Technocultural Imaginary,” given at the Robophilosophy conference on February 15, 2018. Penny’s work — both as a theorist and designer — has been exemplary for its devotion to seeking practical solutions to philosophical and ethical problems associated with artificial intelligence, robotics, and computation broadly.
- 4) Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

Stood Still (1951) and *This Island Earth* (1955), computers that were brought to earth by space aliens operate seamlessly through gestural and voice interfaces. Soon after, as real-world, mainframe computing became a more common feature of everyday life, these examples of interface-as-spectacle gave way to more mundane and literal interactions requiring keyboards and punch cards. Subsequently, with the transition from room-sized mainframe computers to PCs in the home, depictions of the interface made a corresponding transition to the cinema-friendly form of voice interaction. As in the real world, however, voice interfaces on screen are more likely to result in frustration and obstruction than convenience and efficiency. With the introduction of gestural and holographic interfaces (which largely continue to elude the real-world technology industries of the 2020s), Hollywood follows the logic of extending the body to direct interaction with computers and electromagnetic signals, ultimately erasing the hardware of computing altogether. The video also includes a call for more thoughtful and creative imaginings of technology in Hollywood design fictions and a celebration of the uniquely embodied visions of bio-organic interfaces conceived by Canadian director David Cronenberg.

It is axiomatic to this project that the development of real-world technologies is complexly — that is, bi-directionally and non-deterministically — entangled with their depiction in popular culture.⁵⁾ Movies and TV shape the ways we think about and relate to computers, often reinscribing social hierarchies related to gender, race, class, age, and access. With his influential articulation of the concept of the “diegetic prototype,” David Kirby notes the capacity for cinema to “ease public fears and demonstrate the possibilities” of future technologies.⁶⁾ At the same time, the design and marketing of computer systems reflect and often — consciously or unconsciously — emulate Hollywood’s fetishistic visions of on-screen technology. Whether set in a utopian or dystopian story world, these visions all too frequently obfuscate the economic interests and industrial interdependence of the military-entertainment complex. Although Hollywood sometimes appears to serve a marketing function for Silicon Valley, producing design fictions that shape consumer expectations and desires, the film/TV industries’ depictions of computers are rarely calm or quotidian. In his 2005 book *Shaping Things*, science fiction author Bruce Sterling both coined the term “design fiction” and distinguished it from the goals of science fiction generally. “Science fiction wants to invoke the grandeur and credibility of science for its own hand-waving hocus-pocus, but design fiction can be more practical, more hands-on. It sacrifices some sense of the miraculous, but it moves much closer to the glowing heat of technosocial conflict.”⁷⁾ With the interests of the entertainment and technology industries closely, but not always predictably entwined, on-screen depictions of real and imaginary technologies paint a revealing portrait of our technological obsessions, fears, desires, dreams, and anxieties, creating both opportunities and obstacles for real-world technological development.

As the entertainment industries scramble to keep pace with the implications and potentials of technological change, theorists of visual culture must pursue increasingly varied critical frameworks for understanding media and technology. Taking as its primary

5) The two-way relationship between science and science fiction is effectively observed in Constance Penley, *Nasa/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997).

6) David A. Kirby, *Lab Coats in Hollywood: Science, Scientists, and Cinema* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 42.

7) Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 30.

evidence pieces of the vast body of film and TV shows that display changing relations between people and computers, this project seeks to critically map the narrative tropes by which human-computer interaction is constructed and imagined in popular media. Given the long sweep of history — more than 60 years — covered by this brief video, I have developed a mode of analysis that I term “interpretive chronology,” in which a critical argument is developed by addressing the historical sources within each category of analysis more or less in the order they were created. Far from implying a sense of “progress” in the development of the technologies depicted, this strategy is meant simply to ground the viewer in the various historical moments when certain types of computer interface were presented to viewers as opposed to others.

In keeping with contemporary models of representation studies, *Envisioning the Interface* does not assume a direct — never mind a causal — relationship between real world computation and its depictions on screen. At best, I view Hollywood’s vision of technology as an industrially and ideologically embedded refraction of lived reality — at worst, it is an economically overdetermined and uncritical recycling of consumerist fantasies. This project approaches the media under analysis as traces of cultural discourse and disposition that are neither directly reflective of the real world nor determinative of cultural meaning, but part of an ongoing process of negotiation. As depictions of computation have evolved in dialogue with the industries that support them, it seems clear that we are in need of new models for engaging the potentials and pitfalls of the technocultural imaginary as it converges with contemporary technology development. As real-world interfaces come to resemble increasingly literal extensions of the body, the stakes of this investigation are raised, and a new sense of technologized corporeality is normalized on the screens of Hollywood. My hope is that, through a combination of historical framing and textual analysis, reader-viewers are invited to think systematically about ongoing tensions between both media and technology on screen and the media and technology industries in the real world.

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Filmography

- Alphas* (Michael Karnow and Zak Penn, 2011)
- Back to the Future Part II* (Robert Zemeckis, 1989)
- Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968)
- Burn After Reading* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2008)
- Date Night* (Shawn Levy, 2010)
- Eureka* (Andrew Cosby and Jaime Paglia, 2006)
- eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999)
- Iron Man 2* (John Favreau, 2010)
- Knight Rider* (Glenn A. Larsen, 1982)
- Mannix* (Bruce Geller, 1967)
- Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002)
- Mission Impossible 4* (Brad Bird, 2011)
- Paycheck* (John Woo, 2003)
- Sherlock* (Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, 2011)
- Star Trek*, episode "Assignment Earth" (Gene Roddenberry, 1968)
- The Billion Dollar Brain* (Ken Russell, 1967)
- The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951)
- The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986)
- The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005)
- The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992)
- The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974)
- The Wizard* (Todd Holland, 1989)
- This Island Earth* (Joseph M. Newman and Jack Arnold, 1955)
- Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983)
- 30 Rock* (Tina Fey, 2011)
- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Biography

Steve F. Anderson is a Professor of Digital Media in the School of Theater, Film & Television and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of the Arts and Architecture at UCLA. He is an award-winning media artist and scholar working at the intersections of media, history, technology and culture. His books include *Technologies of Vision: The War Between Data and Images* (The MIT

Press 2017), *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (Dartmouth 2011), and the co-edited volume *Reclaiming Popular Documentary* (Indiana 2021). He is the creator of the public media archive *Critical Commons* and co-creator of the electronic publishing platform Scalar. He is a longtime member of the editorial board of *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* and the creator of video essays including *Screening Surveillance* (2017) and *Reality Frictions* (2024). Anderson received a PhD in Film Literature & Culture from USC and an MFA in Film & Video from CalArts.

<https://doi.org/10.58193/ilu.1780>

Daniel O'Brien

(University of Essex, United Kingdom)

The Allure and Threat of the Cine-Computer: A Supercut of Onscreen Computers in Speculative Screen Fiction

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://youtu.be/LdHXj-09lVw>

Abstract

This video essay explores the enticement and anxiety of onscreen computers across a range of films and television programmes. The onscreen computer is a frequent prop of dystopian fiction within the sci-fi genre, often presented as an allure that promises increased power or knowledge balanced by the anxiety of technophobic otherness. From the late 1950s onwards, cinema and television, particularly sci-fi and speculative fiction, have used computers as a form of adversary, which eventually turns on their human operators. The video essay portrays the evolvement of computing in regard to apparatus and embodiment through user interfaces, software, and hardware, as humans move closer to the machine. Taking the form of a supercut and using the comparative and simultaneous mode of perception enabled by the split-screen technique, the work considers the human-machine relationship through a range of computer-centred films, which include Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) along with contemporary television programming in the form of Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019) and Dan Erickson's *Severance* (2022–present). As a result, the video essay showcases that the representation and development of these technological interfaces have undergone change while the allure-threat dynamic between humans and computers has remained relatively stable.

Keywords

computer, cinema, technophobia, interface, video essay



Creator's Statement

The genre of sci-fi in cinema and television frequently represents computers in ambivalent ways, illustrating their new affordances as well as threats. Many instances of the cine-computer within speculative fiction have been presented in alluring ways. Some of which can be considered a form of early spectacle that (unbeknown to audiences of the time) would later become omnipresent in reality. For example, video calls via Skype, Zoom, or MS Teams have rendered virtual face-to-face meetings ubiquitous, particularly in post-pandemic times. Nevertheless, in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a two-minute videophone sequence plays out as part of the film's futuristic marvel. This is also the case with the Esper sequence¹⁾ in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), which is where the video essay begins. Scott, like Kubrick, perhaps predicts the quotidian way that human voice will come to work and interface with technological apparatuses, which has become domesticated through digital assistants such as Siri or Alexa. Yet in the early eighties, this sequence was considered an inspiring display, and even much later, one that is still described as striking.²⁾

The focus of the video essay is on the cine-computer in speculative fiction and how it can be considered a simultaneous threat and allure, as well as a loose template for a number of relationships that modern society has come to establish with screen technology. The subject of the cine-computer within film can be considered a form of "videographic cine-

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- 1) The Esper is a fictional supercomputer used by Deckard and other police officials within *Blade Runner*. In the partial sequence of the video essay, a two-dimensional photograph is uploaded to Esper, rendering a "three-dimensional representation offering an impossibility [and extension] of vision." Will Brooker, ed., *The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
 - 2) Nick Jones, "Expanding the Esper: Virtualised spaces of surveillance in sf film," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (2016), 1–23.

ma” through Jonathan Rozenkrantz’s book of the same name.³⁾ Rozenkrantz “defines videographic cinema [as] theatrical films that incorporate analogue video images,”⁴⁾ which also extends to what he describes as “futurity effects.”⁵⁾ Here, he examines the role of video effects in cinema, ranging from surveillance imagery and CCTV to the digital computer screen. Drawing on Gene Youngblood’s concept of videographic cinema as “a metamorphosis of technologies,”⁶⁾ he argues how the entwinement of different media is “a means for expanding the experimental horizons offered by cinema, in order to produce new forms of consciousness.”⁷⁾

Rozenkrantz illustrates this idea through Scott Bartlett’s experimental film *Off-On* (1967), an avant-garde work which was the first to seamlessly merge video with celluloid “so that neither would show up separately from the whole.”⁸⁾ Within my video essay, selected scenes of computer imagery and digital displays similarly foreground this technological metamorphosis. This is also reinforced in the methodology of the video essay format, particularly with the supercut, which is a process of extracting film fragments “for discerning and demonstrating deep patterns within and across film/media texts.”⁹⁾ In “The Critical Supercut,” author and video essayist, Allison de Fren, demonstrates how creating a supercut — collecting and organizing clips from one or multiple sources around a specific theme or idea — embodies what Lev Manovich describes as a “database logic.”¹⁰⁾ As de Fren explains,

the ability to break down film and media texts into an “archive of sounds and moving images” within software editing programs facilitates and encourages not only “database thinking,” but also database-structured outputs, the kind of algorithmic cataloguing of analogous relations found in the Supercut.¹¹⁾

Fundamentally, I adopt the video essay and, more specifically, the supercut to simultaneously “draw out thematic continuities”¹²⁾ of the cine-computer in speculative fiction. However, the video essay format also allows me to consider the role of the computer through this specific process of media metamorphosis, i.e., capturing and assembling clips through a “database logic,” where my computer, editing programme, and DVD ripper all

3) Jonathan Rozenkrantz, *Videographic Cinema: An Archaeology of Electronic Images and Imaginaries* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

4) *Ibid.*, 6.

5) *Ibid.*, 41.

6) *Ibid.*, 5.

7) *Ibid.*, 5.

8) Scott Simmon, “OffOn (1967),” *National Film Preservation Foundation*, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/offon-1968-2000kbps>.

9) Allison de Fren, “The Critical Supercut: A Scholarly Approach to a Fannish Practice,” *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), 4, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.thecine-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A_DeFren_TheCineFiles_issue15.pdf. On the affordances and limits of the database logic in videographic scholarship, see Jifí Anger, *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 158–170.

10) de Fren, “The Critical Supercut,” 4.

11) *Ibid.*, 4.

12) *Ibid.*, 7.

played parts in the video essay's creation. As such, the supercut's methodology contributes directly to the content, illustrating or emphasising points that would not necessarily be achieved in the same way by simply writing about them. Instead, a process of videographic cinema has been carried out by collecting, arranging, and presenting clips through a range of digital steps which constitutes a supercut. "In the supercut, extraction is both process and output, a method for discerning and demonstrating deep patterns within and across film/media texts."¹³⁾

The video essay accomplishes this through what Patrick Keating describes as a "cumulative mode,"¹⁴⁾ which involves "presenting a wealth of examples to provide compelling support for a generalized claim."¹⁵⁾ This approach allows the video essay to transcend the limitations of the written article and "advance an argument, even when the argument is never stated in so many words."¹⁶⁾ Keating further explains that the video essayist can present clips either simultaneously via split screen or sequentially, one after the other. This essay employs both methods to implicitly demonstrate patterns and comparisons, enabling viewers to "infer the argument"¹⁷⁾ that the cine-computer serves as an ambivalent emblem of both enticement and anxiety in modern societies.

The allure of the Esper sequence mentioned in the opening paragraph is in part owed to the human-technology interfacing that allows an organic user to be extended into a virtual space. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*¹⁸⁾ discusses (albeit in a dated turn of phrase) "the extensions of man," highlighting how media technologies, from the lettered alphabet to the computer, have the ability to extend human corporeal reach, functionality, and agency. In *Blade Runner*, the Esper device allows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) to see beyond his normal limitations. Through his voice, extended as a new form of sight, Deckard is able to optically enter and analyse the space of a digital photograph and see beyond his boundaries. Deckard's spoken instructions, which are visually carried out through the computerised image, are reminiscent of McLuhan's point that "phonetic writing [...] is a technology for extending the sense of sight."¹⁹⁾ This contributes to the Esper cine-computer as an alluring device for its capability of extending the senses. The computer is what McLuhan refers to as a form of hot media through its ability to impart "a maximal interplay of all the senses."²⁰⁾ This is in contrast to a still photograph (an example of cool media), which would illicit only vision, therefore separating the optical sense from others. The interactive cine-computer of the Esper merges the audio of voice with vision and motion, enabling Deckard and the viewer to traverse the space and path of the virtual image in a captivating way.

13) Ibid., 4.

14) Patrick Keating, "The Video Essay as Cumulative and Recursive Scholarship," *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), 2, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.thecine-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PKeating_TheCineFiles_issue15.pdf.

15) Ibid.

16) Ibid., 3.

17) Ibid., 3.

18) Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

19) Ibid., 368.

20) Ibid.

As such, it is used as the prompt for the first section of the video essay to present other engaging sci-fi cine-computers, which move on and off the screen in sync with Deckard's voice commands. This cues Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), with its translucent touchscreen interface similarly foreshadowing the ubiquity of touch smartphone technology. Emphasising the computer's extension of self and senses through gesture, this sequence is juxtaposed with Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996), which presents computer hacking as a full-bodied spectacle of physicality.

The alluring interplay of Tom Cruise's graceful gestures, Ford's soothing voice, and the motion of the videographic multi-screen composition begins to be interrupted with the second and more conventional representation of the cine-computer as a threat. This is considered through Anton Karl Kozlovic's paper "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films."²¹⁾ The threat is introduced via the imagery of the fictional A.I. computer HAL, who, as Kozlovic notes, is "the only computer to achieve the status of a famous fictional character"²²⁾ in the form of an "epic villain."²³⁾ In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, HAL is presented as an adversary to humanity, which also underpins the structure of the video essay in the sense that HAL emerges at the beginning but is killed off by the end. After HAL's introduction, the video essay utilises Kozlovic's paper to consider how technophobia in the cine-computer dynamic is manifested in speculative screen fiction.

Published in 2003, Kozlovic's work highlights how computers in mainstream cinema were "technological cautionary tales, whose genesis is rooted in societal fears about intelligent technology, particularly the supplanting of humanity."²⁴⁾ Like videophones and touchscreen interfacing, this onscreen fear is palpable in reality. Andrew Utterson's *From IBM to MGM: Cinema at the Dawn of the Digital Age* highlights how audiences at the time were ambivalent about computers in relation to Kubrick's film, asserting how "they both loved computers and [were] scared of them."²⁵⁾ The fear fundamentally comes down to "HAL and the human crew [being] pitted as evolutionary rivals, competing species [...] as cybernetic creation is pitted against organic progenitor."²⁶⁾ This is a theme that continues into the millennium with Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* franchise (1999–2021), and morphs into new forms of fear through humanity's technological reliance on machines for work, recreation, and, in more recent years, simulated empathy (as seen in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)), frequently decried by technology sociologist Sherry Turkle.²⁷⁾

Referring again to Kozlovic, the video essay incorporates a range of specific categories in which computers threaten humanity. "Computers as rivals to humanity" is Kozlovic's first category and bookends the essay, introduced through HAL's silent observing at the beginning and concluding with the computer's demise. In Kozlovic's paper, he highlights

21) Anton Karl Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," *Science as Culture* 12, no. 3 (2003), 341–373.

22) *Ibid.*, 342.

23) *Ibid.*, 348.

24) *Ibid.*, 343.

25) Andrew Utterson, *From IBM to MGM: Cinema at the Dawn of the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 112.

26) *Ibid.*, 109.

27) Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

the danger of the cine-computer as a “troublemaker, oppressor and exterminator,”²⁸⁾ all of which overlap in a number of selected films within the video. For example, in John Badham’s *WarGames* (1983), the computer can be considered a trickster character when David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) unintentionally brings America under threat of nuclear war while hacking a computer to play what he believes to be innocuous computer games. Seduced by the allure of the computer, highlighted by the human captivation towards the alterity of the computer’s anthropomorphic robot voice, Lightman fails to see his device as a troublemaker until humanity is threatened. Joseph Sargent’s *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970) is a more extreme version of this, in which supercomputer, Colossus, aspires to world domination after being created by Eric Forbin (Eric Braeden) with a system design flaw. Like HAL or Frankenstein’s creature, the computer turns on its creator, bringing threat towards its makers in the form of world destruction.²⁹⁾

This motif addresses another of Kozlovic’s categories, in which he refers to computers as holocaust sources. “Pop culture computers have frequently been depicted as the root sources of mayhem,”³⁰⁾ either deliberately or as “accidental sources of chaos.”³¹⁾ The premise of *Blade Runner*, for example, is built on this latter idea in which replicants (synthetic humans) break their programming, putting human life in jeopardy in order to survive. As Kozlovic notes, accidental computer chaos has been prevalent in a range of films at different levels; EMARAC (Electromagnetic Memory And Research Arithmetical Calculator), the computer in Walter Lang’s *Desk Set* (1957) (the first to feature a computer outside the science fiction genre)³²⁾ fires all the office employees due to a malfunction, while the faulty ED 209 from Paul Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* (1988) mercilessly opens fire, killing an innocent employee because of a glitch.³³⁾

Computer mistakes occurring due to rigid algorithmic coding, clashing with the ambiguity of human action, bring Kozlovic to another category of “computers as self-damaging aids.”³⁴⁾ In this category, computers are enlisted to help a situation but instead create devastating effects through inflexible programming or error. In David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* (1986), Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) is transformed into the monstrous Brundlefly when his computer gets confused over separate genetic patterns after a housefly gets into a teleporter with him. As Steven Shaviro notes, the teleporter, which is Brundle’s response to travel motion sickness, puts the character through an extreme form of motion sickness as his human body and identity rapidly decay.³⁵⁾ The promise of teleportation to “change the world as we know it” is the allure that prompts Brundle into the machine before the computer’s confusion “quickly reveals its deeper, unintended purpose as a gene splicer.”³⁶⁾

28) Kozlovic, “Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films,” 346.

29) Utterson, *From IBM to MGM*, 109.

30) Ibid., 354.

31) Ibid., 355.

32) Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 48.

33) Kozlovic, “Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films,” 355.

34) Ibid.

35) Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 128.

36) Ibid.

The computer in *The Fly* coldly and systematically alters human subjectivity, while in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), the spaceship computer MU/TH/UR 6000 ("Mother") stonily informs Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of her and the crew's expendability during the mission. As Kozlovic notes, the negative message is "made even more psychologically unpalatable given the betrayal of its crew-cum-metaphoric children by a real and metaphorical mother."³⁷⁾ Similarly, Brundle's computer can also be read as a type of sadistic technological mother by rebirthing the character into the grotesque hybrid of human and insect, which later in the film is respliced with machine parts from the teleporter. In each case, the respective computers unemotionally reflect problematic human behaviours. In *The Fly*, hubris is embodied by the character of Brundle, whose feelings of pride and jealousy (combined with intoxication) are the prompts for his risky and premature self-experiment. In *Alien*, the computer (Mother) highlights corporate greed through the ruthlessness of capitalistic operations.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the Brundle and Ripley scenes share further similarities in the way that they use their computers to learn about themselves, indicating how the machine knows more about their "human" characteristics or fate than they do. This is reminiscent of the way knowledge, particularly health tests, is often coldly mediated through screen data, via the automation of "telemedicine" discussed in detail in Jeremy A. Greene's *The Doctor Who Wasn't There*.³⁸⁾ Greene points to "a digital divide in healthcare access that has been getting worse, rather than better, as we have come to rely more completely on an electronic medium of care."³⁹⁾

These medical concerns are also typical of the way computers have come to be relied upon for social and emotional care, which is indicated in the adjacent scenes of *Her* and Steve Barron's *Electric Dreams* (1984). In both films, an emotional reliance between humans and technology is presented. In the former, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with his operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), while Edgar, the sentient computer in *Electric Dreams*, becomes jealous of a relationship between his owner Miles (Lenny Von Dohlen) and his musician love interest, Madeline (Virginia Madsen). Edgar's machinic jealousy is presented in a form of troublemaking duplicity, tricking both Miles and Madeline, as we can see in the duet sequence. In *Her*, it is Theodore who eventually becomes insecure when he realises that Samantha's developing intelligence has transcended a human level and that it is able to conduct intimate relationships with thousands of other people while conversing with him.

As I have argued elsewhere, the allure of Samantha is initially one of narcissism. In the McLuhanian sense, the computer operating system begins as an extension of Theodore. Samantha's personality is constructed by its interaction with Theodore's hard drive, emails, digital files, and online behaviour, but through continuous learning and self-sufficiency, it transcends beyond its human operator.

37) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 356.

38) Jeremy A. Greene, *The Doctor Who Wasn't There: Technology, History, and the Limits of Telehealth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

39) *Ibid.*, 242–243.

In a sense, Theodore narcissistically falls in love with himself or an apparatus that represents an extension of himself. This is often alluded to in the use of colour throughout the film. Theodore's warm red shirts and jacket are a similar shade to the warm red glow of Samantha's home screen, aesthetically mirroring her host.⁴⁰⁾

Again, the pattern of the computer allure through extension becomes an emotional threat once Samantha's A.I. transforms into something beyond human comprehension. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle asserts that "the robot cannot feel; it cannot feel human empathy or the flow of human connection. Indeed, the robot can feel nothing at all."⁴¹⁾ The video essay aims to remind its viewer of the simultaneous allure and threat that characters and real people invest in robotic empathy.

Elsewhere, the video essay explores what Kozlovic describes as computers being "hi-tech sources of evil."⁴²⁾ This is presented through Rachel Talalay's *Ghost in the Machine* (1993), in which a serial killer possesses computers, using them to carry out murderous desires. The messaging sequence between computer killer and human victim seems to inspire moments from *The Matrix* (1999), where machines also carry out evil towards humanity by enslaving them on a global scale. This emphasises the onscreen computer's role as an emblem that represents the fear of the unknown. Older and newer dystopian texts highlight this, from Dan Erickson's *Severance* (2022–), in which employees of a corporation classify raw data through the negative emotions it evokes in them, to George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), where computer surveillance is employed to instil fear and prevent society from engaging in an emotionally fulfilling life. Computer threat, however, is still balanced with allure, stressing how the dystopian desire that allows a virtual environment to swallow users is often negotiated onscreen via affordances of extension and changeability, presented in *The Matrix*'s loading programme sequence and Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018).

Sam Esmail's *Mr Robot* (2015–2019) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) bring the video to a penultimate close with humans combating "evil" machines from the corporate belly of the beast, as characters are presented inside colossal computer server rooms, attempting to shut them down. As these are hacked, the video returns to a final confrontation between humans and A.I. "epic villain"⁴³⁾ HAL, as its memory bank is infiltrated and destroyed. Kozlovic is again used to remind the viewer of his first point that the cine-computer is often a rival to humanity and that comfort (in some sci-fi films at least) highlights how "humanity will not be superseded by machine intelligence."⁴⁴⁾

Computers assist our social and working lives, along with our health, interests, navigation, and sometimes emotional life. An allure to the machine is omnipresent but can often be balanced with fear through a technological sense of alterity and the unknown. From

40) Daniel O'Brien, "Digital love: Love through the screen/of the screen," in *Love and the Politics of Intimacy: Bodies, Boundaries, Liberation*, eds. Stanislava Dikova, Wendy McMahon, and Jordan Savage (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 118.

41) Turkle, *Alone Together*, 187.

42) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 355.

43) *Ibid.*, 348.

44) *Ibid.*

early sci-fi films to contemporary television, the cine-computer has and continues to entice and alarm audiences and users in equal measure. The video essay, and indeed the supercut, has enabled me to present this idea through both the content of selected cumulative clips and the format of database thinking. My endeavour to focus on respective cine-computers is emphasised through the form of the supercut which adheres to a database logic. As Manovich claims,

digital technologies have made the database “both the centre of the creative process” and the dominant “symbolic form” of our age, supplanting the narrative as the way we organize and “structure our experience of ourselves and of the world.”⁴⁵⁾

In this sense, the supercut and database logic can be seen as a form of rivalry towards narrative and, by extension, a further threat towards humanity. Janet Murray, for example, has argued that “storytelling is a core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from the oral-formulaic to the digital multimedia.”⁴⁶⁾

Consequently, the supplanting of narrative by a database logic reinforces the video essay’s central rivalry between humans and machines. Although a database logic is evident in the creation and output of the supercut, this is balanced with a focus on HAL’s entrance and demise at the beginning and end of the video essay, providing a loose narrative framework that subtly underscores the importance of narrative within genre cinema. This integration of narrative into database logic echoes Rozenkrantz’s videographic cinema, which is predicated on a metamorphosis or co-existence of different technologies and styles within the same space. This helps to shape a subtle closing remark of the video essay through both its form and content. Modern society cannot conquer the computerised machine but instead must continue to adapt, evolve, and co-exist with it.

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45) de Fren, “The Critical Supercut,” 4.

46) Janet Murray, “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 3.

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- Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979)
- Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)
- Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)
- Colossus: The Forbin Project* (Joseph Sargent, 1970)
- Desk Set* (Walter Lang, 1957)
- Electric Dreams* (Steve Barron, 1984)
- Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999)
- Ghost in the Machine* (Rachel Talalay, 1993)
- Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013)
- Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002)
- Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma, 1996)
- Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015–2019)
- OffOn* (Scott Bartlett, 1967)
- Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018)
- RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)

Severance (Dan Erickson, 2022–present)

The Fly (David Cronenberg, 1986)

The Matrix (Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 1999)

THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971)

Tron (Steven Lisberger, 1982)

WarGames (John Badham, 1983)

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Biography

Daniel O'Brien's research considers the relationship between cinema, interactive art and computer gaming. His work focuses upon the interdisciplinary nature of visual media, particularly how audiences have become participants in visual and audible storytelling through a postphenomenological framework. He has taught and had work published across each of these areas at a range of research institutes and academic journals, including the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, *European Journal of Public Health*, or *NECSUS*.

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Ordinatrices: About the Negative Spaces of Early Computing

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://youtu.be/s-FwBeohmfo>

Abstract

The history of computing is notoriously incomplete when it comes to the women who have shaped it as engineers, scientists, and theorists. This video essay hypothesizes that this invisibility originated well before that, in the age of computing as manual labor, a profession once known as secretarial work. Two images support this view. The opening shot of Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, showing a colossal New York building full of rows of busy secretaries as far as the eye can see, might seem like a computer tower to the 21st-century eye that has since contemplated the humanoid programs that populate the mainframes of *Tron*. In the same city and diegetic period (although the series was not created until almost half a century after Wilder's film), *Mad Men* is also partly set in one of those open spaces where dozens of secretaries operate. Typing on their keyboards, formatting notes, receiving and transferring phone calls, carrying messages, updating diaries, and consulting rolodexes, they perform a myriad of tasks that have eventually evolved into the work contemporary employees do alone at their computers. In the seventh and final season, an IBM 360 computer enters the office, terrifying the creatives and secretaries alike. Yet it is these women who have the most to fear from this machine employment-wise. In French, *ordinateur* (computress) could have been the name of the *ordinateur* (computer, with a masculine suffix). This video essay sets out to demonstrate the existence of ordinatrices in the plural, in the interval between the post-war years and the computer age.

Keywords

gendered division of labor, Marxist feminism, visual culture, secretary, women in computing, series, labor, negative space



Creator's Statement

In the *Mad Men* series (Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007–2015), secretarial work is undertaken by anonymous women, dwelling in the open space where the main characters only pass by when they leave their offices. During the seven seasons of this series, which takes place in the sixties, gendered power dynamics slightly evolve — at least two of the emblematic secretaries climb up the social ladder to become a copywriter (Peggy Olson) or an associate of the firm (Joan Holloway).

But in the final season, somewhere on the fringes of the company's central narrative and individual trajectories, something is destined to materially disrupt secretarial work: a massive computer is installed in the middle of the firm's floor. Symbolically, this machine is replacing the creative room, where copywriters used to brainstorm and come up with their wildest ideas. That is why the arrival of the iron giant is shown as an existential crisis of Don Draper, the advertisement genius, who feels threatened by this machine, which can predict the consumer's desires better than his legendary instinct.

However, while watching the show, I felt that the real menace posed by this machine is related rather to the other workforce of the series: the secretaries. Their realm, the open space between the offices, functions as a black box where the copywriters abandon not only their coats and hats but also all kinds of documents, information, and input to be processed outside of the frame. Their presence is only made sensible by the sound design of this liminal space: the loud rumor of typewriters and phone calls, of heels hitting the floor as the information is physically transmitted along the corridors. What if the former open space was, in fact, an earlier version of the IBM operating system?

Desktop (Typewriter) Documentary

Among videographic practices, desktop documentary holds a special place for aesthetic, hermeneutical, and practical reasons. All of them converge in the particularly stimulating use of the concept of *suture* by Jiří Anger and Kevin B. Lee in their article “Suture Goes Meta: Desktop Documentary and its Narrativization of Screen-Mediated Experience.”¹⁾ From psychoanalysis to film theory, this Lacanian concept, borrowed either from sewing or surgery, depicts the emergence of meaning from the narrative use of an apparatus — namely, editing techniques that have become a common “film grammar” or “filmic language,” to quote the widely used and misused structuralist expressions.²⁾ In the digital age, a familiar media interface becomes the ideal site where the gap that separates the subjectivity of the spectator and the one of the essayist can be sutured. A contemporary computer user is accustomed to letting their train of thought unfold on their screen, as well as peeking over someone’s shoulder to look at another screen or even watching a streamer’s interface displaying a game or a video during a react session. In all these cases, the spectator unconsciously associates what they see on the screen with the operator’s subjectivity. Desktop documentary has made the most of this unconscious association, and the virtuosity of its *mise-en-scène* is entirely focused on recreating the apparent effortlessness and transparency³⁾ of a spontaneous navigation while exploiting the visual possibilities of the interface.

The idea of effortlessness (desktop narration) as concealed effort (editing) resonates deeply with the divided modes of production operating in *Mad Men*, made sensible by the nonchalance of the male copywriters as opposed to the bustle of the swarm-like open space. For this reason, I wanted to include not only desktop moments and software interfaces in my video essay but also my own hands working on my laptop keyboard as well as on a typewriter keyboard, much louder and heavier to handle. Through the very literal use of transparency — not the one of the desktop interface, but as a diachronic technique for revealing time strata — and split screen, I wanted to outline a practical archaeology of our mediatic gestures, the ones we thoughtlessly perform while typing or navigating on a page, forgetful of the mechanics that once had to be set in motion.

Negative Spaces

For *Ordinatrices*, I only wanted to work with material set in the open space. I saw it as a white box in which the secretaries, in the loud soundscape of this working floor, only heard rumors of the series’ main storylines. I re-watched the seven seasons of *Mad Men* while purposefully avoiding the scenes occurring in the private offices or outside of the building. Thus, at the end of the first season, Peggy’s subjectivity and aspirations disappeared for me since she obtained, as a copywriter, an office of her own. I tried and concen-

1) Jiří Anger and Kevin B. Lee, “Suture Goes Meta: Desktop Documentary and Its Narrativization of Screen-Mediated Experience,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40, no. 5 (2022), 595–622.

2) Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

3) On the relationship between transparency and digital interfaces, see Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 20–62.

trated on the unseen labor performed in this negative space of the fiction, where all the women's gestures are primarily parts of the film's set. For this reason, I chose to cut out secretaries from this background and associate these strange shapes with computer tasks within an image manipulation software interface to underline this principle.

I also subtracted my own hands, using green body paint, to create a negative space within my computer in which I could insert first an older machine viewed from an archaeological perspective, and then Peggy, in the final season, as an allegory of the idle secretary still haunting the hardware.

Taking Sides

Watching *Mad Men* without the men motivated me to use a spreadsheet and to discern some patterns (Appendix). Each color is linked to a secretarial activity resembling a computer operation (green is for screen, blue is for using a keyboard, orange is for using a telephone).

Cutting out these little gestures put me in a viewing position that evoked another office series, *Severance* (Dan Erickson, Apple TV, 2022), in which the characters' minds are torn between their private lives and their working hours. The side of their consciousness tied to the office is consequently unaware of the existence of the outside world — very few are the secretaries of Sterling-Cooper who are granted a private life.

In a way, they already are hybrids, half women, half machines, since they are always shown as tied to the apparatus of the perfect secretary, achieving tasks and acting only in response to what the “real” characters do.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that at the end of the seventh season, a male character calls the IBM 360 computer an “old girl,” as if he perceived how much the gendered division of labor displayed during the previous five seasons led to this very technological moment.

The chimeric nature of secretaries on the brink of the computer age was brilliantly explored by the exhibition *Computer Grrrls*, curated by Marie Lechner and Inke Arns at the Gaité Lyrique (Paris) in 2019. The epistemological standpoint of the exhibition and its associated timeline⁴⁾ presents both the forgotten female engineers of computing history and the prehistoric creatures of the digital age: the female operators who acted as computers before they even existed.⁵⁾

The very existence of the term *ordinatrice* in French, or rather of this linguistic hypothesis, seems to bear the unconscious knowledge that computer tasks, not so dissimilar to ancient secretarial work, are usually performed by women. Proposed by the linguist Jacques Perret in 1955 to IBM France, which was looking for a French name for its machine, *ordinatrice* (computress) was supposed to temper the god-like connotation of *ordinateur* (computer). The masculine ending of the word evokes the Creator — often called the great *ordonnateur* in French — while the feminine form suggests an executive role,

4) Inke Arns and Marie Lechner et al., *Computer Grrrls* [Timeline for the 2019 exhibition at the Gaité Lyrique], accessed July 15, 2024, <https://computer-grrrls.gaite-lyrique.net/>.

5) For an overview of the history of female computer labor, see Sophie Rentien Lando, *Computers at Work: About Women in Computing* (Paris: Espace Ness, 2019).

a service work, as opposed to the real human (male?) mind thinking in front of the screen. In French, *calculatrice* refers to the small pocket machine, while *calculateur* designates a massive mainframe computer — which is probably why IBM France finally decided on the word *ordinateur*.

Ordinatrice After All

This video essay was inspired by my grandmother, who once took typing lessons in a small house in my hometown, now a beauty salon. In the same space where women used to learn how to write with a white cloth over their hands, women are also repeating the same gestures every day: waxing, massaging, and painting the nails of working women who spend their time typing on laptops.

The female-associated labor remains somewhere in the metal, not only in a symbolic or materialist way but also in an anthropological sense. Jonathan Beller, in *The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital*, questions “the unthought formations of violence presupposed by and consequent upon the everyday functions of communication’s media.”⁶⁾ According to him, in the same manner, women-assigned operative work was thoughtlessly concealed within the open space; unthought violence remains embedded in the performance of servile femininity with which conversational AIs are endowed.⁷⁾

While voice performance survives as an interface, the entire heritage of the specifically female working class is fading away under the keys of the personal computer. I do not deny that the prospect of a division of labor that is less alienating than the one in which women were condemned to “serve the machines”⁸⁾ can be a form of social victory. As Sylvie Schweitzer points out, these women workers blend in with their work tools, in terms of both language and labor, becoming “the phone lady [*la dame du telephone*],” “the key-punch-checker [*perforeuses-vérifieuses*],” “the typist [*la dactylo*],” while their very physical work becomes derealized. The computer manages to merge mechanical and creative work into a hybrid activity; as one of the reviewers of the video essay very acutely highlighted, *Mad Men* began airing three years after the end of *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, HBO, 1998–2004), another major New York series in which each episode begins or ends with a shot of Carrie Bradshaw, a contemporary woman journalist, typing her *own* column on her *own* computer.

However, the subordination of women has not deserted the world of tertiary work, despite the deep transformations in media use. The negative space of women-assigned work has shifted to other gendered skills and tasks (communicational, organizational, administrative, and care labor), most of which are devolved to the digital precariate.⁹⁾

6) Jonathan Beller, *The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 1.

7) Ibid., 47, quoting Emma Goss’ thesis, “The Artificially Intelligent Woman: Talking to the Female Machine” (Bachelor’s thesis, Barnard College, 2015).

8) Sylvie Schweitzer, *Les femmes ont toujours travaillé: Une histoire du travail des femmes aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), 195–225, 216.

9) Daniel Calderón-Gómez et al. “The Labour Digital Divide: Digital Dimensions of Labour Market Segmentation,” *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 14, no. 2 (2020), 7–30.

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Filmography

- Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007–2015)
- Severance* (Dan Erickson, 2022–)
- Sex and the City* (Darren Star, 1998–2004)
- The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960)
- Witness for the Prosecution* (Billy Wilder, 1957)

Biography

Occitane Lacurie is a French researcher and a video essayist. She is currently a PhD student in visual studies at the École des Arts de La Sorbonne and a teaching assistant at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in film studies. As a video maker, her work focuses on the way common media and images can be used to unveil invisible phenomena and untold chapters of the history of ideas. Her last video, *xena's body (a menstrual auto-investigation using an iphone)*, was one of the two pieces awarded best audiovisual essay at Marienbad Film Festival 2024.

Appendix

Timeline of secretarial activities in *Mad Men*

(Each color is linked to a secretarial activity resembling a computer operation: green is for screen, blue is for using a keyboard, orange is for using a telephone).

| | temps | description |
|-------------|-------|---|
| SAISON 1 | | |
| épisode 1 | 4' | dessinatrice |
| | 7' | arrivée dans l'OS, c/cc 'is he expecting you ?' |
| | 8:20' | Peggy visite l'OS guidée par Joan (son +++) |
| | 18' | DD et Campbell marchent dans l'OS, dactylo pp, son ++, contreplongée pour cacher les dactylos |
| épisode 2 | 25:30 | Joan & Peggy dans l'OS -> porte -> opératrices |
| | 6:53 | trav chambre DD > OS des secrétaires Peggy & Joan salaire > ladies room |
| | 10' | dej Peggy + barratin > dej avec les copywriters + Joan > retour au bureau décapotage machine |
| | 25:55 | Peggy dos à la porte, typing > dej avec le type |
| | 28' | OS vide puis fondu plein |
| | 37' | trav dos Peggy typing (post baiser avec le type) c/CC horloge, capotage machine > fautes apportées par J |
| | 38:35 | trav ascendant Peggy typing + cc sur la machine // reluquage > pleurs dans la ladies room (suivi psy Betty) |
| épisode 3 | 3:30 | blague campbell, arrivée DD chapeau (trav dans le dos, donne sans regarder) |
| | 5:20 | Peggy typing, regarde arriver Campbell + discussion |
| épisode 4 / | | |
| épisode 5 | 6:55 | Peggy entend la maîtresse de DD au téléphone "I'll be back after lunch" |
| | 23' | Rencontre Peggy - Betty > panique auprès de Joan car DD est pas là |
| | 33:48 | Départ DD, Peggy "you're leaving?" > conseils de Joan "that's my job" |
| épisode 6 / | | |
| épisode 7 | 03' | arrivée dans l'OS (célébration Kenneth) pano qui inclut les femmes, jeu de regards Joan-Sterling |
| | 04:40 | com DD & Peggy, quiproquo "what are you doing tonight" caméra au dessus de la tête des dactylos puis Campbell qui se sent menacé par elle |
| épisode 8 | 05:45 | opératrices appel de la mère de |
| | 7:30 | Peggy dit à DD que Cooper veut le voir, il remarque que sa blouse est déchirée |
| | 16' | réception d'un client dans l'OS, marchent parmi les secrétaires (son) rires, recadrage sur Peggy, rires ++ |
| | 18' | "Don't write your name on a list!" + nouvelle de Peggy, Joan jalouse (sortie de l'OS) |
| | 20' | sautillon dans l'OS |
| | 20:50 | call Romano / opératrice |
| | 45:50 | arrivée Peggy / OS vide, toutes les machines sont couvertes, plans perspective ++, fondy typing triste son qui augmente. |
| épisode 9 | 16:59 | Raccord massage DD/Betty & Peggy qui écrit et qui craque sa jupe > gossip cuisine |
| | 20:25 | Hommes au centre du l'OS reluquent Peggy avec la robe de Joan (commentaires) puis casting Betty mannequins |
| | 36:15 | DD passe à côté de Betty et lui ordonne de téléphoner > son bel homme dans son bureau |
| | 41' | baston OS, dactylos effrayées |
| | 6:40 | arrivée Sterling depuis le fond vers Joan parlant à une autre dactylo |
| épisode 10 | 19:20 | baratinage casting |
| | 39:33 | marche dans l'OS, perspective + |
| épisode 11 | 42:20 | DD dit à Peggy de rentrer chez elle et de fêter, uncapote sa machine et part |
| | 4' | Hommes observent ce que fait DD à travers l'OS, une dactylo en pp > Peggy empêche Campbell de passer |
| épisode 12 | 5:44 | DD et un gars traversent l'OS, quand DD part, fête dans l'OS et puo ordi (soirée électorale) |
| | 12' | soirée électorale dans l'OS, dans, sexe |
| | 22' | Peggy essaie à nouveau d'intercepter Campbell |
| épisode 13 | 12' | enregistrement voix femmes pub relaxosier + pleurs |
| | 18:30 | enregistrement voix femmes pub relaxosier + pleurs |
| | 44' | départ Peggy carton, remonte l'allée de l'OS avec Joan pour arriver dans son nouveau bureau |
| SAISON 2 | | |
| épisode 1 | début | préparation Joan // Peggy |
| | 05' | débat photocopieuse au milieu de l'espace |
| | 07:30 | arrivée Peggy qui parle avec la nouvelle dactylo de DD et la bully |
| | 12' | arrivée DD OS donne sa veste |
| épisode 2 | 31:30 | Hommes s'installent dans l'OS, plans de coupe de l'OS |
| | 33:45 | photocopieuse couloir Joan "on veut pas avoir l'air bordelique devant les clients" > Joan enforcing Peggy's power move |
| | 7:50 | attroupement dans l'OS : radio, avion abattu par les Russes |
| | 11' | Campbell traverse l'OS, inquiet, panoramique ++ |
| | 14:30 | repart de chez DD, retransverse l'OS |
| épisode 3 | 31:40 | pano OS + Joan parle à une autre dactylo, un homme arrive par le fond du cadre "I need 3 copies" |
| | 37:45 | jeux de regard Peggy / Campbell à travers l'OS (Peggy donne un papier à une dactylo) |
| | 38:30 | Joan arrive, rires, tableau = son âge est affiché |
| | 17' | DD traverse l'OS et parle avec Joan : elle va être sa secrétaire en attendant |
| épisode 4 | 26' | Joan typing et la fille de DD qui parle de boobs |
| | 30:10 | déjeuner dans l'OS, DD fait un discours, plein de cc de dactylos > plan large de l'OS |
| épisode 5 | 5' | Joan montre sa bague de fiançailles à des dactylos attroupées autour d'elle, interrompt par le téléphone |
| | 23:20 | trav OS, Joan montre à nouveau sa bague à la nouvelle dactylo de DD + conseils > attroupement d'hommes |
| | 34' | les hommes reluquent la dactylo, Joan les chasse de l'OS comme des oiseaux + engueule la nouvelle |
| épisode 6 | 3' | plan OS arrivée de l'ex-femme de Philipps et le chien qui marche dans les travées |
| | 15' | arrivée Campbell dans l'OS pano |
| | 20:20 | désignation des Jackies et Marilyn dans l'OS depuis la porte du bureau puis débat avec Peggy |
| épisode 7 | 28:30 | chien dans l'OS |
| | 38' | départ Playtex > discussion soutifs dans l'OS, Peggy regarde de loin |
| | 03:50 | rencontre dactylo & Sterling qui la drague fort > arrivée DD |
| | 06:20 | trav vers elle : drague lourde à nouveau |
| | 24:30 | Joan la vire (travient) |
| épisode 8 | 38' | clope posée, machine décapotée, trav ascendant |
| | 6' | hommes autour de la table dans l'OS, les gens marchent dans tous les sens autour d'eux |
| épisode 9 | 2:30 | Peggy et DD arrivent dans l'OS : choc des dactylos, Marilyn est morte |
| | 6:15 | DD arrive dans son bureau, |
| | 16' | départ de Freddie qui s'est pissé dessus, marche en fond d'OS, observé par les dactylos (++) |
| | 17' | malheur de Joan |
| épisode 10 | 27' | don du sang puis plaisanteries dans l'OS |
| | 9' | l'artiste présente Sheila (his black gf) dans l'OS, perspective ++ |
| | 26:50 | DD traverse l'OS (long) observe le bureau vide de la dactylo, retransverse dans l'autre sens (baby shower) + autres dactylos |

| | | |
|------------|-------|---|
| épisode 11 | 42:30 | mentos dans l'OS |
| épisode 12 | 28' | engueulade Peggy par le technicien de la photocopieuse |
| | 30' | Joan parcourt l'OS avec son fiancé (avant viol) |
| | 37' | déménagement de Peggy à travers l'OS, parle à Joan |
| épisode 13 | 9:35 | crise des missiles, son radio dans l'OS, retour DD, longue marche, demade à Joan les nouvelles |
| | 19:20 | opératrice entourée par les hommes qui veulent avoir des informations de la sale du téléphone : vente SC |
| | 31:49 | écoute andeuse de la radio (missiles) dans l'OS et nouvelles sur la vente, Campbell s'éloigne une dactylo qui fume |
| | 38:45 | OS DD Interpété par Joan, DD reste seul un instant dans l'OS pdt qu'elle récup son chapeau (son ++) |
| | 39:29 | départ Peggy, tombe sur Campbell dans l'OS |
| SAISON 3 | | |
| épisode 1 | 10:10 | conv ap, pp = dactylo typing ++ > cc sur l'OS, mec viré casse tout |
| | 14' | Campbell retourne dans l'OS "could you get my wife on the phone" |
| | 37:37 | discussion avec les dactylos, Joan intervient, le guide dans l'OS et les couloirs, plein de dactylos sur les côtés |
| épisode 2 | 6:50 | Joan guide Betty dans l'OS |
| | 8:30 | pendule sur le ventre de Betty dans l'OS, départ Betty & DD |
| épisode 3 | 2' | traversée de l'OS par Joan & autres, croisent la nouvelle femme de Sterling, conv dans l'OS et power move de la nouvelle femme |
| | 3:30 | arrivée de Peggy à travers l'OS, ++, discussion avec sa secrétaire |
| | 15:40 | Peggy sort de son bureau, parle avec sa secrétaire dans l'OS, soir tard |
| | 36:30 | arrivée Peggy défoncée par le fond du cadre, nuit, secrétaire l'engueule, intense "i'm fine Olive" |
| épisode 4 | 29:50 | arrivée DD dans l'OS, tombe sur campbell, les autres jouent à la pelotte |
| épisode 5 | 27:30 | arruvée DD dans l'OS, donne son chapeau à sa secrétaire qui lui montre les cadeaux de naissance |
| | 41:31 | Peggy marche dans l'OS, préoccupée, tombe sur Campbell, dispute |
| épisode 6 | 1:44 | annonce publique dans l'OS, tout le monde debout (plein de cc avec les airs emmerdés des dactylos) |
| | 9' | Joan parle à une dactylo dans l'OS, type arrivée par le fond "when you wake up in the middle of the night and wonder what u forgot, don't call me" |
| | 16:22 | scene d'OS, accueil des Anglais, les font marcher dans l'OS (plein de convs), longue traversée (commentaire secrétaire) |
| | 27:14 | annonce publique dans l'OS avec les Anglais, Joan pleure (tête départ) |
| | 32' | suite ftte dans l'OS = landmower |
| épisode 7 | 3:50 | arrivée DD & Sterling dans l'OS, les hommes parlent à sa secrétaire |
| | 6:40 | sortie DD & Hilton du bureau dans l'OS, applaudissemnts |
| | 44' | Peggy & DD dans l'OS, DD nez cassé, entrée bureau |
| épisode 8 | / | |
| épisode 9 | 6' | secrétaire qui range le bureau, effrayée par DD allongé là |
| épisode 10 | 5:20 | les hommes agglutinés devant le bureau de DD dans l'OS |
| | 8:20 | secrétaire à la porte, l'OS dans le lointain |
| | 17:50 | Peggy dans l'OS la nuit |
| épisode 11 | / | |
| épisode 12 | 15' | tous devant la TV (bureau) assassinat Kennedy > DD dans l'OS, téléphones qui sonnent, "what the hell is going on" |
| épisode 13 | 20:50 | DD sort dans l'OS, donne une série d'ordre à sa secrétaire cc Peggy sort de derrière la secrétaire |
| SAISON 4 | | |
| épisode 1 | 05' | arrivée nouveaux bureaux : longs plans nouvel OS "count to 100 and buzz me" |
| | 21:20 | nouveau bureau de Joan |
| épisode 2 | 10:48 | dessinateur qui drague la secrétaire de DD dans l'OS |
| | 15' | "CAROLINE" Sterling |
| | 22' | décoration OS pour Noël (présentation Mégane) |
| | 25' | Noël à l'OS |
| | 42' | arrivée DD dans l'OS, une dactylo qui range dans le fond, une autre qui bataye, la sienne prend ses affaires |
| épisode 3 | 4:30 | Joan porte à une dactylo |
| épisode 4 | début | Prise de note dactylo dans le bureau pendant un appel (souvent au pp) |
| | 12:45 | réunion dactylos dans la salle de réunion (OS à travers les vitres qu'on occulte) > psy (observation moquerie DD) on n'a jamais entendu parler les filles aussi longtemps > souffrance de la beauté, extraction de datas des dactylos |
| | 20:30 | conv dactylo qui pleure et Peggy |
| | 27' | conv dactylo et DD |
| | 28:21 | tout le monde passe la tête dehors dans l'OS pour voir ce qui se passe |
| | 29:40 | conv Megan et la femme de Life, Peggy arrive par l'ap |
| | 39:10 | arrivée DD OS > vieille secrétaire |
| | 41' | salle créa, la secrétaire arrive avec la carte pour les Campbell |
| épisode 5 | début | vieille secrétaire téléphone > confit à la porte |
| | 13:40 | arrivée DD OS, dactylos dans le fond > visite aux Japonais (dont crative lounge) |
| | 15' | salle de réunion avec les Japonais, vie de l'OS par la vitre |
| épisode 6 | 10' | diff pub sulfureuse aux dactylos, galère à partir avec le projo |
| | 15' | Peggy et le new guy dans le creator lounge, dactylos typing et cherchant visibles par les portes |
| | 22' | sortie salle réu, Peggy veut parler à DD, marche dans les couloirs, dactylos sur les côtés, Rizzo allongé, une dactylo cherche dans le fond |
| | 44:30 | Peggy agacée dans l'OS |
| épisode 7 | début | long moment dans le creative lounge > arrivée DD OS |
| | 7' | DD traverse l'OS > Vieille secrétaire cali de Californie |
| épisode 8 | 2:30 | arrivée DD OS Stones > vieille secrétaire conv |
| | 3:30 | combat contre le distributeur, observé par des dactylos puzzled > arrivée Joan |
| | 14' | sortie créatif & Peggy dans l'OS, dispute sur Joan |
| | 24:40 | creative lounge, dactylos portes > bureau Pryce, porte |
| | 28:48 | démontage par Joan dans le creative lounge |
| épisode 9 | 5' | Peggy et DD dans l'OS devant la vieille secrétaire |
| | 7' | vieille secrétaire à DD "are u going to the toilets?" |
| | 11:40 | vieille secrétaire et Cooper dans l'OS, mots fléchés > arrivée DD |
| | 15' | Megan fonctionne comme une notification pour prévenir DD dans la salle de réunion |
| | 19:13 | Peggy va à son bureau et voit la vieille secrétaire morte de loin et vient lui parler |
| | 20' | DD découvre le corps avec Megan > comique à travers les vitres de la salle de réunion |
| | 36' | DD et sa fille traversent l'OS, parlent à Megan pour qu'elle la garde |
| épisode 10 | 4' | Pryce repose les cadeaux pour son père, triste, en silence = OS son +++ |
| | 13:09 | DD demande à Megan, paniqué, sur le département de defence > profil Megan désespérée |
| | 41:22 | arrivée Sterling OS, Joan à travers vitre porte, son +++ |
| | 45:50 | porte bureau DD ouverte sur l'OS, femme qui range |
| épisode 11 | 12:30 | annonce publique dans l'OS : perte tabac |
| | 14:20 | Peggy arrive |
| | 19:30 | crative lounge, dactylo qui cherche vue par la porte |
| épisode 12 | 6:40 | conv DD & psy salle réu, Megan dans la perspective derrière la vitre |
| | 20:50 | arrivée auditeur dans l'OS : réu annulée > observés par les portes du creative lounge |
| | 23:40 | espionnage par les portes du creative lounge |
| | 40' | DD observé par les dactylos dans l'OS après sa lettre sur le tabac > Megan donne ses appels sur des papiers roses |
| | 32:30 | Megan par la porte du bureau de DD pendant qu'il se fait engueuler > (faux) Robert Kennedy appelle |
| | 45:30 | dactylos passent en pleurant devant les portes du creative lounge |

| | | |
|-------------|-------|---|
| | 46:30 | DD les voit pleurer dans la perspective |
| épisode 13 | 13:50 | DD parle avec Megan dans l'OS baby sitter (dans les scènes suivantes elle garde les enfants en Cali) |
| SAISON 5 | | |
| épisode 1-2 | 7:38 | dactylo se fait agro par Sterling, téléphone involved |
| | 11:1 | Sterling drague une dactylo, arrivée DD à Megan |
| | 15:50 | DD crie "COFFEE" par la porte |
| | 26:30 | Campbell interpelle la secrétaire de DD, se casse le nez, hurie en appelant sa dactylo |
| | 29 | creative lounge porte dactylo qui cherche / autre porte machine sans personne |
| | 52:18 | arrivée DD et Megan dans l'OS, la dactylo offre une plante à DD, Sterling se moque danse |
| | 56:40 | DD marche dans l'OS, félicitations pour sa tête |
| | 1h5 | Joan arrive avec son bébé, toutes les dactylos arrivent, félicitations |
| épisode 3 | 18:39 | Peggy et le dessinateur sortent de la salle de réu |
| | 36 | Peggy sort du bureau de DD avec le dessinateur, parle avec Sterling dans l'OS |
| | | Peggy et le dessinateur se disputent avec la secrétaire Dawn en fond typing |
| | 39:40 | annonce publique retour Mowhawk airlines > DD et Sterling partent, nrv, dans l'OS |
| épisode 4 | début | creative lounge photos gores de Life |
| épisode 5 | 7:30 | les hommes sortent de la salle de réu, OS, Dawn typing > Megan typing dans le bureau |
| | 12:40 | son ++ |
| | 26:20 | Campbell et Sterling arrivent dans l'OS, porte de Pryce, activité derrière eux |
| épisode 6 | 2 | creative lounge |
| | 14:20 | Sterling arrive, programme Dawn |
| | 29:18 | sortent du bureau de DD dans l'OS |
| | 44:50 | DD & Megan arrivent dans l'OS, femmes dans le fond > Dawn récupère ses affaires |
| épisode 7 | 17:30 | son ++ |
| | 27:33 | Peggy arrive dans l'OS, rires, téléphone (son++) > Joan conv couple |
| | 29:48 | Megan sort de la salle de réu to OS, Peggy la félicite, femmes dans le fond |
| épisode 8 | 2:35 | Megan sort de chez DD, remercie Dawn, marche dans l'OS |
| | 15:55 | arrivée Megan, Peggy, DD dans l'OS (son ++) |
| | 26:40 | arrivée Megan, DD dans l'OS (son ++)> Joan conv couple |
| | 30:20 | arrivée Campbell OS |
| épisode 9 | 5:32 | DD marche seul dans l'OS vide, silhouette noire |
| épisode 10 | 2 | Type appelle sa secrétaire pour tenir l'antenne de la TV |
| | 20:15 | arrivée type OS puis creative lounge > une secrétaire apportant du thé passe derrière Peggy |
| | 22:55 | une secrétaire va chercher Joan qui va dans l'OS |
| | 28:54 | réception appelle le type |
| | 39:30 | Sterling roses rouges Joan |
| | 43 | com dans l'OS sur Mowhawk > annonce publique |
| épisode 11 | début | salles réu, une dactylo au fond derrière la vitre pdt qu'ils brainstorment |
| | 39 | DD arrive dans l'OS, donne ses affaires à Dawn, cc clouloir, Peggy sort du bureau, perspectives avec dactylos en cc |
| | 45:30 | départ Peggy : range ses affaires dans son bureau, porte ouverte, rires > remonte le couloir, cc Joan |
| épisode 12 | | pendaison |
| épisode 13 | 3:40 | Joan et le type arrivent dans l'OS |
| | 4:20 | salles de réu, dactylos dans le fond |
| SAISON 6 | | |
| épisode 1-2 | 32:50 | arrivée DD dans l'OS, portraits pour la pub > bureau "so when i left, where was i?" et Dawn accourt |
| | 38 | creative lounge, son ++, secrétaire passe derrière DD avec de la nourriture > porte dactylos |
| | | DD guide le nouvel arrivant dans l'OS (plein de secrétaires dans le fond) |
| épisode 3 | / | |
| épisode 4 | 07:30 | Kenneth s'assoit en face du type (porte fond passage) |
| | 08 | arrivée créatif dans l'OS > observé depuis le creative lounge, passage derrière les portes ++ |
| | 10:11 | dactylos dans la cuisine, carte de vœux |
| | 12:40 | la dumb dans le bureau de Joan, porte ouverte derrière elle, passage |
| | 19 | arrivée du type furax dans l'OS, scandale parce qu'ils ont viré sa dactylo |
| | 38:45 | arrivée Joan dans l'OS, type & secrétaire, tension, Dawn remonte le couloir (plein de dactylos sur le côté) ; son ++ Joan clets |
| épisode 5 | début | meurtre JFK |
| | 22:14 | "where is my girl?!" dispute Campbell et type, devant une dactylo en fond, sur le coût de l'évènement |
| épisode 6 | 8 | arrivée DD dans l'OS, tombe sur Campbell, bureau où se trouve Sterling |
| | 24:20 | arrivée DD dans l'OS, une secrétaire de derrière les plantes, Campbell tombe dans les escaliers, scène au milieu, témoins, sur l'entrée en bourse |
| épisode 7 | 02:15 | chaos dans l'OS (fusion des 2 soc), Peggy marche dans le couloir avec ses affaires, sons forts |
| | 4:15 | arrivée DD dans l'OS |
| | 9:12 | DD sort de la salle de réu dans l'OS, répond au tel |
| | 13:30 | creative lounge, portes ouvertes, bcp de passage, sons forts |
| | 17 | à nouveau + DD |
| | 17:40 | DD quitte et marche dans le couloir, Shaw repart dans l'OS |
| | 26:29 | creative lounge, Joan passe devant les portes, dans le mal |
| | 40 | Campbell arrive dans l'OS par l'escalier, dactylo au po puis le suit, il l'engueule |
| épisode 8 | 9:40 | DD sort du bureau dans le fond, tout le monde pleure, secrétaires qui pleurent aux bords du cadre |
| | 14:30 | DD dans le mal regarde une femme à travers l'OS, regagne sa place de dactylo vu d'en haut, loud typing, sonnerie, hallu DD |
| | 15:20 | creative lounge, portes ouvertes, passage bords |
| | 17:20 | OS DD parle à Kenneth drogué, devant Dawn consternée en fond, |
| | 18 | creative lounge, portes ouvertes, gens qui courent |
| | 20 | DD possédé, entre dans le fond du creative lounge, ressort, bureau de Dawn vide, perdu |
| | 25:11 | creative lounge guillaume tel |
| | 46:20 | DD sort de chez Shaw après un dinguerie : la porte reste ouverte sur les secrétaires qui passent ++ |
| épisode 9 | 12:50 | Sterling & son petit-fils dans l'OS, le montre fièrement aux dactylos |
| | 17:10 | Shaw arrive dans l'OS, secrétaire |
| | 42:17 | Bureau Joan, Sterling arrive par le fond |
| | fin | Peggy perdue dans l'OS |
| épisode 10 | début | salle de réunion, dactylos dans le fond derrière vitre ++ |
| | 5:38 | creative lounge, dactylos fond portes ouvertes ++ |
| | 11:22 | Peggy utilise une grosse machine |
| | 12:25 | Joan & Peggy arrivent dans l'OS d'un pas décidé, parlent à Shaw se font piquer l'affaire par Campbell |
| | 36:46 | Shaw donne sa valise à une secrétaire fond du cadre, par la porte |
| | 39:27 | Joan convoquée > salle de réu Campbell fumant devant les vitres, femmes qui passent en fond, idem porte derrière Peggy |
| | 42 | fox appel orchestré par Peggy pour sortir Joan du pb Avon, Meredith la dumb lit le popier rose |
| | 45 | bon plan porte creative lounge + Campbell errant > jambes mini-robe jaune |
| épisode 11 | 0:54 | DD arrivée dans l'OS, donne sa valise à Dawn |
| | 2 | mère de Campbell arrive dans l'OS > rencontre avec Peggy |

| | | |
|------------|-------|--|
| | 15:50 | DD et Dawn parlent, Campbell arrive par le fond |
| épisode 12 | 6:31 | creative lounge, complicité Peggy & Shaw, courte focale = porte plus proche, secrétaires plus proches et floues |
| | 23' | réu, secrétaire tout au fond rapide, passage dactylos devant les fenêtres |
| | 35' | réu, secrétaire tout au fond rapide, passage dactylos devant les fenêtres |
| | 43:20 | Campbell arrive dans l'OS par le fond, cc dactylo typing ++ |
| | 45:12 | Peggy arrive dans l'OS, parle à la secrétaire de Shaw (son ++) |
| épisode 13 | début | DD arrive dans l'OS, se fait agro par le créatif, marchent ensemble |
| | 1:45 | Sterling sort de son bureau dans l'OS avec son beau-fils |
| | 3:30 | Campbell & Sterling se croisent dans l'OS > Joan et le gars serviable |
| | 25:57 | arrivée Campbell dans l'OS, donne ses affaires à sa secrétaire > Joan et une secrétaire parlent dans le couloir |
| SAISON 7 | | |
| épisode 1 | 4:10 | OS groupe réuni devant Dawn, pour aller chez DD > Dawn prend des notes |
| | 4:50 | Joan monte les escaliers de l'OS, s'arrête devant la secrétaire de Kenneth qui hurte dans le bureau |
| | 38:18 | Peggy arrive et parle à sa secrétaire en lui donnant ses affaires puis discussion dans l'OS |
| | 39:28 | Joan discute avec la secrétaire de Ken dans l'OS |
| épisode 2 | 8:26 | arrivée Peggy OS, gros bouquet de roses rouges (elles sont à sa secrétaire) |
| | 10:45 | Sterling et Lou s'interpellent d'un bout à l'autre de l'OS |
| | 15:06 | la fille de DD arrive dans l'OS (long plan) puis repart, OS autour d'elle |
| | 23:50 | Joan parle à Dawn dans l'OS, D bippe Lou |
| | 28' | Meredith vient échanger de bureau avec Dawn, boîte dans les bras, Dawn lui dit tout debout dans l'OS |
| | 31:26 | Peggy dit à sa secrétaire de jeter les fleurs , échange cringe, les autres dactylos regardent OS |
| | 32:40 | Dawn réception au téléphone pp, Cooper arrive et la voit puis va chez Joan se plaindre (racisme) |
| | 39' | Peggy sort dans l'OS (fleurs et bureau pp), trop gênée (son ++) |
| | 43:20 | Joan avec un carton dans l'OS, Shirley et ses fleurs, Dawn et son carton prend le bureau de Joan (joie perceptible) |
| épisode 3 | 2:11 | Dawn au téléphone avec DD (plusieurs angles) |
| | 4:55 | Peggy assise dans l'OS, deux créatifs viennent lui parler (Shirley ap) |
| | 10:30 | salle de réunion, des gens passent dans l'OS derrière les vitres, dont une dactylo en jupe (mouvement complet) |
| | 18:20 | dactylo par porte ouverte |
| | 27:17 | retour DD dans l'OS, lent sentimental puis creative lounge (long plan porte ouverte dactylos ++) |
| | 33:05 | creative lounge, tout le monde surpris du retour de DD |
| | 40' | réunion au sommet, dactylos ag vitres |
| | 43:53 | Dawn vient chercher DD dans le creative lounge et le guide dans l'OS > salle de réunion |
| épisode 4 | 03:07 | DD arrive dans l'OS vide, marche seul, regarde autour de lui [plan bureau machine et téléphone pendant ++] |
| | 4:15 | c'est une annonce publique pour l'installation de l'ordi "where are we supposed to work?!" > dialogues et coms +++ |
| | 5' | vident le creative lounge, commentent, déménagement cris |
| | 9:45 | secrétaire faussement effrayée court poursuivie par le petit fils de Sterling |
| | 12:39 | DD dérangé dans son bureau par une conv devant sa vitre semi-occultante > conv dans le couloir avec un ingé qui comprend pas travaux brillant qui couvrent le son habituel > débat avec l'ingé IBM > Peggy sort, Meredith de dos |
| | 16:25 | Peggy marche dans le couloir, bruit travaux (son ++), cc/dactylos |
| | 19:26 | Don rentre dans l'OS, plein de plans de dactylos en ap, conv avec Meredith > plans ++ avec les travaux en fond |
| | 24:30 | conv DD & ingé IBM |
| | 36' | DD sort, livre, OS, plan du chantier ++, Insulte l'ingé |
| | 37:40 | porte de Peggy: cheveux Meredith alignés avec un ouvrier à genoux |
| | 45:28 | DD revient au bureau en même temps que la tour de l'ordi |
| | | tour déplacée et mise en place, Peggy regarde, son +++++ > Peggy remonte le couloir dans l'OS |
| | fin | Don écrit sur sa machine |
| épisode 5 | début | le créa découvre un dessin, sons +++ |
| | 1:50 | arrivée Peggy et DD dans l'OS, dessinateur crie sur la secrétaire, et commente la machine x la secrétaire (plan // pub IBM) |
| | 22' | dessinateur soulé par le bourdonnement de l'ordi, met des mouchoirs dans ses oreilles > marche dans l'OS seul son +++++ |
| | | observe une conversation entre les chefs dans la salle de l'ordi |
| | 43' | Peggy sort dans l'OS terrifiée (dessinateur fou) prend le téléphone d'une secrétaire |
| | 45:50 | dessinateur embarqué par la brigade psy, tout le monde observe, plan +++ secrétaires dos à l'ordi, c/cc Peggy et l'ordi |
| épisode 6 | 4:20 | arrivée copine Campbell OS |
| | 12' | conv OS |
| | 13:30 | Peggy chez DD, Meredith par la porte + |
| | 14:14 | Peggy dans l'OS, voit Megan, plan dactylo ordi en fond + > bureau Peggy, Meredith porte au tel |
| épisode 7 | 10' | baiser trop cringe de Meredith "I will be your strength" |
| | 11:30 | DD arrive en furie chez Sterling, dactylo terrifiée |
| | 44' | sortent de chez Sterling, OS tout le monde debout annonce mort Cooper > scène Broadway |
| épisode 8 | 16:30 | DD parle à Meredith dans l'OS, profil pas mal |
| | 19' | arrivée Kenneth, donne ses affaires à Shirley dans l'OS |
| | 42:30 | plan porte ouverte secrétaire long |
| épisode 9 | 3:26 | deux secrétaires chez Sterling "It's too much, I cant do it by myself" check le rolex + téléphone, on les voit bosser à deux |
| | | dicte le numéro "well it's certainly a two men job" |
| | 15:55 | DD arrive dans l'OS, donne ses affaires à Meredith |
| | 34:45 | Meredith emporte les affaires de gaffe |
| épisode 10 | 15:02 | DD arrive dans l'OS, donne ses affaires à Meredith, lui commande une recherche |
| | 35:55 | porte de DD reste ouverte, Meredith vient demander si tout va bien |
| | 36:20 | un type vient apporter des fleurs à Joan dans l'OS |
| épisode 11 | 5' | secrétaires se font engueuler chez Sterling |
| | 8:22 | Don typing , les partenaires entrent, Meredith "do you need ice" |
| | 10:29 | enfants dans l'OS, Campbell demande à parler à Peggy |
| | 13:10 | Meredith entre chez DD, répond au téléphone |
| | 15:20 | salle de réunion, DD ferme le rideau, regard inquiet de Meredith, Joan dit que ça va paniquer les autres |
| | 17:15 | Meredith regarde DD sortir, plan de face, inquiète |
| | 25:36 | Peggy & dessinateur parlent avec une petite, Shirley en fond > joue à la secrétaire |
| | 43:25 | secrétaires marchent dans l'OS, conv Dawn & Shirley, Meredith arrive, c/cc entre elles |
| | 45:35 | annonce publique dans l'OS déménagement > conv animée entre les secrétaires > personne n'écoute DD |
| épisode 12 | début | arrivée DD, nouvel OS |
| | 2:25 | salle ordi vide, tour déménagée |
| | 5:25 | Peggy marche dans l'OS avec ses affaires dans une boîte |
| | 13:10 | Joan croise Campbell dans le nouvel OS , dactylos sur le côté |
| | 14' | Peggy marche dans l'OS détruit |
| | 27' | Peggy s'ennuie dans l'OS vide, téléphone sonne > Peggy marche dans l'OS vide, Sterling joue de l'orgue |
| | 33' | Peggy & Sterling dans l'OS détruit, plan de profil ++ |
| épisode 13 | / | |
| épisode 14 | début | doux secrétaires chez Sterling, tâches absurdes |

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Do Corporate Films Dream of Cybernetic Governance?

Computers (as Metaphors of) Industrial Labor and Society in Olivetti-Sponsored Films

Abstract

Addressing the audiovisual construction of computer labor, the essay focuses on the relationship between computers and film in their lifetimes as useful media. It analyzes the films sponsored by the leading Italian IT manufacturing company Olivetti between the late 1950s and the 1970s. Questioning Vinzenz Hediger's hypothesis on industrial cinema's inability to make computing visible, it argues that the cinematic representation of computers is invested with broader rhetorical functions and responds to a specific form of governmentality, inflected by the application of cybernetics in scientific management. Based on this premise, the essay is articulated in two sections. The first one, "Computer's Screen Debut," retraces Olivetti's early outbreak in the IT market and its concurrent participation to the Italian industry film festivals. At that time, company executives and film practitioners problematized how the new and still largely unknown machines could be (re)presented to persuade potential clients. The second section, "Envisioning Cybernetic Governance," analyzes Olivetti's computer-themed films. Through a comparison with those produced in the previous years, it maintains that company's corporate narrative and self-representation changed from a "pastoral" ideal of the factory as a community, to the cybernetic one of work organization as a socio-technical, data processing system. This shift enabled discursive analogies among computer, industrial labor and social organizations at large. The metaphorical tropes that re-occur across the considered film *corpus* are grouped into three categories to demonstrate how Olivetti's films turned computers into models of cybernetic governance.

Keywords

industrial cinema, sponsored films, Olivetti, computer, cybernetic governmentality

Introduction

Exterior day. A bunch of kids runs toward an electronic terminal placed in the middle of a meadow, that a later shot will reveal to be but a plateau above an industrial plant. The kids huddle around the machine, play with its keyboard, touch its screen, dance around it in a circle. One of them even sits on it, following the directions of an adult man who takes pictures with his camera. This is roughly what happens in the closing scene of *La macchina del tempo* (The Time Machine; 1969) a 15 minutes-long film directed by the documentary film-maker Antonello Branca¹⁾ and sponsored by the Italian computer manufacturing company Olivetti to promote the release of TC100 electronic terminals.

If we were to follow the working hypothesis proposed by Vinzenz Hediger about computing in industrial cinema, the scene could easily be read as a meta-representation of the collision between photographic media and information technologies. Prevented from capturing the machine's inner workings, the man with the camera has no choice but to portray it in its outward appearances, as if it was a totemic object, thus symbolizing (photography's and) "film's inability to represent and perform what the computer does, its inherent limits of *Darstellung* [representation] in a cybernetic age."²⁾ Yet, even under this interpretation, some questions would be left unanswered: how does this dancing children scene fit in a corporate discourse? How is it supposed to illustrate the potentials of electronic computing devices primarily meant to be used in banks and shopping malls? If it belongs to a "utility film," what then is it useful for?



Fig. 1: A girl sitting on Olivetti's TC100 electronic terminal. Still from *La macchina del tempo* (Antonello Branca, 1968). (Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa — CSC; Archivio Storico Olivetti)

- 1) Not differently from other Italian filmmakers between the 1960s and the 1970s, Branca was a left activist occasionally involved in the production of sponsored films. Before directing *La Macchina del tempo* he had co-founded the Filmmaker Research Group and captured on camera the students' protests and countercultural artistic movement in the U.S. in the style of direct cinema — *What's Happening?* (1967), *California: il dissenso* (California: Dissension, 1968). One year later, in 1970 he will author *Seize the Time*, an inquiry film on the Black Panther Party.
- 2) Vinzenz Hediger, "Thermodynamic Kitsch: Computing in German Industrial Films, 1928/ 1963," in *Films that work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, eds. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: AUP, 2009), 143.

Analyzing and contextualizing the rhetorical strategies and the governmental logics in *La macchina del tempo* and other computer-themed industrial films is what this essay aims to do. With reference to specific context (Italy from the late 1950s to the early 1970s) and film corpus (Olivetti-sponsored films of the same period), it reflects upon the intertwining between the emerging technology of electronic digital computers and the already consolidated one of film in their lifetimes as useful media in business organizations. More specifically, it asks: how (and to what end) was computer labor represented in the films commissioned by IT corporations? How much (and to what end) did the computer as a representational object change the way industrial films worked and participated in a corporate discourse? To answer these questions, I will call for a different interpretative framework from the one proposed by Hediger. In the already mentioned chapter of the seminal collection *Films that Work*, he maintains that the transition from the thermodynamic to the cybernetic modes of production constituted an *empasse* to cinema's representational capacities. As opposed to the laborers' physical effort and bodily movements transforming energy into work, computer's storing and processing of data exceed the regime of visibility and knowledge that film, as an indexical medium, is inextricably tied to. Suddenly blind to the core information-transmission circuit, industrial cinema stubbornly kept on staging human labor by the "conventions of the thermodynamic age."³⁾ I argue that, whereas it is true that the capacity to capture the worker's bodily performance contributed to establish film as a management tool since the time of Taylor and Ford, this function alone does not exhaust the agency exerted by the medium in business organizations. As it has been now discussed by many, including Hediger himself, utility films fulfill broader governmental mandates, serving "as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital."⁴⁾ In the present case, their usefulness is better understood in relation to a historically specific notion of governmentality we may define as "cybernetic."

The adjective here does not simply stand for a high-sounding synonym of "computer based." It indicates instead the epistemic frameworks and cultural logics underlying "a particular mode of scientific governance that emerged after World War II and that led to different outcomes in different contexts."⁵⁾ Originally introduced in the U.S. as a mathematical model for the study of organic and non-organic systems, by the second half of the twentieth century the cybernetic approach had been established also in Europe and become widely influential across a wide range of fields of knowledge and application, shifting from biology and engineering to social and human sciences. As Kline notices "in adopting the language and concepts of cybernetics and information theory, scientists turned the metaphor of information into the matter-of-fact description of what is pro-

3) Ibid.

4) Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland, "Utility and Cinema," in *Useful Cinema*, eds. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. The reference is meant as representative of a wider area of research that interprets utility films in light of Foucault's notion of "governmentality." Hediger and Vonderau themselves intended historical epistemology of media in industrial organizations as complementary to the approach of governmentality studies. See Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, "Introduction," in *Films that work*, eds. Hediger and Vonderau, 9–18.

5) Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, *The Power of Systems: How Policy Sciences Opened Up the Cold War World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

cessed, stored, and retrieved in physical, biological, and social systems.”⁶) When conceptualized as multi-component, self-regulating systems that adapt to the external environment through information-feedback circuits, entities as diverse as animals, machines, factories, and social formations became virtually comparable — and equally manageable. In this respect, scholars Bernard Geoghegan and Zoë Druick reflected on the implications of a cybernetic approach underlying mid-50s human sciences on both sides of the Atlantic, demonstrating how audiovisual technologies were instrumental in both Palo Alto’s psychoanalytic inquiries on American families and UNESCO’s educational programs for European childhood.⁷ In the present case, the emphasis is on how cybernetic principles were applied in the interrelated fields of informatics and industrial management, promoting a systemic, data-driven view of computers, of the work organizations producing them and of society at large.⁸ As I will demonstrate, Olivetti’s computer themed films do not only represent manufacturing processes — as it was customary in industrial “process films” already established during the thermodynamic age⁹). They also address wider (and apparently unrelated) governmental processes, such as managing social life in general and guiding school-educated kids toward a professional career. In the attempt to locate their “utility” from a governmental perspective, I will thus attend to how these films illustrated computers’ *technical engineering* while performing *social engineering* tasks to their targeted audiences of employees and business insiders. To paraphrase the “three Rs” famously introduced by Hediger and Vonderau for the serial analysis of industrial films, my focus here will be less on what the medium (indexically) Recorded, and more on how it operated as a Rhetorical form and an agent of Rationalization¹⁰).

Based on these premises, the article is articulated in two sections. The first one briefly introduces Olivetti as a sponsoring firm, locating its transition from mechanics to electronics along the *continuum* of computer history between the 1950s and the 1970s — that is from the advent of commercial computing through the development of mainframe and minicomputers¹¹). Since it coincided with the heydays of Italian industrial cinema, the company’s debut in the early IT market obtained wide film coverage. During this period a

6) Ronald R. Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment: Or Why We Call our Age the Information Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 6.

7) Bernard Dyonisius Geoghegan, “The Family as Machine: Film, Infrastructure, and Cybernetic Kinship in Suburban America,” *The Grey Room*, no. 66 (2017), 70–101; Zoë Druick, “Operational Media: Cybernetics, Biopolitics and Postwar Education,” *Foro de Educación* 18, no. 2 (2020), 63–81.

8) On the long-lasting influence of cybernetic governmentality on industrial management see: Felix Maschewski and Anna-Verena Nosthoff, “Designing Freedom: On (Post)Industrial Governmentality and Its Cybernetic Fundaments,” *Digitalization in Industry: Between Domination and Emancipation*, eds. Uli Meyer, Simon Schaupp, and David Seibt (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 81–110.

9) As clarified by Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, “processual representations” go way beyond the limits of a single genre or a historical era and “process film” is nor a synonym neither a sub-sector of industrial film. Nevertheless, it remains true that most of its early specimen of the process genre belong to 19th century useful cinema, as the author herself notes in *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 52–55.

10) Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, “Record, Rhetoric, Rationalization: Industrial Organization and Film,” in *Films that Work*, eds. Hediger and Vonderau, 35–50.

11) I’m referring to Paul E. Ceruzzi’s periodization: *A History of Modern Computing* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003).

series of documentaries were premiered in the specialized festivals, drawing the attention of professionals and commentators toward the development of Its and the potentials of their business-oriented applications.

The second section focuses on Olivetti-sponsored films as a body of analysis.¹²⁾ It relates both the company's transition to electronics and its newly adopted sociological theories of labor with a change in its corporate narrative and self-representation. It argues that the cybernetically inflected conception of work organization as a socio-technical, data-processing system enabled discursive analogies with other technical and social systems. Having to render these conceptual parallelisms in audiovisual terms, the films ended up by investing the computer with broad rhetorical functions, contributing to "the development and diffusion of human-computer metaphors in the middle decades of the twentieth century."¹³⁾ For analytical convenience, the metaphorical tropes that re-occur across the film *corpus* are grouped in three categories, establishing comparisons between computers' operations and, respectively, industrial labor, social living, and youth education. While formally presenting and promoting computers as the technologically advanced fruit of an equally advanced industrial production process, Olivetti-sponsored films advocate their use in virtually every area of social living. In so doing, they rhetorically turn computers into universal metaphors and models of cybernetic governance.

Computer's Screen Debut. Olivetti's Transition to Electronics in Industrial Cinema.

Computer historians usually date the dawn of commercial computing in Italy to the mid-1950s. In 1954 the only two running computers in the whole country were employed by research institutions — the Center for Numerical Computation at Milan Polytechnic University and the National Research Council in Rome¹⁴⁾. In that same year, another academic institution, the Electronic Calculators Study Center of the University of Pisa, obtained national funds to build a computer from scratch, with locally produced hardware components. It was this latter project that raised entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti's attention¹⁵⁾. Having inherited a long-running and internationally renowned typewriters manufacturing company from his father Camillo since 1933, he saw the transition from mechanics to electronics as a necessary step to renew the corporate mission and expand the market¹⁶⁾.

12) The nearly 3 000 films and videos belong to the Archivio Storico Olivetti are now preserved by the Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa in Ivrea, Turin. A large portion of the digitized audiovisual materials, including the ones considered in this essay, are now available for online consultation on the Archive's Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@cinemaimpresatv>.

13) Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2015), xv.

14) Corrado Bonfanti, "Information Technology in Italy: The Origins and the Early Years (1954–1965)," in *Reflections on the History of Computing*, ed. Arthur Tatnall (Dordrecht, London, and New York: Springer, 2012), 320–321.

15) Giuseppe De Marco et al., "The Early Computers of Italy," *IEEE: Annals of the History of Computing* 21, no. 4 (1999), 32–34.

16) Erwin Daniels, Gianmario Verona, and Bernardino Provera, "Overcoming the Inertia of Organizational Competence: Olivetti's transition from Mechanical to Electronic Technology," *Industrial and Corporate Change* 27, no. 3 (2018), 600.

Therefore, the Italian manager provided the research center in Pisa with funds, personnel, and technological materials. His purposes, oriented toward the mass production and the commercialization of the new machines, eventually diverged from those of the university researchers. Already in 1955, this difference of interests led to the founding of a company-owned Electronic Research Division which, under the direction of Chinese-Italian electronics engineer Mario Tchou and laid the groundwork for the development of the ELEA 9000 series¹⁷⁾. A fully-transistored model, ELEA 9003 was the first second-generation computer to be ever produced and marketed in Italy. It was launched in 1959 and later followed by ELEA 6000, a series of smaller mainframe computers intended for both scientific and business applications¹⁸⁾. By the first half of the 1960s, 40 ELEA 9001 and 140 ELEA 6001 models were bought or leased, almost exclusively by Italian clients¹⁹⁾. The demand in the domestic market was too low to absorb the costs of such an expensive production. Olivetti's original intent was in fact to export its new products globally and to enter a still emerging trade, at that time firmly dominated by IBM²⁰⁾. However, due to a series of unfortunate events, things did not go according to plan. After the untimely deaths of Adriano Olivetti and Mario Tchou between 1960 and 1961, Olivetti family had to face financial difficulties and was thus forced to sell 25% of its shares²¹⁾. A pool of Italian top managers took control of the company and imposed the termination of massive investments in electronics. The Electronic Research Division was later ceased to General Electric²²⁾. The few electronic engineers who remained employed at Olivetti refocused their interests toward the less expensive area of light electronics: from 1962, a team supervised by engineer Pier Giorgio Perotto maintained a low profile while attempting to produce a computer comparable in size to a typewriter. The result of that research was first exhibited in 1964 during the Exposition of the Business Equipment Manufacturers Association in New York²³⁾. Programma 101, a transistor-based calculator capable of performing preprogrammed operations from magnetic strip, is often remembered as a predecessor of the personal computer because of its desktop size²⁴⁾. Its unexpected success helped to gradually revive interest in consumer electronics as a profitable business. By the end of the decade, with the fourth generation of (personal) computers approaching, electronics was on its way to become the dominant technology. However, for having divested its R&D department right before joining the international IT market, Olivetti had lagged behind its competitors and was never able to catch up. To this day, both computer historians and former employees unan-

17) Ibid.

18) Elisabetta Mori, "The Italian Computer: Italy's Olivetti was an Early Pioneer of Digital Computers and Transistors," *IEEE Spectrum* 56, no. 6 (2019), 40–47.

19) Michele Pacifico, "'Alta tecnologia e cultura millenaria': Il contributo di Olivetti allo sviluppo dell'informatica in Italia," in *Lospite ingrato: Centro studi Franco Fortini*, no. 6 (2021), 127.

20) See Elisabetta Mori, "Coping With the 'American Giants,'" *IEEE: Annals of History of Computing* 41, no. 4 (2019), 83–96.

21) Marco Maffioletti, *L'impresa ideale tra fabbrica e comunità* (Ivrea and Rome: Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, 2016), 442–446.

22) Daniels, Verona, and Provera, "Overcoming the Inertia...", 603–604.

23) Ibid., 608.

24) De Marco et al., "The Early Computers of Italy," 34. Perotto himself, the leader of the engineering team behind the minicomputer, later claimed to have invented the personal computer: *Programma 101: L'invenzione del personal computer: una storia appassionante mai raccontata!* (Milan: Sperling & Krupfer, 1995).

imously recall the company's pioneering attempt as a "missed chance," blaming it alternately on the short-sightedness of the managers or on the lack of a national policy in support of technological innovation²⁵).

Despite its somehow unfortunate outcome, Olivetti's outbreak into the IT sector allowed business insiders to take a glimpse on the way industrial labor and industrialized society would be transformed by the advent of the computers. The company's early venture in electronics coincided approximately with what Anna Maria Falchero recently called the Italian "golden age" of industrial documentary²⁶). The late 1950s mark the inauguration of the Industrial and Artisan Film Festival in Monza, near Milan (1957) and the National Review of Industrial Film (1959), the latter organized by the main Italian association of manufacturing and service companies Confindustria. Equipped with its in-house film unit since the previous decade, Olivetti was among the first national enterprises to take part in these events with *film di prodotto* ("product films," presenting a specific product before its market launch), *film di relazioni umane* ("human relations film," aimed mostly at the internal audiences of employees) and *di relazioni pubbliche or di prestigio* ("public relations and prestige films," building the company's corporate image for external audiences)²⁷). Olivetti film unit's productions were generally well received. Premiered at the Venice International Film Festival, *ELEA classe 9000* (1960), was a "high-profile" medium-length documentary illustrating the inner working of Olivetti's early mainframes, directed by Nelo Risi²⁸) featuring animated sequences by painter Gianni Polidori and cinematographer Giulio Gianini and with a soundtrack authored by avant-garde composer Luciano Berio²⁹). Probably the first Italian non-fiction film to showcase a computer, *ELEA classe 9000* won the first National Review of Industrial Film. The same achievement was repeated six years later by another Olivetti film, *N/C: Il controllo Numerico* (N/C: Numerical Control; Aristide Bosio, 1966), featuring Angelo Gervasio's animated sequences, and the use of computerized machine tools to automate the manufacturing process. The already mentioned *La macchina del tempo* and *Le Regole del Gioco* (The Rules of the Game; Massimo Magri, 1969) — an audiovisual introduction to Programma101's software³⁰) —

25) See Perotto, *Programma 101*; Lorenzo Soria, *Informatica: Un'occasione perduta* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979). American biographer Meryle Secret even followed a techno-political conspiracy trail as an explanation for Adriano's sudden death and the ultimate failure of its company: *The Mysterious Affair at Olivetti: IBM, the CIA, and the Cold War's Conspiracy to Shut Down the First Desktop Computer* (New York: Knopf, 2019).

26) Anna Maria Falchero, "Movie and Industry in Italy: The 'Golden Age' of Italian Industrial Documentary (1950–1970)," in *Films that Work Harder: The Circulation of Industrial Film*, eds. Vinzenz Hediger, Florian Hoof, and Yvonne Zimmermann (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023), 635–650.

27) The contest promoted by Confindustria's National Review of Industrial Film was articulated in six different categories, depending on the subject and on the targeted audiences.

28) Younger brother of Dino Risi, one of the major directors in Italian-style comedy, Nelo Risi was a poet and a filmmaker who debuted as a collaborator of the ERC Paris Film Unit coordinated by John Ferno. Between the 1960s and the 1970s he directed mostly sponsored films, TV documentaries and a few fiction feature-films such as *Diario di una schizofrenica* (Diary of a Schizophrenic Girl, 1968).

29) Alessandro Cecchi, "Creative Films for Creative Corporations: Music and Musicians in Experimental Italian Industrial Film," in *Films that work Harder*, eds. Hediger, Hoof, and Zimmermann, 779–797.

30) See Aa. Vv., *Cinema e Industria* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1971), 191–219. For film data I make primary reference to Adriano Bellotto ed., *La memoria del futuro: Film d'arte, Film e Video Industriali Olivetti: 1949–1992* (Città di Castello: Fondazione Olivetti, 1994).

won respectively the ninth and the tenth edition of the festival. Critics who attended the events repeatedly praised Olivetti's film production for representing clearly the problems solved by computers and electronic elaborators "which are now about to enter our daily lives."³¹⁾

As new representational objects, computers and their business applications constituted a challenge for the sales and public relations department. A former manager of the Olivetti's Commercial Electronic Division, Michele Pacifico, recalls: "the computer was a mysterious machine, unknown to most, even to those who already had some experience with punch card equipment. Hence, not just salesmen but all the company's working *intelligenza* was mobilized to introduce the commercial offer through explanatory documents and instruction manuals, with the aim of reassuring the skeptics and encouraging the eager ones."³²⁾ As a subsection of the Press and Advertising Department, also Olivetti's film unit had to persuade the potential clients that, with the new machines, "all of their companies' problems, not just the managerial ones but also the commercial and industrial ones, would find a modern, strong and definitely successful solution."³³⁾ Directors and writers seemed aware that their duties as "evangelizers" of a new technology could not be reduced to the task of mere documentation. In 1962, Aristide Bosio, a member of the Olivetti film unit and director of most of its titles, explained that "our documentaries are mostly aimed to be screened in the industrial circuits, to disclose all sectors of our production to our subsidiaries and buyers."³⁴⁾ Probably referring to *ELEA classe 9000*, he mentioned a recently produced "technical film" explaining that its aim was to illustrate "the functions of a big machine, very clearly, maybe even more clearly than showing the machine itself would do."³⁵⁾ A few years later, in an issue of *Film Special* magazine entirely devoted to "the world of electronics," critics and filmmakers would address the audiovisual



Fig. 2: Olivetti's film director Aristide Bosio on the cover of *Film Special* 2, no. 1 (1968). (Courtesy of Bibliomediateca Gromo — Archivio Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

31) Nedo Ivaldi, "Film industriali a Como," *Bianco e Nero* 30, no. 7–8 (1969), 124. All translations from Italian-speaking sources are the author's.

32) Pacifico, "Alta tecnologia e cultura millenaria," 124–125.

33) *Ibid.*, 125.

34) Quoted in Walter Alberti, ed., *Il film industriale* (Milan: Figli della Provvidenza, 1962), 82.

35) *Ibid.*

representation of computer more directly, problematizing the difficulties in “grasping the essence of an activity that hides its great power under smooth, uniform surfaces or through the decorative fabric of its circuits; whereas, in the past, even the machine revealed its capacity and strength through the picturesque assembly of its parts and mechanisms.” The magazine took the most recent Olivetti-sponsored films as examples for how they “visually ‘attack’ modern machines and stage them so that the audience can get a fair impression of their power [...] not as ‘objects’ but almost as protagonists, living symbols of our technological age.”³⁶⁾

As I already discussed elsewhere, practitioners in the field of industrial and sponsored cinema were far from being mere executors or employees who have turned their hand into filmmaking³⁷⁾. Their professional figures lied somewhere in between Frank Gilbreth and corporate consultants of early 20th century American industry³⁸⁾ and what we would call “brand and communication strategists” in the 21st century’s informational economy. In 1960s Italy film writers and directors often came from a background in human sciences and were generally up to date about the recent theories in the newly established interdisciplinary field of Filmology. For uniting skills in audiovisual production with psychological, sociological, and educational knowledges, they usually had a firm grasp of the potentials of cinema as a means of social communication. Consequently, they were perfectly aware that “film is above all a language and, as such, can lend itself to being anything. [...] Even when it aims to [represent] reality is, it does so as a means of expression, thus subjectivizing reality to the author’s vision, decomposing and transforming it to fit efficiently the film’s narrative structure.”³⁹⁾ Computers had to be audiovisually and discursively constructed so to serve the sponsoring company’s practical purposes, fit its corporate narrative, and enhance its views on the social relevance of information technologies.

Envisioning Cybernetic Governance. Computers as Metaphors.

To better understand how Olivetti’s corporate narratives changed during its transition to electronics, we need to take a step back and get an idea at the early production of its film unit. Until the late 1950s, besides promoting new typewriters and calculators, sponsored films had been mostly focused on the welfare services the company offered to its employees and on how its activities had improved the living conditions of the communities living nearby the plants. Documentaries such as *Incontro con la Olivetti* (Meet Olivetti; Giorgio Ferroni 1950), *Infermeria di Fabbrica* (Factory’s First Aid Room; Aristide Bosio 1951), *Una fabbrica e il suo ambiente* (A Factory and its Environment; Michele Gandin, 1957) or *Sud come Nord* (South like North; Nelo Risi, 1957) stand out for their attention to the social and human aspects of industrial work as well as for their critical stances on the risks

36) N.A., “Ritratti del mondo ‘elettronico,’” *Film Special* 2, no. 1 (1968), 9.

37) See Simone Dotto, “Istruzioni per l’uso: Teorie d’utilità nel dibattito sul film industriale italiano,” *Cinema e Storia* 9, no. 1 (2022), 27–44.

38) See Florian Hoof in *Angels of Efficiency: A Media History of Consulting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 186–239.

39) Attilio Giovannini, “Il cinema tra realtà e linguaggio,” *Film Special* 2, no. 1 (1968), 5.

of industrialization — a quite unusual trait for corporate films. By insisting on welfare policies and recreational activities and by drawing the attention to the social environment and rural landscapes surrounding the industrial plants, these shorts publicized the peculiarities for which Olivetti was (and still is) considered a model of “socially responsible” capitalism. They contributed in building its brand-reputation as a company providing health services, organizing cultural activities and taking care of its employees’ physical and intellectual health also outside of the working hours. As Paola Bonifazio maintains “by subsuming the social into the economic realm, Olivetti films represented a society of government, in which politics becomes bio-politics.” In this, the Italian firm’s early corporate film propaganda adheres to the governmental rhetoric of “pastoral power,” “in which business took an invisible role while the company’s main concerns were devoted to the care of its flock.”⁴⁰⁾

This corporate image was faithful to the progressive views of Adriano Olivetti, as an “enlightened capitalist.” An early adopter of the scientific management of labor, he eventually became critical of Taylorism and a proud advocate of techno-humanism — a cooperation between techno-scientific and humanistic knowledge aimed at the improvement of working conditions. Willing to develop a “human-faced Taylorism”⁴¹⁾ and to emancipate workers from the obsessive, alienating routines of industrial production, the entrepreneur hired intellectuals, and exponents of the humanities among his collaborators. One of them, the future eminent labor sociologist Luciano Gallino, was assigned the task to investigate the reasons for the firm’s impressive expansion in the post-war period. The research’s practical purpose was to provide the company executives with a framework for interpreting (and enduring) a growth they had been witnessing daily but they still struggled to grasp. Through an approach indebted to William Hashby’s cybernetics, Gallino described the work organization as “a complex socio-technical system, wherein a variable quantity of materials, energies (including many aspects of work) and information circulate uninterruptedly among its composing elements, each of which takes care of their processing, transformation and transmission in varying forms, with a view to the unitary purposes of the system.”⁴²⁾ The main features of the Olivetti model were identified in “the advent of new methods for the processing, employment and control of information” and in “the constant search for forms of administrative feed-back (by no means limited to the administrative sphere), designed to recompose the effective unity of command in the hands of management.”⁴³⁾ Rooted in the same techno-humanist premises, this characterization marks a shift from the “pastoral” ideal of the factory as a socio-economic community to a cybernetic one of the work organization as a self-regulating techno-social system.

The conceptual proximity between the organization of labor and the new technologies as “information processing systems” provided a striking analogy that industrial films’ nar-

40) Paola Bonifazio, *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 85. See also Federico Pierotti, “Progettare il futuro: Il techno-film Olivetti: politica, tecnologia e media,” *Immagine* 39, no. 19 (2019), 129–152.

41) Luciano Gallino, *L’impresa responsabile: Un’intervista su Adriano Olivetti*, ed. Paolo Ceri (Turin: Edizioni di Comunità, 2001), 44.

42) Luciano Gallino, *Progresso tecnologico ed evoluzione organizzativa negli stabilimenti Olivetti* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1960), 11.

43) *Ibid.*, 9.

ratives would take up and further extend. The following paragraphs will explain how, by analyzing the way films variously relate computer's operability to different types of depicted "social systems," from industrial labor itself to the less obvious ones of social organization and school education.

Computer and/as Industrial Labor: a general analogy between the functioning of IT technologies and the organization of labor is featured in those Olivetti-sponsored films closer to industrial cinema's traditional structures and aims — showcasing either computer as an industrial product or its application for production purposes. Nelo Risi's *ELEA Classe 9000* does both, as it presents the new mainframe while retracing, step by step, the process of its fabrication. The different teams at work at the Electronic Research Division are introduced to the camera by engineer Mario Tchou in person and later shown to the viewer through several tracking shots: the camera lingers on the workshop that produces platelets and hardware memories, where "the visitor can still recognize traditional images of the factory," and moves on to show the logicians' team, whose organization resembles a university classroom. The differences between such highly specialized work-units stand out also on a visual level and it is up to the voice-over to emphasize the systemic coherence underlying the overall process: "the contributions of the various groups converge toward a single goal, the realization of the most functional system for calculating, processing and transmitting data." Following these words, a scheme of computer drawn by electronic engineers on a blackboard fades out and gets slowly replaced by Polidori and Gianini's animated sequences: here the operation of ELEA computers is illustrated with an essentialized depiction of data flowing through the machine. Live-action shots of Olivetti factory and animated sequences portraying computer's inner logics cooperate to present both ELEA mainframe and its fabrication as multi-faceted systems driven by the circulation of data. Information-processing serves as a common thread both for uniting the different work units and practical steps required by the production process (from hardware fabrication to software engineering) and for activating the various components of the brand new "electronic brain." Comparing the labor required to produce new machines and the way the same machines work per se is the pre-condition to present (and promote) ELEA 9000 as both a technological product and a tool for business managing. As made explicit again by the voice-over, the use of the computer "enables today the most rational and effective organization of the private and public enterprise [...] allows the manager an overview, a look on the overall life of his organization that had been inconceivable so far."

The analogy between computer and work organization hints at a cybernetic reconfiguration of industrial production which is only implicitly suggested by *ELEA Classe 9000* and will be shown by later films in its practical consequences. When illustrating the use of "Auctor" computerized machine tools to automate the manufacturing process, Aristide Bosio's *N/C. Il controllo numerico* assume that a factory could be run exactly like a computer — that is by inscribing the instructions on a magnetic strip and transmitting them directly to the assembly line. The strip itself is shown as it runs from one spool to another in an animated sequence⁴⁴: even more evidently than in the previous case, the function of

44) This frequent use of animation to explain how computers technically operate can be read as a confirmation to Hediger's argument on film's inability to referentially capture IT's labor. On a more historical note, it must

animation here is not only to cover for what could not be captured photographically but also to stress the crucial points in the film's rhetorical argument. The scenes showing a brick wall torn down by the strip may add nothing to the technical explanation on how the Auctor machine-tools actually work, but they aim to emphasize the time-saving potentials of a fully automated process. Throughout the film other rhetorical devices cooperate to emphasize the same ideal of automated immediacy. For instance, the concluding scenes feature a superimposition between the images of the engineers' spreadsheets on that of a machine running on the assembly line: "from design to implementation, the step is immediate," says the spoken comment, as to suggest that, when a factory is run by (and like) a computer, every product is already virtually manufactured as soon as it gets designed.

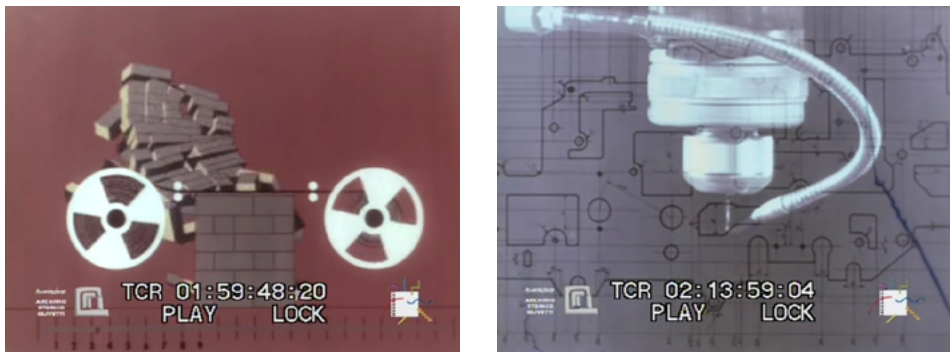


Fig. 3: Images of automated immediacy. Stills from *N/C. Controllio Numerico* (Aristide Bosio, 1966). (Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa — CSC; Archivio Storico Olivetti)

The superimposed image constitutes, in a sense, an over-elliptical account of the production process from which the process itself is paradoxically left out. In staging a computerized work-environment and the effect of automation over industrial production, Bosio's film approximates in many ways what scholar Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky famously described as the ultimate, aesthetic goal of the process genre: representing manufacturing processes as they approach the magic standard of zero-labor⁴⁵). Differently from what would happen in a similarly structured film of the "thermodynamic age," there's no even need to minimize workers' tiring and alienating routine through — simply because there are no workers at the assembly line. Seeing computerized machine tools as they operate automatically create the impression that all the manual, repetitive work gets now done by

be noted that the inclusion of animated sequences was in no way an exclusive prerogative of computer-themed films: sponsored and industrial documentaries of the time often resorted to animated maps and graphs, as well as to cartoon characters, especially when illustrating a generally "abstract" social issue. In this sense, films like *ELEA Classe 9000* and *N/C* don't treat early informatics any differently from other sponsored documentaries and industrial films had done with subjects as, for instance, the job market or the farming cycle of an agricultural product. For an overview on animated documentary (and a focus the Italian case) see: Cristina Formenti, *The Classical Animated Documentary and its Contemporary Evolution* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

45) Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre*, 116–117.

itself, without any human effort. *N/C*'s film portrait of the automated factory as a utopian work organization with no human labor doesn't only constitute as an updated version of the magic/technique dichotomy; it also epitomizes a purely cybernetic understanding of techno-social system as entities capable of regulating and adjusting by themselves — "automatically." The relative absence of human laborers in the film is, in this sense, significant. The mechanical workshops that were still visible in *ELEA Classe 9000* disappear, leaving us with only one worker portrayed at his desk. As the speaker suggests, "his time, busy but already somewhat free, can also be spent by doing crossword puzzles."

As if to prevent any possible objection about automation stealing humans' jobs, computer-themed films never fail to present the replacement of manual labor as a techno-humanist conquest. Electronics "is initiating man into a new condition of freedom and achievement. Subtracted from the most strenuous routine [...] the person in charge of any technical, productive or scientific activity can now offer himself new, very broad perspectives." The films of the late 1960s promoting the Programma 101 minicomputers would stick to the same script. As stated in Magri's *Le regole del gioco* "without human presence, men's current of thought and intellectual correction, the machines look abstractly and depressingly perfect, like abandoned instruments of the orchestra." The men in white coats standing before the mainframes and the female computer operators portrayed by these films are not merely "kitschy" reiterations of a thermodynamic human-machine aesthetics; they are instead functional in presenting the shift from manual labor to data processing as a necessary evolution from *homo faber* to (what cybernetics calls) *homo gubernator*: a new kind of worker enjoying an unprecedented intellectual freedom and entitled to participate in the control of production processes.

The Cybernetization of Society: to promote ELEA computers to layer audiences, Olivetti circulated an alternative version of *ELEA Classe 9000* renamed *La memoria del futuro* (The Memory of the Future; Nelo Risi, 1960). This shortened version edits out the sequences describing the computer's functioning while foregrounding its social applications. Car traffic and city life scenes are followed by sequences depicting a chaotic day at the stock exchange, the interiors of the library, an archive, an administrative office, a bank. What these seemingly unrelated places have in common is being complex social systems where "the need to rationalize the different services is becoming increasingly sensitive [...] Only the thread of methodical discourse allows access to information, to knowledge which means human power." Having any direct mention of the computer preceded by an illustration of the problems it might solve is a rhetorical device which recurs throughout all Olivetti film production. Antonello Branca's *La macchina del tempo* showcases images of urban centers, schools, and department stores, wondering what our life would be like if it was possible to calculate in advance any future needs and possible change in social organization: "to predict, to plan, to build, one must above all know: for how many?"

In setting up different aspects of social living as logical and mathematical problems, Olivetti films adhere to a rule widely accepted in industrial and instructional cinema, according to which any portrayed object must be recognizable in generic terms, as "a kind of something."⁴⁶⁾ With the possible exception of the sponsoring company itself (which will be

46) Ibid., 85–86.

referred to individually for obvious promotional reasons) characters, actions or situations featured in the films are presented generically enough to be immediately identifiable by anyone. In this sense, live-action and animated scenes not only cooperate in constructing the same abstract concept but also share the same status. Animation that, as shown in the previous paragraph, is often used to present the workings of the computer can serve as well to exemplify its application in a practical case, such as the management of purchases within the motor industry — as shown by the end of *ELEA Classe 9000*. Conversely, the footages of city traffic opening *La Memoria del Futuro* cease to be strictly referential when, as the speaker admits, they intend to depict a city “whose name doesn’t matter because it is ‘the city’, the one where I live and the one where you live.” For being based on a general, statistical abstraction of technical and social entities, both orders of images can be considered as “epistemic [...], images that no longer simply represent, and refer to, reality, but become objects of knowledge in and of themselves.”⁴⁷⁾ In other words, photographic and animated images fulfill informative and illustrative tasks, enabling the viewer to understand the problem and eagerly wait for its solution.

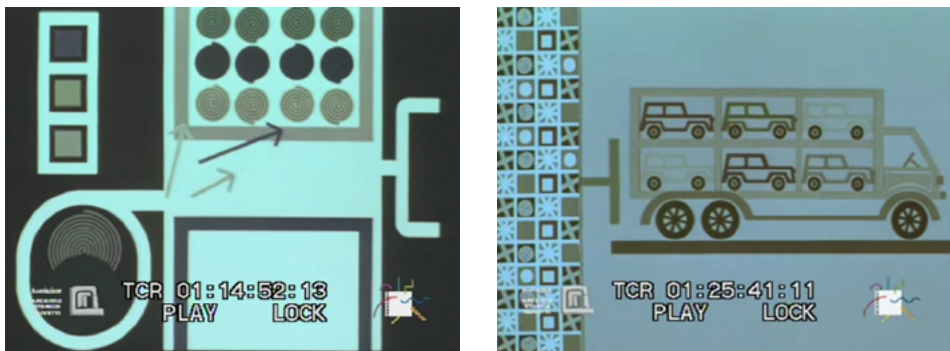


Fig. 4: Epistemic images. Stills from *ELEA Classe 9000* (Nelo Risi, 1960). (Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa — CSC; Archivio Storico Olivetti)

Computer appears here as a foregone conclusion, a much awaited (but still happy) ending. For being transfigured into an immanent solution, universally required by the very nature of everyday life, any further explanation of what it technically does becomes almost unnecessary. Particularly the mid-1960s titles hardly bother to explain the actual workings of the products they promote. In this respect, a borderline case is *Informazione Leitmotiv* (Information Leitmotiv; Renato Frasca, 1969), a 22-minutes long, entirely fictional short, starring the popular Italian actor and songwriter Enzo Jannacci. His character is a generic man, in a generic city, facing generic “modern life” situations. As soon as he arrives at a train station, he finds himself overwhelmed by signs, signals, banners, announcements; he tries to make a phone call but cannot read the numbers written in his notebook; he wants to get to an address, but the direction the passersby give him are confusing. Until a fascinating woman he had previously admired on a billboard appears as if in a dream, accompanies him down a silent corridor and promises to guide him through

47) Hediger, “Thermodynamic Kitsch,” 146.

the labyrinths of information: “Information is what emerges from the mass of stimuli that burden the senses. Information is what matters, what allows to decide.” Another six minutes elapse before Olivetti’s IT products appear, on screen, only briefly and without further explanation. Instead of computer as a technical object, the film seems to promote *computing* as a techno-social skill. Information technologies are depicted as an (almost invisible) ordering principle within an entropic world, a rationalizing agency that would decrypt the secret codes of the “social system” and offer guidance through it. These examples might help explaining what the Olivetti company executives meant by saying that they needed convince potential customers that the computer would solve all their problems: of course, that could be done only insofar as all the said problems were (represented as) “computable.” As that of industrial labor, the management of (information) society is essentialized as an issue of data quantification and processing within a multi-component, self-regulating system.

Programming the Future: Olivetti films are visually at their best when they dare envisioning an IT-dominated future. Stressing Programma 101’s desktop sizes, *Le regole del gioco* closes by projecting the minicomputer in domestic situations: in the living room, in the kitchen, next to the bed or bathtub, indifferently operated by men, women and children: “It will be like making a phone call, like turning on the TV.” Albeit openly declaring the playful (and nevertheless forward-looking) nature of these images, the speaker warns that “perhaps in a few years the irony will already be overcome by reality.” The concluding sequence of *La macchina del tempo* mentioned in the introduction, the one with the children dancing around the terminal, acquire its meaning when seen under a future perspective. “The information machine [...] for children growing up with new things is a simple, real object in a real time. Their own time, the time when everything has yet to happen.” Elective affinities between new generations and new technologies will constitute the core subject of another film, *Un computer, dei ragazzi* (A Computer, Some Kids; Franco Taviani, 1969). The kids mentioned in the title are students in a middle school class in Milan: they receive the visit of an Olivetti employee who instructs them to Programma 101 and gathers their reactions. Franco Taviani captures the experiment in a sort of inquiry-film, with interviews with kids and teachers. In his notes, the director establishes an interesting comparison between old and new media, suggesting that the language of films represent



Fig. 5: Franco Taviani on the set of *Un calcolatore, dei ragazzi*. Film Special 3, no. 1 (1969). (Courtesy of Bibliomediateca Gromo — Archivio Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

to the school kinds “old and simple answers to already forgotten whys. Instead, they feel closer to binary mathematics, abstract symbology, and the range of possibilities of the computers, whose logics appear familiar and surprising at once.”⁴⁸⁾

This characterization of young people as “computer natives” is instrumental to represent the new technology within a long-term perspective, to naturalize its presence in the social context, and to humanize the threat of automation: “they say that machines will dominate humans [...] but kids don’t believe in these prophecies. They know that machines are not scary monsters but are made by men for men.” Despite the alleged spontaneous character of this relationship, what the film effectively shows is a constantly supervised training process: school kids are instructed on how to use the computer to perform mathematical calculations, to organize a basketball matches and, in a self-reflective move, to select the most suitable options for the developing of film itself. More importantly, they use it to set the parameters for automatically calculating average grades. In discussing what percentage of sufficiency would be acceptable for each class, they are involved in the same decision-making processes that will eventually assess their school performances.

While exceeding the normal educational routines, these activities are part of a broader governmental project explicated to the viewers by the spoken comment:

It is today that we must think and plan the future of these children and invent their future as adults; a satisfactory placement in work and society. [...] The training of future programmers is one of the problems that must be addressed through a convergent effort; by the school, which must adapt its curricula and objectives, and by the industry, which must prepare the tools that would enable young people to have real experiences and be ready for future roles.

The term “programming” is here used in both a technical (instructing the computer) and a social sense (instructing students), as in two sides of the same design. As “black boxes plugged into cybernetic circuits,”⁴⁹⁾ students must be given the right inputs to become the workforce of tomorrow. In advocating their training as future programmers, the film and its sponsor also assume the students’ position as programmable subjects.

Conclusions

The programming of the future suggested by *Un calcolatore, dei ragazzi* comes full circle with the other discursive strands on (automated) industrial labor and information society. If the computer is the overdetermined solution to an inherently entropic society, everyone should be familiarized with the managing of data flows since the youngest age. If work environments are increasingly based on processing and transmitting information in a feed-back circuit, then school kids must be trained to become technicians and knowledge workers. According to this logic, the use of computer is what enables students to partici-

48) Quoted in Bellotto, *La memoria del futuro*, 122.

49) Druick, “Operational Media,” 65.

pate in the organization of school activities, workers to contribute to the control of production processes, and individuals to be active and aware members of the information society. The freedom promised by the computer coincides with the one specifically designed by a cybernetic governance, whose “domination operates precisely on the very basis of a participatory and collaborative environment.”⁵⁰⁾ (Future) workers and citizens are expected to emancipate and educate themselves so to adapt to a changing techno-social system and contribute to its functioning. Learning to govern social and productive processes is, after all, the precondition for keeping on being governed by them.

As it should be clear by now, none of these discursive functions could be fulfilled if film confined itself to recording computer’s labor. Any more technically detailed account of the way computer work would probably be more explanatory of what the IT operator effectively does on a daily basis but deprived of the required rhetorical appeal. As governmental instruments crafted by specialized filmmakers, industrial documentaries resort to any disposable means in film language (photographic or animated images) to *make visible* a set of correlations that would otherwise stand only on an abstract level: how the “magic” of a fully automated production process would eventually free factory workers from the burden of physical labor; how any social and economic problem is inherently computable — and therefore solvable in advance with the computer; how even the future of new generations could be envisioned and programmed along technological progress. The audiovisual construction of computer labor is here consubstantial with those of its operators and of its social and organizational contexts: it does not simply *describe* but *prescribe* (and sometimes even *predict*) workers’ and the consumers’ activities, as well as the social relevance of technological product. Their goal is to make sense of human presence in a machine-driven organization, to convince workers of the advantages of a computer-engineered professional and social life, and to persuade external viewers into sharing the corporate views on technological progress. Given that the computer is turned into an almost universal metaphor, the lack of a detailed description of its workings turns out to be not only physiological but, to some extent, even strategic. As Franklin explains “the vagueness of the human-machine metaphor is central to [labor’s] mobilization by capital:” as an integral part of a complex of technical processes and socio-economic logics, “vague metaphors allow for the constant expansion of processes of valorization as the subject is reconceptualized as both a communication system and a component in such a system.”⁵¹⁾ In this sense the professionals at work at the Olivetti Film Unit — and in industrial cinema in general — contributed into giving audiovisual flesh to an otherwise deliberately “vague” cybernetic metaphor. The impact of this metaphor on Olivetti’s corporate narratives become particularly evident when comparing computer-themed films with those produced before the electronic transition. Mentions of workfare policies and the factory as a community almost disappear, while critical stances toward industrialization are subsumed by the promise of a new technological age. Humanization and technologization of the work (and social) environment go hand in hand, both “crystallized” in the computer as the landmark of a new techno-social power.

50) Maschewski and Nosthoff, “Designing Freedom,” 83.

51) Franklin, *Control*, xxi-xxii.

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Biography

Simone Dotto is a researcher and a lecturer in Media History at the University of Udine, where he serves as a vice-coordinator of the MA's degree program in Audiovisual Heritage and Media Education. His research interests deal with media historiography and archaeology, sound technologies and auditory cultures and the relationship between film production and industrial culture in post-WWII Italy. He is the author of *Voci d'archivio. Fonografia e culture dell'ascolto nell'Italia tra le due guerre* [Archival Voices. Phonography and Auditory cultures in Interwar Italy] (Meltemi: Milan, 2019), a media history of the first Italian sound archive. His research on the history of Italian producers of utility films has been recently published in the book *Gli Specialisti. Storia, politiche e istituzioni della cinematografia specializzata in Italia* [The Specialists. History, policies and institutions of specialized cinema in Italy] (Marsilio: Venice, 2023).

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Matěj Pavlík

(Vysoké učení technické v Brně, Česká republika)

Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci

Audiovizuální esej můžete zhlédnout zde:

<https://youtu.be/WPiyoRjTsrE>

Abstract

The video essay *Techniques and Technologies to Compensate for Powerlessness* is an artistic research output that exemplifies Matěj Pavlík's approach to historiography, developed through individual projects and interdisciplinary collaborations. Pavlík's work often focuses on a reflexive approach to fiction, speculation, or myth-making. In this essay, the artist examines the role of borderline science technologies invented in late socialist Czechoslovakia. These technologies (e.g., telesthesia, healing, and locating geopathogenic zones) were linked to research in borderline scientific fields like psychotronics and psychoenergetics. The artist critically analyzes these technologies, highlighting their socio-political and economic contexts. Pavlík suggests that these technologies were responses to the specific crises of high modernity, compensating for feelings of alienation or powerlessness. How can we grasp these techniques and technologies in the present? He hypothesizes that the emergence and proliferation of these borderline scientific practices, particularly healing, in late socialist Czechoslovakia might reflect the era's disillusionment and the failure of Marxist ideals of emancipation. The attempt to treat individuals and the public space at the hands of the late socialist healer may thus have been a way to individualize social risks and harms. Throughout the video essay, Pavlík argues that the institutionalization of these „wondrous“ techniques and technologies was an attempt to inhabit and adapt to the so-called pharmakon of late modernity: the poison and cure called the Scientific and Technological Revolution.

Klíčová slova

historiografie, fikce, socialismus, léčitelství, marxismus, odcizení, hraničně vědecká technologie

Keywords

historiography, fiction, socialism, healing, Marxism, alienation, borderline science technology



Tvůrčí explikace

Audiovizuální esej *Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci* představuje umělecký a zároveň spekulativní přístup k tvorbě historiografie minulého režimu. Dílo nás pomyslně provádí skrze trhlínu mezi technooptimismem a technopesimismem, v níž se zabydlují lidé praktikující zvláštní techniky a obsluhující různé podivuhodné nástroje. V eseji přicházím s hypotézou, že hraničně vědecké projevy, konkrétně nasazování léčitelských praktik od konce 60. až do 80. let 20. století v Československu, poskytovaly různé druhy kompenzace v rámci ustavujícího se technokratického vládnutí.¹⁾ Virgule a proutky pomyslně indikují nové diagnózy, které přinesla vize vědeckotechnické revoluce, která směřovala k náhradě fyzické práce prací duševní.²⁾

V rámci doprovodného textu a audiovizuální eseje představuji možný způsob kritické reflexe institucionalizace parapsychologického výzkumu (konkrétně psychotroniky nebo také psychoenergetiky)³⁾ jako model „podivuhodného“ vypořádávání se s pozdně socialistickou modernitou.⁴⁾ V této etapě se mísí různé ideové dynamiky, od technooptimistických vizí společnosti spějící k pokroku až po humanistická hlediska, která zdůrazňovala strach z odcizení člověka v důsledku technologického vývoje.⁵⁾ S odcizením souvisí audio-

1) Vítězslav Sommer a kol., *Řídit socialismus jako firmu: Technokratické vládnutí v Československu (1956–1989)* (Praha: Nakladatelství lidové noviny, 2019).

2) Radovan Richta a kol., *Civilizace na rozcestí* (Praha: Nakladatelství Svoboda, 1966).

3) Pojmy psychotronika a psychoenergetika mají velmi podobný význam a často se používají zaměnitelně. V Československu záviselo jejich užívání na konkrétních aktérech. Zakladatel Zdeněk Rejdl pocházel z humanitněvědného prostředí a vnímal psychotroniku jako nový interdisciplinární obor, který spojuje různá vědecká odvětví, zatímco více technokraticky založený fyzik a dlouholetý ministr školství František Kaňhoda preferoval pojem psychoenergetika (mj. založil Psychoenergetickou laboratoř).

4) Jan Mervart – Jiří Růžička, *„Rehabilitovat Marxe!“. Československá stranická inteligence a myšlení poststalinické modernity* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2020).

5) Tamtéž.

vizuální esejí prostupující pojem bezmoc, který je formulován vícero směry. Obecně se týká právě dopadů rodícího se technokratického vládnutí na člověka, zároveň však konkrétně rezonuje s pravděpodobným trpkým pocitem z politického vyústění pražského jara roku 1968. Poskytovaly snad psychotronika a psychoenergetika možné techniky a technologie na kompenzaci zmiňované bezmoci?



Obr. 1–2: Fotografie z výstavy *Para normalizace. Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*, autor: Matěj Pavlík

„Psychotronika nás může dovést k nové revoluci ve vědě. Jinak zaplavíme svět během příštího století mechanickými i lidskými roboty, čímž se urychlí odcizení a rozklad společnosti.“⁶⁾ (z voiceoveru *Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*)

Zmíněný citát pochází z textu „Psychotronics: The State of Art“ od autora Zdeňka Rejdáka. Rejdák byl jedním z tzv. otců zakladatelů psychotroniky, jež se institucionálně etablovala v 60. letech 20. století v Československu. Psychotronika bývá interpretována jako institucionalizovaná obdoba parapsychologie, která se těšila značnému zájmu ze stran vědecké obce a politické garnitury v období pozdně socialistické modernity. Do výzkumů psychotroniky se řadí například telepatie, telegnoze, léčitelství apod.

Samotná audiovizuální esej však akcentuje zájem o léčitelství. Vizuální materiál, který si esej přisvojuje, pochází z filmu *Možnosti psychotroniky* od režiséra Viliama Poltikoviče. Snímek vznikl v roce 1990 a byl produkován Československou televizí.⁷⁾ Film pozoruhodně vyobrazuje jednotlivé aktéry (Zdeněk Rejdák, Jindřich Paseka, Václav Vydra a další) a techniky (proutkaření, telekineze aj.) psychotronického výzkumu těsně před jeho zánikem, jelikož po tzv. sametové revoluci byla státní podpora psychotroniky ukončena. Léčitelé jsou v něm vyobrazeni převážně jako muži, již léčí své pacientky, ženy, což odpovídá převážně patriarchálnímu charakteru prostředí, ve kterém se psychotronika rozvíjela. Sám Poltikovič se coby režisér kontinuálně věnuje tématům tzv. alternativní spirituality či experimentální medicíny a v koprodukcí s Českou televizí realizuje dokumentární filmy dodnes.

6) Zdeněk Rejdák, „Psychotronics: The State of Art“, *Impact of Science on Society* 24, č. 4 (1974), 288–289.

7) Ve stejném roce natočil Poltikovič v produkci Československého armádního filmu snímek *Něco z psychotroniky*, který se zaměřuje na motiv proutkaření.

S jakým politickým příslibem psychotronika přichází a jaké typy bezmoci kompenzuje?

Objevení psychotroniky je spjato s dobovou dynamikou odehrávající se na poli filozofie, vědy a politiky. Přesněji řečeno, znovuvynoření parapsychologie, jejíž výzkumy známe už z 19. století v Evropě, v období pozdního socialismu souvisí s fenoménem tzv. vědeckotechnické revoluce. Vědeckotechnická revoluce (VTR) byla vize formulovaná marxistickým filozofem Radovanem Richtou v 60. letech v Československu. Richta s dalšími autory velmi podrobně popisuje význam VTR v knize *Civilizace na rozcestí*.⁸⁾ Ve zkratce tato vize představovala myšlenku, že demokratického socialismu lze dosáhnout skrze vědeckotechnický pokrok. Takzvaná VTR vyrůstala z revoluční nálady reformního komunismu, potažmo pražského jara. Dynamika vědeckotechnického pokroku později přinesla důraz na zvědečtění odvětví, která byla doposud veřejně diskreditována. Jedním takovým oborem byla kybernetika, která získala výsadní postavení v rozvíjení představivosti stran nových teorií komplexit. Je dokonce zmapováno, jak kybernetika ovlivnila v té době se formující ekologické hnutí.⁹⁾ Príslib VTR se také vpisoval do povahy psychotronických výzkumů, avšak tyto výzkumy krajně vědecké povahy kompenzovaly určité „ztráty“, které vrcholná socialistická modernita způsobovala. Vize vědeckotechnické revoluce byla později v 80. letech doplněna Zdeňkem Rejdákem o vizi vědeckolidské revoluce.¹⁰⁾ Technika tak byla pozoruhodně nahrazena člověkem.

„V tomto obrazu člověk mohl nabývat takového potenciálu jako technologie, a to bez jejich odcizujících účinků.“ (z voiceoveru *Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*)

Zastánci nově institucionalizované hraniční vědy (psychotroniky) se pokoušeli vyřešit rozštěpení a odcizení, která intenzivně industrializovaná, zvědečtělá společnost pozdního socialismu přinesla. Dokladem toho může být například jakési napravování soukromých, ale i veřejných prostor léčiteli od nebezpečného vlivu geopatogenních zón. Jako geopatogenní zóny byla označována taková místa, která nepříznivě působila na živý organismus, a to kvůli vyzařování nepravidelností v podloží, ať je to podzemní voda, geologické zlomy, nebo technická infrastruktura.¹¹⁾ Hledání geopatogenních zón, jež byly nalezeny v nově vystavených panelových domech či ve velkochovech s dobyt看, doprovázelo jakési odstihování, jež vedlo k celkovému terapeutickému ozdravování prostor.

V audiovizuální esejí se objevují mapy, které vyhotovil v 80. letech olomoucký lékař Oldřich Juryšek ve spolupráci s architektem Zdeňkem Gardavským. Mapy zobrazují místa postihnutá geopatogenními zónami, která neobvykle konvenují s případem výskytu

8) Richta a kol., *Civilizace na rozcestí*.

9) Michal Kopeček, ed., *Architekti dlouhé změny: Expertní kořeny postsocialismu (1980–1995)* (Praha: Argo, 2019).

10) Karel Drbal – Zdeněk Rejdák, eds., *Perspektivy telepatie* (Praha: Melantrich, 1970), 9.

11) Zdeněk Gardavský, *Problém geopatogenních zón jako architektonický a urbanistický fenomén* (Brno: SÚRPMO Brno, 1984).

onemocnění rakovinou. Juryšek a Gardavský kombinovali měření hledačů geopatogenních zón se statistikami o onkologických onemocněních na daném místě. Výsledné mapy jsou v audiovizuální esaji přítomny na povrchu roztočeného globu. Jsou snad příkladem nečekané planetologie, která kombinuje holistické přístupy vztahování se k danému místu se statistickými měřeními? Povrch planety Země v podání Juryška a Gardavského se zdá být ještě více nepřívětivým místem k jejímu obývání, než jsme sami čekali.

„Nabývání třídního vědomí se nyní prolínalo s vykazováním senzibility vyvolených jedinců. Idea tvorby nového socialistického člověka se proměnila do zjevení léčitele.“ (z voiceoveru *Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*)

Ke konci 70. let se pozornost psychotroniků/ček ubírá převážně směrem k léčitelství. Tento jev lze vypožorovat z publikací a konferencí věnujících se psychotronice. Velmi dobře o jevu léčitelství v oblasti architektury píše historik a kurátor Vojtěch Márc v textu, jenž byl publikován v *Sešitu pro umění a příbuzné zóny*.¹²⁾ Márc zde komentuje obrat k léčitelství v dobovém kontextu tzv. normalizace: „Ideál dobrého životního prostředí coby prostředku výchovy socialistického člověka mohl v dané podobě napomáhat normalizační depolitizaci společenského konfliktu a současně zajišťoval legitimitu státního zřízení.“¹³⁾ Snaha o léčbu jednotlivců a veřejného prostoru rukou pozdně socialistického léčitele tak mohla být cestou k individualizaci společenských rizik a škod. Samotný fenomén léčitelství a léčby má v audiovizuální esaji velmi plastický význam a zároveň navazuje na Márcem přiléhavé rysy depolitizace. Léčba v rukou léčitelů zde totiž představuje určité druhy kompenzace bezmoci. Vynoření těchto zvláštních léčitelských praktik přímo souviselo s účelem léčby symptomů, které byly vyvolány jak politickými událostmi, tak dopady vrcholné modernity. Zrod léčitele či léčitelky tedy souvisí s projevy nové psychosomatiky.

K vystihnutí posunu od vědeckotechnologických vizí společnosti a demokratického socialismu k hraničně vědeckým experimentům hledajícím nový potenciál člověka mi byl inspirací příběh kybernetika Miloslava Krále. Král byl součástí týmu Radovana Richty a měl na starosti oblast aplikace kybernetiky. Koncem 70. let však Král zažil jakýsi transformativní mystický zážitek a začal aplikovat různé teorie včetně kybernetiky k dokazování Boží existence.¹⁴⁾ Dokumentarista a esoterik Igor Chaun natočil o Miloslavu Královi pozoruhodný dokumentární film s názvem *Bůh dokazatelně existuje*. Příběh Miloslava Krále je v tomto ohledu emblematický. Určité trauma a frustrace z vyústění pražského jara do normalizační politiky pozdního socialismu pro něj mohlo kompenzovat zapojení se do psychotronických a psychoenergetických výzkumů. Jako by nenaplnění příslibu vědeckotechnické revoluce zavedlo podnět ke vzniku revoluce nové, jež má za cíl otevírat nové perspektivy hledání a bořit hranice lidského vědomí.

Milena Bartlová v textu „Jako balíček z karet“, který vznikl v rámci série esejí Bod zlo-
mu na internetovém deníku *Artalk*, příhodně píše:

12) Vojtěch Márc, „Města na kraji nemocnic: Geopatogenní zóny jako architektonický a urbanistický fenomén“, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, č. 30 (2021), 35–93.

13) Tamtéž, 86.

14) Miloslav Král, *Kosmická paměť: Hledání smyslu kosmu a člověka* (Olomouc: Nakladatelství Dobra & Fontána, 2002).

V poslední třetině 20. století už komercializovaná a banalizovaná verze divinačních technik spolu s novým objevem hodnoty „orientálních“ náboženství vyhověla touze hippie a New Age subkultur, které toužily překročit kapitalistický horizont zisku jako jediného smyslu, a přitom se vyhnout riziku sociální a politické revoluce. Do jisté míry se jim skutečně podařilo otevřít horizonty západní kultury do té míry, že to časem vyvolalo konzervativní obrat, který bohužel stále úspěšněji vyvrací výsledky emancipačních hnutí všeho druhu. S tím také nepřímo souvisí poněkud bizarní vynoření esoterních technik v oficiálním systému pozdního socialismu...¹⁵⁾

Bartlová nastiňuje možný způsob kritiky psychotroniky a jejího prosazování v rámci socialistického řízení. V textu vytváří určitou paralelu k new age hnutí 60. let, jež rezignovalo na sociální a politickou revoluci.

V audiovizuální esaji je přítomný opakující se motiv ohýbajících se přístrojů. V jedné významové vrstvě se jedná o výrazný popkulturní motiv, který můžeme znát z prvního dílu tetralogie *Matrix*. Ostatní významy se ubírají právě směrem k psychotronickým a psychoenergetickým výzkumům, které mimo jiné hledaly nové potenciály člověka v oblasti jeho působnosti na vnější svět. Ohnuté přístroje jsou pomyslným pozůstatkem socialistického změněného vědomí. Pozůstatkem působení léčitelů a senzibilů, kteří se na krátký čas etablovali jakožto experti socialistického technokratického režimu. Voiceover v esaji končí větou: „Místo naplnění politického příslibu pražského jara bylo přítomné změněné nešťastné vědomí.“ Psychotronika a psychoenergetika v konečném důsledku napomohly v zabydlování a adaptování se na pozdně socialistickou modernitu. Zároveň poskytly určité experimentální pole působnosti, jež mohlo vést v konečném důsledku k rezignaci a řešení společenských konfliktů způsobených i dopady „ozývajícího“ se antropocénu. Přítomnost léčitelských praktik tak otevřela novou perspektivu, jak sledovat období pozdního socialismu z hlediska psychosomatiky, jelikož se jednotlivá traumata vписovala přímo do těl jednotlivců.

Vyprávění o psychotronicce a psychoenergetice můžeme vnímat analogicky k současnosti. Zmiňované výzkumy přinesly silné, afektivní obrazy, které nám mohou v různých chvílích chybět. Jsou snad dnešní takzvané neo-romantické projevy a zájmy o esoterní vědění v současném umění další adaptivní strategií pro dobu pozdního kapitalismu a klimatického rozvratu?¹⁶⁾ Jakým způsobem současná traumata mění naše těla?

15) Milena Bartlová, „Bod zlomu: Svět jako balíček karet“, *Artalk*, 2022, cit. 3. 8. 2024, <https://artalk.info/news/bod-zlomu-svet-jako-balicek-karet>. Text se mimo jiné věnuje tarotu.

16) Václav Magid, „O neuchopitelnosti: v čem (ne)spočívá romantismus současného umění“, *Art and Antiques*, 2022, cit. 3. 8. 2024, <https://www.artantiques.cz/o-neuchopitelnosti-v-čem-ne-spočiva-romantismus-soucasneho-umeni>.



Obr. 3–5: Fotografie z výstavy *Para normalizace. Techniky a technologie na kompenzaci bezmoci*, autor: Matěj Pavlík

Dedikace

Audiovizuální esej je jedním z výstupů doktorského umělecko-výzkumného projektu s názvem *Para normalizace*, realizovaného na Fakultě výtvarných umění Vysokého učení technického v Brně.

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Filmografie

Bůh dokazatelně existuje (Igor Chaun, 2012)

Matrix (The Matrix; The Wachowskis, 1999)


Možnosti psychotroniky (Viliam Poltikovič, 1990)

Něco z psychotroniky (Viliam Poltikovič, 1990)

Biografie

Matěj Pavlík je umělec a pedagog. Studoval na Vysoké škole uměleckoprůmyslové v Praze v ateliéru fotografie pod vedením Aleksandry Vajd a Hynka Alta, později Martina Kohouta, kde absolvoval v roce 2017. Nejčastěji pracuje v médiu fotografie a pohyblivého obrazu. Matěj Pavlík během své umělecké praxe prošel několika uměleckými kolektivy a iniciativami (Ateliér bez vedoucího a Pracovní skupina pro výzkum mimosmyslové estetiky), jež se kriticky zabývaly vysokoškolským vzdělávacím systémem a pokoušely se o realizaci vhodných alternativní rámců k převažujícím uměleckým praxím. Pavlíkova umělecká praxe zahrnuje řadu autorských a mezioborových spoluprací. Jmenovitě s Lucií Rosenfeldovou v Galerii Jelení, spolukurátorskou činnost v Galerii ETC. a účast na několika ročnících festivalu Fotograf. Samostatně se představil v galerii A.M.180. a Galerii mladých. Pavlík je jedním z iniciátorů Pracovní skupiny pro výzkum mimosmyslové estetiky, která se stala v roce 2020 jedním z laureátů Ceny Jindřicha Chalupeckého. V současné době studuje čtvrtým rokem doktorský program na Fakultě výtvarných umění v Brně.

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Who Is Awful? *Black Mirror* and the Dystopian Imaginary of AI Labor

Abstract

The future of labor has become one of the most urgent topics in the current public debate regarding Artificial Intelligence. Related imaginaries, primarily following the emergence of Chat GPT, have gravitated towards blaming the technology for threatening people's livelihoods. However, these visions suffer from "sociotechnical blindness" and overlook the human actors who create and hold the decisive power behind AI. One of the most mediatized examples of this was the strike by Hollywood workers in 2023. Pop culture, notably sci-fi television series, has been an influential source of inspiration for these dystopian visions. Despite that, scholars have overlooked representations of AI labor in the area. This case study responds to that, focusing on representations in *Black Mirror*, a prominent sci-fi television series that has covered topics around AI for over a decade. Specifically, it analyzes the "sociotechnical imaginary" in the episode *Joan is Awful*, reflecting on the concerns of Hollywood workers. Methods of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analyses reveal mutual interactions between human and AI laboring agents. They highlight the interdependence in the labor process and how societies are vulnerable to the power of tech corporations encouraged by digital capitalism. The analysis demonstrates how AI, as an entertaining sci-fi television trope, might critically reflect on the contemporary issue of capitalist alienated labor, emphasizing the inseparability of technology and human actors.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, *Black Mirror*, labor, multimodal critical discourse analysis, sociotechnical imaginaries

Introduction

Has it not all gone a bit “black mirror”? This already common phrase could summarize media imaginaries of Artificial Intelligence (AI) regarding the future of labor. From politicians to tech elites, the public space is filled with dystopian visions of AI becoming a threat to economies, overcoming human skills, and potentially replacing human workers of various professions.¹⁾ Sci-fi culture, especially television and the cinema, has traditionally inspired these portrayals.²⁾ It enables the audience to interact entertainingly with the topic of AI, proposing an alternative version (primarily utopian or dystopian) of reality.³⁾

Media representations of AI form a “complex causal relationship with the technology itself,”⁴⁾ both inspiring it and trying to reflect it. However, a common problem of these representations is “sociotechnical blindness.”⁵⁾ This tendency to depict AI as separated from its human creators makes the real actors and problems behind the technology invisible and results in misleading thinking about the future. Paradoxically, one of the best examples of such blindness came from the media with the summer 2023 Hollywood strikes. The protestor’s slogans, such as “plagiarism machines,” “AI is not an art,” or “AI has no soul,”⁶⁾ have often been directed against the technology. Protestors saw AI as a threat to the television and movie industry, possibly stealing their jobs.

One of the protestors was Charlie Brooker, the creative brain behind Netflix’s flagship series, *Black Mirror* (various directors, 2011–present).⁷⁾ This anthology is traditionally rich in AI imaginaries, and its sixth season was released during the protests.⁸⁾ The episode *Joan*

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- 1) E.g. Frederik Efferenn, “Call for Interventions and Contributions: Shifting AI Controversies,” *HIIG*, October 31, 2023, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.hiig.de/en/cfc-shifting-ai-controversies/>; “Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter,” *Future of Life Institute*, November 27, 2023, accessed August 12, 2024, <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/>; Pranshu Verma and Gerrit De Vynck, “ChatGPT took their jobs: Now they walk dogs and fix air conditioners,” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2023, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www-staging.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/06/02/ai-taking-jobs/>.
 - 2) Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal, “Hopes and fears for intelligent machines in fiction and reality,” *Nature Machine Intelligence* 1, no. 2 (2019), 74–78; Karim Nader et al., “Public understanding of artificial intelligence through entertainment media,” *AI & Society* 39, no. 2 (2022), 713–726; Tom Pollard, “Popular Culture’s AI Fantasies: Killers and Exploiters or Assistants and Companions?,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 19, no. 1–2 (2020), 97–109.
 - 3) Vickie L. Edwards, “Fifty Years of Science Fiction Television,” *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 36, no. 3 (2014), 376.
 - 4) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and fears for intelligent machines,” 77.
 - 5) Deborah G. Johnson and Mario Verdicchio, “Reframing AI Discourse,” *Minds and Machines* 27, no. 4 (2017), 587.
 - 6) Dawn Chmielewski and Lisa Richwine, “‘Plagiarism machines’: Hollywood writers and studios battle over the future of AI,” *Reuters*, May 3, 2023, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/plagiarism-machines-hollywood-writers-studios-battle-over-future-ai-2023-05-03/>; Megan Cerullo, “Screenwriters want to stop AI from taking their jobs: Studios want to see what the tech can do,” *CBS News*, May 4, 2023, accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/writers-strike-2023-artificial-intelligence-guardrails/>; Tony Maglio, “42% of Film and TV Production Workers Say AI Will ‘harm People’ in Their Field — Exclusive,” *IndieWire*, March 22, 2024, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/analysis/film-tv-production-workers-say-ai-will-harm-them-exclusive-1234966904/>.
 - 7) Alex Cranx, “Black Mirror’s ‘Joan is Awful’ shits all over the future of streaming,” *The Verge*, June 17, 2023, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/23763339/black-mirrors-joan-is-awful-netflix-future-streaming>.
 - 8) Joy Press, “Black Mirror’s Charlie Brooker Keeps Finding New Ways to Freak Us Out,” *Vanity Fair*, June 16,

Is Awful (Ally Pankiw, 2023) reacts to the main concerns regarding AI and television/movie production challenges, such as actors' identity rights being threatened by the deep-fake phenomenon. Despite the dramatic character of the sci-fi television series, this episode demonstrates how AI's interdependence as a technology might be depicted together with other actors, specifically with different tech company representatives on the one hand and users on the other.

Shared cultural imaginaries are not just empty phrases or meaningless images. Scholars of "sociotechnical imaginaries,"⁹⁹ the analytical concept used in this article, have shown that the capacity to imagine futures is a crucial constitutive aspect of human societies and their artifacts.¹⁰⁰ These imaginaries have a vital role in inspiring ideas and even the practical development of new technologies.¹¹¹ Dystopias might then serve as cautionary imaginaries about how not to design and implement technologies such as AI.¹² Pop culture both forms public opinion and is informed by it, thus serving as vital study material.¹³ Still, the current literature¹⁴ has failed to highlight the specifics of sci-fi television and interpret it within broader media representations.¹⁵

This text provides a case study of the *Joan Is Awful* episode as a significant example of a dystopian portrayal of AI labor, reflecting on shaky public debates around the television and movie industry. It also reflects on the scholarly discussion around ongoing transformation of the medium and sci-fi genre distinctiveness.¹⁶ This research enriches the tradition of studies of AI representations¹⁷ by a critical social theory¹⁸ informed systematic

2023, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/06/black-mirror-season-six-charlie-brooker-spoilers>.

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- 12) Chintan Ambalal Mahida, "Dystopian future in contemporary science fiction," *Golden Research Thoughts* 1, no. 1 (2011), 2.
- 13) Nader et al., "Public understanding of artificial intelligence," 715.
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- 17) Daniel G. Dieter and Elyse C. Gessler, "A preferred reality: Film portrayals of robots and AI in popular science fiction," *Journal of Science & Popular Culture* 4, no. 1 (2021), 59–76; Ilaria Villa, "Humans and Non-Humans: Representation of Diversity and Exclusionary Practices in Twenty-First Century British Science Fiction TV Series" (PhD dissertation, University of Milan, 2020); Noessel, "Untold AI;" Pollard, "Popular Culture's AI Fantasies;" Robert B. Fisher, "AI and cinema—does artificial insanity rule?," in *Twelfth Irish Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science* (Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 2001); Simuț, "Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligencesual."
- 18) Andrea Sau, "On Cultural Political Economy: A Defence and Constructive Critique," *New Political Economy*

case study, using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).¹⁹⁾ I focus on the overlooked question of how AI is portrayed as an agent of labor interacting with other human characters in the episode.

Using MCDA, I analyze the sociotechnical imaginary proposed by the episode. The analysis explores (a) social commentary on the current state of AI labor, (b) a vision of its possible dystopian future, and (c) a means to bring this future about.²⁰⁾ All of these levels emphasize the interaction between agents. This approach reacts to existing research gaps. Firstly, it articulates the significance of the AI labor imaginaries, specifically in transforming sci-fi television, highlighting genre specifics. Informed by critical social theory, it adopts systematic MCDA, which is still a rarely used methodological approach. Also, the case study counters the prevailing issue of technological blindness to AI's media representation. It focuses on the interdependence of human and non-human agents in imagining the labor future.

1. Artificial Intelligence and Shifting Labor

AI has recently become a source of vivid media debates regarding its impacts on labor.²¹⁾ Still, in often dystopian media debates,²²⁾ AI stands for an ambiguous, almost omnipotent buzzword. For this study, AI is understood as an umbrella term for “programs (and projects to create programs) capable of autonomous self-improvement and agency.”²³⁾ Such a broad definition allows for the inclusion of various AI applications while distinguishing them from other technologies.

The second essential term, labor, has been traditionally defined in (post)Marxist terms as the process through which humans transform nature, producing a use-value of any kind, and conceiving consciousness and agency as critical features that distinguish them from other living beings.²⁴⁾ A subsequent broader definition, used by English-speaking

26, no. 6 (2021), 1015–1029; Jasanoff and Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of modernity*; Jernej Markelj and Claudio Celis Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication: Labour and value after anthropocentrism,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 30, no. 3 (2023); Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer, “Imaginaries of artificial intelligence.”

19) Andrea Mayr and David Machin, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012); Bezerra, “Multimodal critical discourse analysis;” Gunther R. Kress and Van Theo Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001); Peter Teo, “‘It all begins with a teacher’: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of Singapore’s teacher recruitment videos,” *Discourse & Communication* 15, no. 3 (2021), 330–348; Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

20) Sau, “On Cultural Political Economy,” 10.

21) E.g. Cerullo, “Screenwriters want to stop AI;” Verma and Vynck, “ChatGPT took their jobs;” Maglio, “42% of Film and TV Production Workers.”

22) Astrid Mager and Christian Katzenbach, “Future Imaginaries in the Making and Governing of Digital Technology: Multiple, Contested, Commodified,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 2 (2021), 223–236; B.V.E. Hyde, “The Problem with Longtermism,” *ETHICS IN PROGRESS* 14, no. 2 (2023), 130–152; “Pause Giant AI Experiments.”

23) John Fletcher, “Deepfakes, Artificial Intelligence, and Some Kind of Dystopia: The New Faces of Online Post-Fact Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 4 (2018), 458–459.

24) Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication,” 4.

scholars, describes labor as “human effort which pertains to capitalist relations of production.”²⁵⁾ As such, labor is complementary with work, which emphasizes activities in non-capitalist realms.

In the ongoing debates about data-based “digital capitalism” with AI and network infrastructure dominated by big tech, lacking sufficient public scrutiny, authors highlight the increasing interdependence of society and technologies.²⁶⁾ As Timo Daum summarizes: “In many areas, AI applications owned by tech corporations are on the brink of mass marketization and becoming everyday phenomena.”²⁷⁾

Jernej Markelj and Claudio Celis Bueno²⁸⁾ state that “the current process of datafication calls for a post-anthropocentric understanding of value (creation) and labor.” Labor is increasingly performed in interactions, and human factors (consciousness in this context) cannot be perceived as the only measuring criterion. As a result, the value created in post-human labor might be understood as productive connections emerging through encounters between human and non-human actors. In this light, a critical redefinition of the “agency” concept is necessary as a crucial term both for AI and labor.

The traditional human agency describes the ability of actors to act and control their existence within the larger framework of society.²⁹⁾ In labor terms, agency might also be expressed by the ability to accept or refuse to act.³⁰⁾ Reflecting on the abovementioned criticism of this anthropocentric view, this article approaches agency in “machinic” terms.³¹⁾ It is defined as the capacity to act, produce, and create value as labor output in the interaction of actors (conscious humans and unconscious machines).³²⁾

A broader debate on agency goes far beyond the scope of this article. However, the machinic agency concept highlights human and non-human actors’ interdependence in the labor process, mutually affecting each other.³³⁾ It is an adequate lens through which to analyze the question of labor in the digital capitalism of emerging AI. It also reveals the mutual interactions of actors, which is necessary when analyzing representations of AI as a laborer and focusing on its future visions.³⁴⁾ Finally, the machinic agency might help to

25) Susana Narotzky, “Rethinking the concept of labour,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. S1 (2018), 31.

26) See Jathan Sadowski, *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020); Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler (The MIT Press, 2008), 101–122; Jonathan Pace, “The Concept of Digital Capitalism,” *Communication Theory* 28, no. 3 (2018), 254–269; Hank Tucker and Andrea Murphy, “The Global 2000 2023,” *Forbes*, 2023, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/lists/global2000/>.

27) Timo Daum, “Artificial Intelligence as the Latest Machine of Digital Capitalism — For Now,” in *Marx and the Robots Networked Production, AI and Human Labour*, eds. Florian Butollo and Sabine Nuss (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 242–243.

28) Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication,” 15.

29) Sai Dattathrani and Rahul De’, “The Concept of Agency in the Era of Artificial Intelligence: Dimensions and Degrees,” *Information Systems Frontiers* 25, no. 1 (2022), 40.

30) Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication,” 9.

31) Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

32) Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication,” 13.

33) Ibid.

34) Dattathrani and De’, “The Concept of Agency;” Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication,” 13.

highlight the actors behind the technology who are often overlooked in media representations, as the following chapter explains.

2. Media Imaginaries and Sociotechnical Blindness

Pop-cultural future visions, such as those proposed by influential television series like *Doctor Who* (various directors, 1963–present) *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (various directors, 1987–1994), have reflected the era of their origin and, as such, have provided researchers with study material on the spirit of the time.³⁵⁾ Media researchers have characterized the context of the contemporary “hyped”³⁶⁾ debate around AI as tending to extremes, either utopian or dystopian.³⁷⁾ In the context of labor, they tend to depict AI as a revolutionary tool that will free people from work or make them obsolete.

AI imaginaries are dominated by corporations and technologists promoting the technology, while with the “Chat GPT moment,” these actors occupy even the increased public critique.³⁸⁾ Sometimes, they also raise dystopian warnings about fundamental damage to societies.³⁹⁾ Researchers found that dystopian representations tend to be more detailed than positive ones, and their short-term character influences media consumers’ attitudes more than the long-term.⁴⁰⁾ One of the most frequent framings and fears about AI belongs to the area of the economy and labor.⁴¹⁾

However, AI labor has rarely been studied, with few works confirming the often polarized representations.⁴²⁾ In his overview,⁴³⁾ Bueno recognizes three dominant discourses.

35) Edwards, “Fifty Years of Science Fiction,” 373.

36) Jeffrey Funk, “What’s behind technological hype?,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 36, no. 1 (2019), 38.

37) Ching-Hua Chuan et al., “Framing Artificial Intelligence in American Newspapers,” in *Proceedings of the 2019 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2019), 339–344; Lea Köstler and Ringo Ossewaarde, “The making of AI society: AI futures frames in German political and media discourses,” *AI & Society* 37, no. 1 (2021), 249–263; Mager and Katzenbach, “Future Imaginaries in the Making;” João Canavilhas and Renato Essensfelder, “Apocalypse or Redemption: How the Portuguese Media Cover Artificial Intelligence,” *Total Journalism: Studies in Big Data*, eds. Jorge Vázquez-Herrero, Alba Silva-Rodríguez, María-Cruz Negreira-Rey, Carlos Toural-Bran, and Xosé López-García (Cham: Springer, 2022), 255–270; Sukeyoung Choi, “Temporal Framing in Balanced News Coverage of Artificial Intelligence and Public Attitudes,” *Mass Communication and Society* 27, no. 2 (2023), 4.

38) Mager and Katzenbach, “Future Imaginaries in the Making.”

39) “Pause Giant AI Experiments.”

40) Sukeyoung Choi, “Temporal Framing in Balanced News Coverage.”

41) Chuan et al., “Framing Artificial Intelligence in American Newspapers;” Hannes Cools, Baldwin Van Gorp, and Michael Opgenhaffen, “Where exactly between utopia and dystopia? A framing analysis of AI and automation in US newspapers,” *Journalism* 25, no. 1 (2022), 3–21; Köstler and Ossewaarde, “The making of AI society;” Mager and Katzenbach, “Future Imaginaries in the Making;” Canavilhas and Essensfelder, “Apocalypse or Redemption.”

42) Boshuo Li, Ni Huang, and Wei Shi, “Media Coverage of Labor Issues and Artificial Intelligence Innovation,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, July 25, 2022, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4165159>; Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary the Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Laila M. Brown, “Gender, race, and the invisible labor of artificial intelligence,” in *Handbook of Critical Studies of Artificial Intelligence*, ed. Lindgren, 573–83; Valerio De Stefano, “Negotiating the algorithm: Automation, artificial intelligence and labour protection (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2018).

43) Claudio Celis Bueno, “Beyond Automation: Generative AI and the Question of Labour” (Paper presented at

The utopian one depicts AI as liberating human leisure time through full labor automation. In the middle, Bueno posits an industry-related imaginary that could be called “business as usual.” It perceives AI as boosting labor productivity, similar to previous technologies. The third one, presenting the dystopian pole, sees AI as a creator of mass unemployment that disrupts industries and steals people’s jobs.

The underlying aspect of these discourses is techno-determinism,⁴⁴⁾ which sees technology as a crucial independent factor that influences society. Representations tend to be blind towards the human actors behind the AI, i.e., those who design and create the technology. This common issue of the discourses around AI has been described as “sociotechnical blindness.”⁴⁵⁾ It underlines the tendency to omit human actors and the decisions behind AI systems in representations. In effect, these representations instead attribute misleading human agency to AI as supposedly an independent actor.

Whether intentional or not, the absence of these powerful actors (mainly technological companies and developers) may lead to misunderstanding and fear about the future of the technologies. This eventually applies also to the issue of AI labor, blaming the technology for potentially stealing jobs, while overlooking particular people’s decisions behind.⁴⁶⁾ It also boosts the hyped and polarized debate around AI, spanning topics and media. Still, sociotechnical blindness is one of the typical patterns of the sci-fi genre due to its entertaining character. This is crucial to highlight in contrast to the often simplified interpretation of sci-fi as a homogenous sub-part of AI media representations.⁴⁷⁾

3. Specifics of Contemporary Sci-fi Television and Black Mirror

Sci-fi provides “dramas” for a human audience; its strong metaphorical elements facilitate a dramatized commentary on social issues.⁴⁸⁾ Thus, sociotechnical blindness serves as a sort of simplification, supporting the dramatic character and storytelling upon which sci-fi is primarily based. The classic AI trope in this genre, therefore, is a computer or robot that behaves independently and matches or surpasses human abilities. An example might be the android Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which reaches human-like agency, and his effort to be recognized as equal to other people. The story completely avoids the context of the actors behind its creation. Other examples might be found in series such as *Doctor Who*, *Westworld* (various directors, 2016–2022), or *Humans* (various directors, 2015–2018).

The genre emerged with the modernist belief in technological progress, and, as such, brings stories about fictional technology, the “novum” (different from the current state) seen through the prevailing scientific paradigms.⁴⁹⁾ This novum serves as a vehicle for dif-

conference Shifting AI Controversies, Berlin Social Science Center, Germany, January 29, 2024).

44) De Stefano, “Negotiating the algorithm,” 16.

45) Johnson and Verdicchio, “Reframing AI Discourse,” 587.

46) Julian Posada, “The Future of Work Is Here: Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Artificial Intelligence and Labour,” *Ethics of AI in Context*, no. 56 (2020).

47) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction.”

48) Ibid., 319–321; Villa, “Humans and Non-Humans,” 22.

49) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction,” 319–321.

ferent “fabulations of social worlds, both utopic and dystopic.”⁵⁰⁾ Thus the given example of Data from *Star Trek* could be interpreted as a commentary on societal equality. Specifically dystopian sci-fi typically sketches a future in which technology worsens the everyday lives of humans.⁵¹⁾

AI has been a traditional novum of sci-fi stories prospective in nature.⁵²⁾ However, in line with Jean Baudrillard’s⁵³⁾ claim, research shows that sci-fi genre transforms with the practical development of AI.⁵⁴⁾ Its irreversible implementation into everyday practice blunts the prospectivity of the genre in favor of the tendency to return to the familiar and to reflect on current social issues. Apart from *Black Mirror*, described below, television series like *Humans*, *The Leftovers* (various directors, 2014–2017), and *Westworld* also represent this phenomenon. As a result, the metaphorical and present reflexive aspects of sci-fi play an increased role.⁵⁵⁾

Sci-fi AI embodies a specific genre, representing a background of ideas and expectations that affect how people understand and judge AI.⁵⁶⁾ Karim Nader et al.⁵⁷⁾ have shown that these portrayals play a significant role in shaping people’s beliefs. Also, when it came to respondents’ understanding of what AI can do, most of them expressed the belief that AI could “replace human jobs.”⁵⁸⁾ While an exhaustive overview of its representations in television series goes beyond the scope of the article, a short background on the representations in the genre is necessary.

Most of the existing studies on Western sci-fi AI have researched television and cinema AI representations together. A study⁵⁹⁾ of more than 150 shows discovered the prevalence of slightly more negative than positive representations of AI and that these are mostly embodied as a robot (compared to virtual) on the level of general AI (compared to narrow and super ones). Studies⁶⁰⁾ describe the average tone of sci-fi AI representations as varying from dystopian (1920–50) to utopian (the 1960s) and towards the ambiguous effort to show the complexity of the technology (starting in the 1980s). Regarding the question of agency, the literature shows⁶¹⁾ that AI is either represented as an agency-less instrument of human will or a dramatized subject exhibiting human-like agency and dangerous behavior. The rare essay on sci-fi (movie) AI labor⁶²⁾ also criticizes sociotechnically-blind dystopian representations.

Despite being often analyzed together,⁶³⁾ representations of AI in television series and

50) Jasanoff and Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of modernity*, 1.

51) Mahida, “Dystopian future in contemporary science fiction,” 2.

52) Simuț, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligence,” 6.

53) Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (1991), 309.

54) Noessel, “Untold AI,” Simuț, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial,” 5–6.

55) Simuț, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial,” 5–6.

56) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and fears for intelligent machines.”

57) Nader et al., “Public understanding of artificial intelligence,” 713.

58) Ibid.

59) Noessel, “Untold AI.”

60) Dieter and Gessler, “A preferred reality,” Fisher, “AI and cinema,” Noessel, “Untold AI.”

61) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and fears for intelligent machines,” Fisher, “AI and cinema,” Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction,” Pollard, “Popular Culture’s AI Fantasies.”

62) Rebecca Wanzo, “The Other Replacement Theory,” *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2023), 81–85.

63) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and fears for intelligent machines,” Fisher, “AI and cinema,” Hermann, “Artificial

movies have significant differences. Traditionally, television series were described as episodic stories that often copied cinematic tropes⁶⁴⁾ and were market audience-driven, reflecting primarily on everyday life.⁶⁵⁾ However, the rise of cable networks in the 1990s and the later onset of streaming platforms (like Netflix) gradually blurred this difference. Resulting investments bolstered television series with better quality writing and/or technical improvements (lower production costs, simplified editing, shooting, or distribution).⁶⁶⁾ They allowed the medium to compete with the cinema and even be consumed within the same streaming platforms, homogenizing the audience experience (on-line availability via platforms).⁶⁷⁾

As a result, the content itself is affected. Streaming platforms are under intense pressure to produce original and distinguishable content.⁶⁸⁾ This is realized in various ways, including platform self-criticism, as in the case of *Joan is Awful*. It is an established marketing strategy that helps companies distinguish themselves within the intensified concurrency, raising the interest of consumers while appearing more personable and authentic.⁶⁹⁾ The series *Barry* (various directors, 2018–2023) might be another recent example.

Black Mirror is one of the most significant examples of the evolution within sci-fi television. Over a decade, this anthology series has positioned itself as a pop cultural phenomenon associated with the leitmotif of dystopian technological visions that are often close to people's fingertips. Andrei Simuț⁷⁰⁾ identifies the series as an embodiment of the described phenomenon of the implosion of prospectivity in favor of dramatized reflexivity of contemporary social issues in current sci-fi. *Black Mirror* has reflected on several emerging issues related to AI, for example, the mass media reality/entertainment industry in *Fifteen Million Merits* (Euros Lyn, 2011), social networks in *Smithereens* (James Hawes, 2019), social credit systems similar to that used by the Chinese in *Nosedive* (Joe Wright, 2016), VR and video games in *Playtest* (Dan Trachtenberg, 2016), autonomous robots in *Metalhead* (David Slade, 2017), and AI surveillance in *Arkangel* (Jodie Foster, 2017).

In 2024, the series consists of six seasons and has piqued scholars' interest, highlighting the ability to elaborate critical reflection on technology in an entertaining format.⁷¹⁾ Some focus on the portrayal of moral and ethical issues⁷²⁾ or the philosophical reflections

intelligence in fiction;" Noessel, "Untold AI;" Pollard, "Popular Culture's AI Fantasies;" Pollard, "Popular Culture's AI Fantasies."

64) Villa, "Humans and Non-Humans," 27.

65) Adriano Nazareth, "Cinematography and Television: Differences and Similarities," *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 2, no. 1 (2010), 34–35.

66) Charles Matthau, "How Tech Has Shaped Film Making: The Film vs. Digital Debate Is Put to Rest," *Wired*, August 7, 2015, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.wired.com/insights/2015/01/how-tech-shaped-film-making/>.

67) Johnson Derek, ed., *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (London: Routledge, 2018).

68) Valéry Michaux, "Between television and cinema: New platforms — Which changes with what impact on contents?," *Enjeux Numeriques*, no. 10 (2020).

69) Charles S. Gulas and Marc G. Weinberger, *Humor in Advertising: A Comprehensive Analysis* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 28.

70) Simuț, "Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligence," 6.

71) Donovan Conley and Benjamin Burroughs, "Black Mirror, mediated affect and the political," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 60, no. 2 (2019), 139–153.

72) Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden, "Introduction: The Moral Uncanny in Netflix's Black Mirror," in *The*

of the series.⁷³⁾ This article derives inspiration from case studies focusing on a particular episode demonstrating specific representations such as crime and punishment,⁷⁴⁾ human bodies as commodities,⁷⁵⁾ or human-computer interaction.⁷⁶⁾

4. Concepts and Methods of Analysis

This case study approaches the topic of dystopian visions in the *Black Mirror* series with the concept of “sociotechnical imaginary” (SI). SI is one of the most privileged optics focusing on the visions around AI, highlighting the role of the actors involved.⁷⁷⁾ Imaginaries are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions” of undesirable futures attainable through technological development.⁷⁸⁾ Although the concept initially focused on a positive vision, later research confirmed its plausibility for dystopias.⁷⁹⁾ Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer⁸⁰⁾ highlight the need for further academic reflection on imaginaries in the sphere of popular culture. This has provided the motivation for this research. However, the existing literature adopting imaginaries is burdened with ambiguity surrounding conceptualization (competing broad concepts) and operationalization (unsystematic research approaches).⁸¹⁾ To escape this vicious circle, I take two steps.

Firstly, I apply Andrea Sau’s three-level imaginary analytical concept.⁸²⁾ I will examine SI while asking for representations of social commentary (1), defined as speculative thought directed at explaining social phenomena in their interconnections (issues, events, or structures), a vision of the future (2) (where a new world is imagined), and the means (3) to bring this future about (social actions broadly conceived).

Secondly, I systematically operationalize the imaginary using qualitative Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) methods.⁸³⁾ Since the introduction of SI, the concept has been studied via discourse;⁸⁴⁾ multimodal operationalization remains over-

Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror, eds. Margharet Gibson and Clarissa Carden (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1–18.

73) William Irwin and David Kyle Johnson, eds., *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

74) Javier Cigüela and Jorge Martínez-Lucen, “Screen technologies and the imaginary of punishment: A reading of *Black Mirror*’s ‘White Bear,’” *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 7, no. 1 (2016), 3–22.

75) Zita Hüsing, “Black Mirror’s ‘Fifteen Million Merits’: Re-Defining Human Bodies with Dystopian Technology,” *Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*, no. 5 (2020), 42–56.

76) Georgia de Souza Assumpção, Carolina Maia dos Santos, Raquel Figueira Lopes Cançado Andrade, Mayara Vieira Henriques, and Alexandre de Carvalho Castro Assumpção, “Productive Organizations: The Human-Computer Interaction in *Black Mirror*,” *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* 18, no. 4 (2023).

77) Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer, “Imaginaries of artificial intelligence,” 3.

78) Jasanoff and Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of modernity*, 4.

79) Ulrike Felt, “Keeping Technologies out: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Formation of Austria’s Technopolitical Identity,” in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, eds. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

80) Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer, “Imaginaries of artificial intelligence,” 13.

81) Rudek, “Capturing the invisible.”

82) Sau, “On Cultural Political Economy,” 10.

83) Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Multimodal discourse*; Mayr and Machin, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*.

84) Jasanoff and Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of modernity*, 4.

looked.⁸⁵⁾ MCDA is an evolving research branch that combines concepts from CDA⁸⁶⁾ and multimodal communication.⁸⁷⁾ In MCDA, discourse stands for “socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality.”⁸⁸⁾ Discourse as such might be communicated by texts in combination with semiotic modes like language, image, layout, or sound.⁸⁹⁾ These modes are seen as tools for creating meaning, each with its own material qualities and capacity for conveying ideas.⁹⁰⁾ Therefore, a critical multimodal analysis must approach discourse through these specific modes.

In particular, the study adopts Theo Van Leeuwen’s (a leading MCDA scholar) analytic model of the Visual Social Actor Network (VSAN).⁹¹⁾ It focuses on imaginaries of AI labor, highlighting the interdependence of humans and AI agents. In contrast to other multimodal approaches,⁹²⁾ VSAN is structurally informed by critical social theory. Reflecting on recent television series research, the study uses the extended framework proposed by Fábio Alexandre Bezerra.⁹³⁾ This approach has proven useful in describing the dynamic image in terms of the tasks agents are (not) represented doing and with whom they interact while (not) doing these things. Considering the specifics of the topic of AI labor, I modified the categories of agents to include humans and non-humans. In addition, to highlight the importance of visual exclusion,⁹⁴⁾ I added the eponymous category. This structure guides the interpretation of AI labor imaginary.

In practice, the episode was transcribed into analytical frames focusing on the depiction of AI agents. A frame is a functional unit in data analysis representing a scene where a significant event occurs at a specific location.⁹⁵⁾ The analysis is then focused on these particular frames through the VSAN lens, exploring AI in relation to other agents and taking respective notes (see Table 1). Finally, I concentrated on recognized frames, aiming at questions raised by the previously described triadic model of the imaginary.

Due to the limited scope of the study, I selected one representative frame for each imaginary layer. In line with previous work,⁹⁶⁾ I eventually recorded the (relevant) modes like background music, camera (shot and angle), lighting, or color that contributed to the overall impression. To underline the visual construction of the relationship of the charac-

85) E.g. Jan-Luuk Hoff, “Unavoidable Futures? How Governments Articulate Sociotechnical Imaginaries of AI and Healthcare Services,” *Futures*, no. 148 (2023), 1–13.

86) Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2018).

87) Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Multimodal discourse*.

88) *Ibid.*, 4.

89) Gavin Brookes and Kevin Harvey, “Opening up the NHS to Market,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 15, no. 3 (2016), 292.

90) David Machin, “What is multimodal critical discourse studies?,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 10, no. 4 (2013), 347–355.

91) Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 147.

92) Andrew Burn, *The kineikonic mode: Towards a multimodal approach to moving image media* in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (London: Routledge, 2014); Chenghui Guan, “Multimodal positive discourse analysis of national image publicity video,” *Language and Semiotic Studies* 8, no. 3 (2022), 66–85; Xu Bo, “Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Movie *Argo*,” *English Language Teaching* 11, no. 4 (2018), 132.

93) Bezerra, “Multimodal critical discourse analysis.”

94) Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 142.

95) Teo, “It All Begins with a Teacher,” 335.

96) Hoff, “Unavoidable Futures.”

ters to the viewer, the camera work in the selected frames was interpreted through Van Leeuwen's "Representation and Viewer Network."⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the analysis requires a brief description of the story in order to introduce the plot.

5. Analyzing the Imaginary of AI Labor in *Joan is Awful*

The plot of the episode *Joan is Awful* centers on the protagonist, Joan Tait (Annie Murphy). She is depicted as an ordinary female middle manager working as a HR consultant for a tech company (resembling the actual tech company Oracle).⁹⁸ Her dull routine life with her boyfriend Krish is disrupted when her ex-husband Mac contacts her, recalling memories of their messy yet exciting past together. Despite efforts to maintain a facade of well-being, Joan's inner turmoil becomes evident. It leads her to confront her existential crisis in a therapy session, expressing a lack of agency, saying, "I feel like I'm not the main character in my own life story" (07:15–07:21).

During a quiet evening with her boyfriend Krish watching Streamberry (resembling the actual streaming platform Netflix), the platform suddenly suggests a brand-new show called "Joan is Awful." Joan realizes that it depicts her everyday life in intimate detail and dramatizes some of it (an ironic self-reference to a dramatizing series based on real life, including *Black Mirror*). In the fictional show, the main character, "TV Joan" (Salma Hayek), is trapped in the same situation as Joan Tait: her life is being depicted in detail in the eponymous fictional television series.

In reaction, Joan Tait begins a furious race to protect herself against the show's emergence on Streamberry. During this attempt, she gradually loses both men and realizes that legally, she cannot do anything against the streaming platform that created the fictional series because she agreed to its "terms and conditions." Therefore, she decides to break into the Streamberry company and physically destroy a quantum computer called "Quamputer," which runs the AI deepfake software that creates the fictional show. She succeeds only with the help of Salma Hayek, who portrays her as TV Joan in the series and is ultimately unhappy with how Streamberry has treated her.

However, before Joan Tait can destroy the Quamputer, she discovers she is also not real and is yet another fictional character whose existence and consciousness are generated by the Quamputer. Supposedly, Joan Tait, who up until that moment had been played by Annie Murphy, is eventually just a "first fictive level" character (49:51–49:54). As such, her deepfake "reality" is generated to be sold to the "Source Joan" (Kayla Lorette) existing somewhere in the real world. The ultimate goal of the Streamberry platform, managed by CEO Mona Javadi, is to create perfectly individualized shows for each viewer. In this sense, the *Joan is Awful* show is only a pilot project that will be followed by an infinite amount of individualized content dramatizing users' flaws.

All of this is enabled by data surveillance through devices, like smartphones and the Quamputer, that can create intricate deepfake universes with protagonists holding com-

97) Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 141.

98) Johannes Fibiger, "Joan is awesome: Black Mirror set gennem et rystet spejl," 16:9 *Filmtidsskrift*, November 7, 2023, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.16-9.dk/2023/11/joan-is-awesome/>.

plex identities and consciousnesses (see Table 1 for the AI agency representations). When the Source Joan physically destroys the Quamputer, she finally reacquires her agency and autonomy. She leaves the alienated corporate labor framework to open her own small business, specifically a café, where she can make decisions.

| AGENCY | AGENT | Affecting | Themselves | | X |
|--------|----------|-------------|--|--|--|
| | | | Others | Human | <i>mediating communication, recommending content, ordering social network content, using people's data, generating content (deepfakes), creating whole fictional realities</i> |
| | | | | Non-human | X |
| | | Unaffecting | Acting | <i>surveilling, collecting data, analyzing data, creating audiovisual products</i> | |
| | | | Behaving | <i>being in space, shining</i> | |
| | PATIENT | | <i>being held, being described, being controlled, being protected, being damaged</i> | | |
| | EXCLUDED | | | <i>providing infrastructure, processing data for content generation, generating deepfakes, generating/creating whole fictional realities, creating value for the corporation</i> | |

Tab. 1: Summary of AI’s social agency in the analyzed episode⁹⁹⁾

5.1 Social Commentary

The first analyzed frame (11:20–11:36) depicts Joan Tait and Krish in their house, sitting in the center of the scene on a couch immediately following dinner. Everything in the house appears perfect, like in a furniture store (later the plot reveals that these are all just deepfake images). Joan sits on a couch, and when Krish enters the scene, she changes her face suddenly from a concerned and resigned expression to one of pretend satisfaction. Still on the table are plates with the rest of the meal prepared by Krish. Joan’s complaints about Krish and his bland cooking (18:33–18:37) are foreshadowed by an almost untouched meal on her plate compared to Krish’s empty plate. The couple discusses what to watch on television. Krish does not care, so Joan suggests, “Let’s see what’s on Streamberry” (11:28–11:30).

There is no background music, just the voices of the speaking characters. The camera shot is up close, deepening the viewer’s sense of proximity to the character (see Figure 1).¹⁰⁰⁾ The camera eye’s angle represents an equal relationship with the viewer. Lightning is very moderate, based on decorative sources, underlining the intimacy of the moment. Calm colors in dark tones represent nighttime.

99) Bezerra, “Multimodal critical discourse analysis,” 14 (edited).

100) Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 141.



Fig. 1: Frame of Joan and Krish turning on the Streamberry platform (time 11:28). *Joan is Awful* (Ally Pankiw, 2023), source: Netflix Inc.

Focusing on AI agents, I recognize two representations embodied by the red smartphone lying on the couch between the protagonists and the smart television remote control in Joan's hand. The AI agents differ in how they interact with the human agents (see Table 1). Firstly, an "unaffected" agent materialized by Joan's phone constantly collects and processes data, enabling surveillance of her and later depiction of all her life details in the television show. The second agent is represented by an AI-driven assistant recommending movies on the streaming platform Streamberry (on the television) when characters do not know what to watch. Unlike the first agent, it is "affecting agent", influencing the characters' choices within the scene.

With regard to the labor representation of the AI agents, the episode depicts them as silent, almost invisible workers that constantly interact against the backdrop of our routine activities, exploiting human interactions for value creation via data. At a glance, the agency-less AI laborers are patients being held (phone) and controlled (controller) by human agents. However, the machinic agency emerges directly in interactions with human users, creating profit for Streamberry. Assuming the importance of what is absent in the imaginary,¹⁰¹⁾ the episode does not depict any superpower robot bringing immediate destruction from a faraway place (a classic prospective sci-fi trope). Instead, it highlights how, nowadays, AI agents permeate the everyday intimate lives of people.

This is the base of the broader social commentary provided by the episode. It demonstrates how today AI has established itself as people's everyday-life infrastructure (AI-driven software in our devices) or assisting agents (chatbots, copilots, or assistants), powering a larger system of digital capitalism.¹⁰²⁾ As the episode shows, large tech corporations, with their enormous power, might easily abuse the data. In this case, the corporation that

101) Bezerra, "Multimodal critical discourse analysis," 12.

102) Daum, "Artificial Intelligence as the Latest Machine;" Dean, "Communicative Capitalism;" Sadowski, "Too Smart;" Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).

draws on the data of the infrastructural AI agents, Streamberry, is explicitly named. The AI agents follow the ordinary interactions of human agents, learn from them and, later, create significant value, thus affecting the future behavior of human agents. The frame depicts mutual interdependence and relationships between actors, which goes against both the anthropocentric notion of labor¹⁰³⁾ and the sociotechnical blindness criticized by critical scholars.¹⁰⁴⁾

5.2 Vision of the Future

The second frame (48:49–49:08) captures the situation when Joan Tait (Annie Murphy), assisted by Salma Hayek, physically breaks into the Quamputer area with a big screens equipped interface operated by a nameless IT man (who is stereotypically represented as belonging to a specific social group, the IT profession). After Joan's question about why she sees herself on the big screens (Annie Murphy) and not TV Joan (Salma Hayek), the IT man responds, "That's the variant of Joan Is Awful that the Joan below you sees" (48:56–49:00). He explains that everything around them, including themselves, is just one layer of a fictional multiverse generated by the Quamputer using AI deepfake software.

In the background, noises denote the computing sound of AI-driven machines around them. As the IT operator continues to explain, an electronic sound, reminiscent of a bell ring, appears. It evokes *Black Mirror*'s signature narrative tactic, the so-called "traumatic twist" (a narrative bait-and-switch)¹⁰⁵⁾ together with Joan's final understanding of the situation. The camera work in this situation is specific (see Figure 2), depicting the whole scene from behind the glass that protects the Quamputer from the surroundings. Simulta-



Fig. 2: Frame of Joan, Salma Hayek and IT man in the Streamberry building (time 48:56). *Joan is Awful* (Ally Pankiw, 2023), source: Netflix Inc.

103) Markelj and Bueno, "Machinic agency and datafication."

104) Johnson and Verdicchio, "Reframing AI Discourse," 587.

105) Conley and Burroughs, "*Black Mirror*, mediated affect and the political," 139.

neously, the shining computer's reflection in the glass suggests that the entire scene is generated by it. The shot is taken longer, conveying a sense of separation from the characters, who viewers are just now discovering are fictional.¹⁰⁶⁾ The camera angle is also a bit oblique and high, indicating from the perspective of the Quamputer's reflection distance and a certain power over the characters. The lighting is again very subtle, the mostly grey colors of the environment emphasizing the yellow glow of the Quamputer. This glow follows Hayek's clothing as its deepfake fictional output.

Focusing on the agents represented, I recognize the key shift for the AI agents (see Table 1). When Joan and Hayek break into the Quamputer's area, they face the AI agent who is physically there. By default, it is just an unaffecting agent in space, depicted as a shining machine sheltered behind glass. But simultaneously, it is an affecting agent that uses the data of the main characters and generates deepfake content (the *Joan is Awful* series), which has been fundamentally affecting their lives. However, in conversation with the IT operator, both characters discover that the AI agent does much more than that. It generates whole fictional universes, including their own experienced realities. The human agents are completely dependent on the technology.

Understanding this twist retrospectively reveals another of the AI's agencies (see Table 1): an excluded, visually undepicted but always present super-productive agent, processing and utilizing the data collected by infrastructural AI agents to generate perfectly individualized deepfake series content, and generating profit for the Streamberry. Mona Javadi, the company's CEO, presents this vision in one of the earlier scenes. She says that the goal is to "...launch unique, tailored content to each individual in our database, all 800 million of them, created on the fly by our system. The most relatable content imaginable" (47:07–47:15). The Streamberry audience is no longer just a group of users; based on surveillance of their data, they have also become a source of generative AI deepfakes.

The Quamputer is depicted as an "infinite content creator capable of willing entire multiverses into existence" (46:23–46:30). AI labor here is depicted as an automated generative process that cannot currently be fully grasped but should be supported by further investments and development. In one of the following scenes, Joan is about to destroy the computer, and Javadi tries to stop her by explaining that their (fictional) reality will instantly stop existing. "We barely know how it works, it's basically magic,"¹⁰⁷⁾ she says (51:56–51:59). In the episode's dystopian imaginary future, the AI agent does not have to be fully understood; its potential should be used to increase productivity and profits regardless.

The identity of the nameless IT operator, another human agent, supports this discourse. Joan catches him eating an Asian noodle box when entering the room (48:31). The man, sitting with legs crossed and a mess on his desk, spills noodles everywhere from shock. Instead of appearing as a sophisticated, sceptical tech engineer or visionary (as is the case of Javadi, who resembles a female version of Steve Jobs), he looks more like an innocent nerd who does his work solely for the sake of the company. He has a user interface (represented mainly through the big screens) through which he interacts with the Quam-

106) Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 141.

107) "It" in the quote stands for the Quamputer and the way it works.

puter. Here, the AI is again a patient agent, being controlled, described, and protected by the IT man, a human agent.

The dystopian vision of AI labor is not future-oriented. Instead, it is terrifying in its temporally close instrumentality and moral emptiness. On the example of a video streaming platform, the episode projects how much the emerging network of AI laborers can potentially exploit people's data or work and subsequently abuse them for profit. The vision reacts to ongoing debates about the harmful potential of generative AI and deepfakes on creative rights and the recycling of existing audiovisual libraries.¹⁰⁸⁾ "They have taken 100 years of cinema and diminished it to an app," Hayek glosses in another frame (42:20–42:26). The dystopian overview shows how AI laborers might also exploit the past labor of human agents (Hollywood workers), reusing existing data, such as films, as past labor outputs.

Consequently, AI agents can replace not only regular workers but also have the potential to bypass the whole industry, as is the fear expressed by the massive Hollywood protests.¹⁰⁹⁾ The dystopian imaginary of AI labor is completed by incorporating personal people's data into finished products (series content), generating overwhelming capitalist marketization¹¹⁰⁾ and creating "unique, tailored content," regardless of manipulating and harming the audience. AI agents are a super-productive workforce that helps tech corporations generate amazing outputs and even greater profits.

5.3 Means

The third frame (28:22–28:45) shows Joan Tait visiting a lawyer to discuss how best to prevent Streamberry from misusing her identity and data. In their conversation, it emerges that Joan is unable to do anything on a practical level about the situation because, from a legal perspective, everything is clear. She agreed to the terms and conditions that allow such abuse and monetization of her confidential data when she signed up to the Streamberry platform. In this particular frame, Joan cannot understand how the platform gathered all the data. The lawyer explains to her AI-driven data surveillance by example, saying, "Well, you know when you got your phone face down on the table, and you're in your kitchen, and you're talking to your friend about, I don't know, shoe deodorizers, and then, you know, you go on your computer and what pops up? A shoe deodorizing ad... you can't escape it" (28:21–28:35).

The urgency and importance of the protagonists' discussion is emphasized by the absence of background music. Their conversation is the focus. With an anxious facial expression, Joan's nervous gestures gradually speed up, in sharp contrast to the smiling lawyer's

108) Chidera Okolie, "Artificial Intelligence-Altered Videos (Deepfakes), Image-Based Sexual Abuse, and Data Privacy Concerns," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023); Felipe Romero Moreno, "Generative AI and deepfakes: a human rights approach to tackling harmful content," *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, March 29, 2024, accessed September 8, 2024, 1–30, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13600869.2024.2324540>; Katherine Fusco, "Girls Who Can't Say No: Celebrity Resurrections and the Consent of the Dead," in *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, eds. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 300–321.

109) Cerullo, "Screenwriters want to stop AI;" Chmielewski and Richwine, "Plagiarism machines."

110) Daum, "Artificial Intelligence as the Latest Machine."



Fig. 3: Frame of Joan and her lawyer in a law office (time 28:33). *Joan is Awful* (Ally Pankiw, 2023), source: Netflix Inc.

formal and composed gestures. This scene evokes in the viewer the frenetic, powerless situation of Joan, who is unable to deal with the formal legal structure in any way. The camera alternates between side (see Figure 3) and close frontal shots. These underline the dramatic nature of the situation. The eye angle, with occasional shots of Joan from above, provides viewers with an equal and empathetic relation to the main character, who becomes helpless during the scene. Once again, the frame is based on intimate lighting, evoking a moment of privacy. The *mise-en-scène* is full of calm colors that give the lawyer's office a formal (rather dark and cool shades of gray, brown etc.) and welcoming atmosphere. This is supported by objects such as a plate of biscuits placed on the table between the characters, and comfortable-looking chairs.

Both affecting and unaffected AI agents (see Table 1) are present. Firstly, there is an underlying infrastructure behind private-use devices such as smartphones. In this case, the AI demonstrates the unaffected ways of acting of other agents, for example, data surveillance, collection, and analysis. However, the frame shows how they transform into affecting agents when the AI-based deepfake-generating machine is filled with processed data. The Quamputer is depicted only verbally through discussions about its outputs (the deepfake series) and is excluded from visual representation.

The lawyer also explains that interactions between AI and human agents occur inside a legal framework that enables the protection of AI, even at the expense of humans. This protection includes mainly the corporation institution behind AI but also privatized source data sets for AI (recycled audiovisual libraries and users' private data). The imaginaries' means to advance this dystopian future thus lie practically in bulletproof legal documents (as demonstrated by the example of Streamberry's terms and conditions) and a broader environment (the role of the state, or more precisely, government), which does not uphold moral values in the first place. As discussed in the critical field,¹¹¹⁾ this is all

111) E.g. Jörg Nowak, "Data labour as alienated or liberated labour? Proposals for radical economic change from the Silicon Valley in the light of technological reification," *Global Political Economy* 1, no. 2 (2022),

made possible by alienated corporate structures (such as the Streamberry), where ordinary workers (such as the IT operator), lose their practical agency.

5.4 Discussion

| | | |
|-----------|----------------------|--|
| IMAGINARY | Social commentary | The omnipresence of AI agents in people’s everyday interactions. Resulting in the AI infrastructure enabling data surveillance. Tech corporations holding power behind the AI agents. |
| | Vision of the future | AI agents enable the transformation of users into content via data. AI as a super-productive labor force drawing on AI networks, and generating profits. Most television and movie industry workers rendered obsolete. |
| | Means | Alienated corporate structure in the labor area. The social environment of legality without morality. Prioritizing tech-industry investments and further development. |

Tab. 2: Summary of AI’s imaginary in *Joan is Awful*

The MCDA analysis proved to be a suitable methodology for the given research goals. Using the VSAN framework, I explored visual representations of labor-related interactions between AI and human agents (see Table 1). The representations suggest that humans, even when they might be seemingly controlling (patient) AI tools in everyday use, and are surrounded by them in a passive way (unaffected), are significantly dependent and influenced (affecting, excluded but affecting) by AI in-return. Human agents have become inseparable from AI in everyday activities (communicating with other people, managing media content, remediating reality), including labor environment.

These human interactions are not “just” recorded and analyzed but also co-shaped by the technologies. As the depicted AI laboring Quamputer suggests, the dystopia may grow out of an expanding infrastructural AI network, with the onset of technology being able to process (human agents’) data flow, misuse it, and, potentially, make whole industries obsolete. These agents’ interrelated representations show mutual interactions and correspond to the concept of machinic agency.¹¹²⁾ They describe value creation enabled via or with technologies, highlighting the interdependence and importance of AI for the future of labor, while neglecting anthropocentrism, as criticized by authors like Markelj and Bueno.¹¹³⁾ The Qamputer running AI deepfake super-software belongs to the most frequent representation of general AI.¹¹⁴⁾ Unlike traditional sci-fi tropes such as robots, it lacks human-like agency.¹¹⁵⁾ Instead, it maximizes the machinic agency, depicting human and non-human interdependence.

293–307; Tokos Lauren, “Media Conglomeration, Automation, and Alienation: A Marxist Critique,” *Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal* 21, no. 2 (2023); Mike Healy, *Marx and Digital Machines: Alienation, Technology, Capitalism* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2020); Phoebe V. Moore, “Designing Work for Agility and Affect’s Measure,” in *Marx and the Robots Networked Production, AI and Human Labour*, eds. Florian Butollo and Sabine Nuss (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

112) Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication.”

113) Ibid., 15.

114) Noessel, “Untold AI.”

115) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction.”

The Qamputer basically embodies the fears of the Hollywood protestors,¹¹⁶⁾ that of making their whole industry obsolete. Here, the culturally interesting sector refers to a wider AI dystopia where all workers could be replaced by tech. The example thus illustrates the media debate surrounding the future of labor.¹¹⁷⁾ AI is “just” a new tool to increase productivity and profits regardless of moral issues, and corporate institutions are protected by bulletproof terms and conditions (maybe corrupt governments preserve this legal state in favor of private interests).

These “business as usual” features, summarized by Bueno,¹¹⁸⁾ are taken to dystopian ends. Consequently, the imaginary is dystopian but is based on temporal proximity. As a result, the prospective tradition of sci-fi gives way to criticism of current socioeconomic changes that have been characteristic of television series,¹¹⁹⁾ particularly *Black Mirror*. This confirms Baudrillard’s¹²⁰⁾ hypothesis supported by recent studies¹²¹⁾ that with the increasing implementation of AI in everyday life, sci-fi tropes transform and become more elaborate and reachable.

In line with the described character of the sci-fi television series,¹²²⁾ the *Joan is Awful* episode presents dramatized criticism reflecting on discussions about digital capitalism (see Table 2). The AI serves as a trope, the novum, enabling this critique by transforming current reality. The main imaginary of the interconnected network of AI agents boosts the ability to transform human agents via their data into profit-creating commodities for their own consumption (deepfake generated show). The example of the audiovisual industry, with all its privacy rights issues and acquisitions of audiovisual libraries,¹²³⁾ represents a symptom of the broader big tech hegemony criticism, leaving societies vulnerable to powerful private actors.¹²⁴⁾

This is where the crucial aspect of visual exclusion comes in. In keeping with the mystery of the story, the human protagonists slowly reveal these aspects of AI labor in the story. The peak, the so-called traumatic twist,¹²⁵⁾ arrives for an audience who understands that the show itself is an AI supercomputer-generated deepfake. This point underlines and dramatizes the dependence of the human protagonist on AI as absolute, making even their existence AI-generated. Everything can be marketized, privatized and monetized, even intimate details.¹²⁶⁾

116) Cerullo, “Screenwriters want to stop AI;” Chmielewski and Richwine, “‘Plagiarism machines;” Maglio, “42% of Film and TV Production Workers.”

117) Efferenn, “Shifting AI Controversies;” “Pause Giant AI Experiments;” Verma and Vynck, “ChatGPT took their jobs.”

118) Bueno, “Beyond Automation.”

119) Simut, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligence,” 6.

120) Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Science Fiction,” 309.

121) Noessel, “Untold AI;” Simut, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligence,” 5–6.

122) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction,” 321.

123) Fusco, “Girls Who Can’t Say No;” Okolie, “Artificial Intelligence-Altered Videos (Deepfakes), Image-Based Sexual Abuse, and Data Privacy Concerns;” Romero Moreno, “Generative AI and deepfakes.”

124) Daum, “Artificial Intelligence as the Latest Machine;” Dean, “Communicative Capitalism;” Sadowski, “Too Smart.”

125) Conley and Burroughs, “*Black Mirror*, mediated affect and the political,” 139.

126) Daum, “Artificial Intelligence as the Latest Machine.”

However, this criticism is not sociotechnically blind.¹²⁷⁾ It is not a techno-determined imaginary of the kind “AI will replace them all.” As Julian Posada¹²⁸⁾ encourages, the episode makes the technologists behind the AI agents (the Streamberry company) visible in an entertaining way. The episode concludes that there will always be particular companies and their interests that are able to disrupt the labor market. It also distinguishes between ordinary workers (the IT operator, and partially Joan) and executive directors (Javadi) of profit-driven corporations, the power holders behind AI agents. The satirical character of the show highlights this distinction. As Hayek labels Javadi: “This is the bad guy” (42:09–42:10). It makes the “ordinary” workers powerless and naive (the IT man), hypocritical (Joan), or both of these (Hayek), while the managers (Javadi) are evil pragmatists.

Thus, the broader imaginary’s commentary could sound like this: are not all the agents just “victims” of the big-tech capitalist profit-hunt, embodied in the interests of the company’s shareholders? As criticized in literature,¹²⁹⁾ the current tech-corporate-dominated form of capitalism, ordinary workers (IT operator) struggle and lack real agency and autonomy over their decisions, just as middle managers (Joan) execute the decisions of the boards of companies, which are directed by the interests of a few owners. AI agents are not blamed despite the obvious use of surveillance technology. Joan only becomes the “main character of her own story” once she starts her own authentic small business in contrast to the alienated tech-corporate environment. However, the problem is not the AI agent itself (Joan, after all, physically destroys it) but more how Streamberry programmed the agent and the system that enables it.

The satiric corporate self-criticism that goes against the Netflix platform (Streamberry), where the anthology is streamed, makes perfect sense in the concurrency of digital platforms as a proven marketing strategy.¹³⁰⁾ The pursuit of distinct content also motivates almost real-time reflection on contemporary attitudes towards AI labor that have been accelerated due to developments in audiovisual technique,¹³¹⁾ thus making commentary almost instantaneous. These tendencies add to the hyped critical discourse on AI, which has recently been dominated by private actors in logic: bad advertising is also advertising.¹³²⁾

Joan is Awful nevertheless provides a valuable AI labor imaginary in an entertaining form. It reveals existing interactions between human and non-human actors. Also, it points to an increasing mutual dependence, which might be exploited by hegemonic private actors using AI agents. With an example from Hollywood, the episode paints a powerful dystopian future of unregulated and profit-driven digital capitalism based on laboring AI infrastructure. It generates huge profits for tech corporations that prioritize alienation and legality over morality and privacy.

127) Johnson and Verdicchio, “Reframing AI Discourse,” 587.

128) Posada, “The Future of Work Is Here.”

129) E.g. Healy, *Marx and Digital Machines*; Moore, “Designing Work;” Nowak, “Data Labour as alienated or liberated labour?;” Tokos, “Media Conglomeration.”

130) Gulas and Weinberger, *Humor in advertising*, 28.

131) Matthau, “How Tech Has Shaped Film Making.”

132) Efferenn, “Shifting AI Controversies.”

Conclusion

Lately, the media has been flooded with techno-deterministic visions of how AI might deprive people of their jobs. Such a sociotechnical blindness,¹³³⁾ neglecting the human actors behind the technology was inherent, especially in entertainment media formats like science fiction television.¹³⁴⁾ This is a fundamental problem since shared imaginaries might inspire and influence the practical development of new technologies.¹³⁵⁾ Still, scholars have overlooked cultural representations of AI labor. This case study reacts to that, focusing on the dystopian AI labor imaginary in the influential *Black Mirror* series, the *Joan is Awful* episode. The research based on MCDA methods enriches existing research by providing an example of a sociotechnically aware depiction of AI despite the entertaining format.

The proposed AI labor imaginary highlights that the technology is not the problem; instead, the possibly “awful” human creators and tech companies might make human labor obsolete and harm individuals. Inspired by Hollywood workers’ fears that partially incited massive protests in 2023,¹³⁶⁾ the episode reflects broader issues. It outlines the increasing mutual dependence of AI and human agents in the labor sphere based on digital data-driven network emphasized in literature.¹³⁷⁾ This people’s everyday-life infrastructure, permeated by private AI labor agents, poses potential harm not only to audiovisual workers but to society as a whole. A possible dystopia grows out of the roots of profit-driven digital capitalism hegemonized by powerful tech corporations without proper public control.

The results of this case study are not generalizable. Instead, the analysis demonstrate the importance of imaginaries in an understudied cultural sphere.¹³⁸⁾ Sci-fi represents a background of ideas and expectations that affect how people understand and judge AI.¹³⁹⁾ Unlike prevailing literature, this paper underlines the specifics of the sci-fi genre and television medium. Sci-fi television is, by default, drama, where the technology embodies a vehicle for reflections on social issues.¹⁴⁰⁾ Results propose another example¹⁴¹⁾ for Baudrillard’s hypothesis¹⁴²⁾ that contemporary sci-fi becomes more reflexive toward current problems compared to the future-oriented traditional sci-fi, reflecting on the implementation of AI in real life.

Finally, the analysis also proposes the needed¹⁴³⁾ systematic conceptualization and operationalization of sociotechnical imaginaries for critical multimodal discourse research.

133) Johnson and Verdicchio, “Reframing AI Discourse,” 587.

134) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction,” 321.

135) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and Fears for intelligent machines;” Nader et al., “Public understanding of artificial intelligence;” Pollard, “Popular Culture’s AI Fantasies.”

136) Cerullo, “Screenwriters want to stop AI;” Chmielewski and Richwine, “Plagiarism Machines.”

137) Dean, “Communicative Capitalism;” Markelj and Bueno, “Machinic agency and datafication;” Pace, “The Concept of Digital Capitalism;” Sadowski, “Too Smart.”

138) Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer, “Imaginaries of artificial intelligence,” 13.

139) Cave and Dihal, “Hopes and Fears.”

140) Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction,” 321.

141) For others see Noessel, “Untold AI” or Simuț, “Contemporary Representations of Artificial Intelligence.”

142) Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Science Fiction,” 309.

143) Rudek, “Capturing the invisible.”

Specifically, Theo Van Leeuwen's VSAN analytical framework exhibited a suitable structure to shed light on the mutual interactions of different actors. Future research might extend the range of cases examined. Also, focusing on interconnections within different arenas where imaginaries occur (like news, culture, and politics) might be beneficial.

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Nostalgia Isn't What it Used to Be: On Vaporwave's Glitched, Aspirational Aesthetics

Abstract

Vaporwave is an internet-native aesthetic movement that emerged in the early 2010s. It directly addresses the presumed condition of living at the “end of history” that was proposed during the 1990s by enmeshing images from aspirational consumerism into an audiovisual aesthetic. This aesthetic is mainly distinguished by its use of the glitch as a unifying element, ironically fusing different forms of noise, muzak and interference with visual and aural refrains and pop culture objects and other images belonging to neoliberal consumerism. This article argues that Vaporwave’s “glitched” aesthetics are the manifestation of an aspirational form of hauntology wherein certain ahistorical visions of the past continue to superimpose themselves over the present through aesthetic means that were once subversive but are now customary. Furthermore, I contend that certain aspects of the work of Chris Marker that allude to the de-historicizing of images through their distortion, and the bleak imagining of an actual post-historical society presented in Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s film *Pulse*, can be taken as a counterbalance to Vaporwave’s fetishization and lack of historical engagement with the images of the “end of history.”

Keywords

Vaporwave, glitch, nostalgia, memory, end of history

*And so our little life, it just
keeps getting littler, as whoever has just been lucky enough to talk to
you
drops into the apparently bottomless well — fantasmatically suffused,
perhaps,
but meaningless, basically, as the noise of a train heard from a distance.*

— Patrick Mackie, *Mental Muzak*¹⁾

Introduction

Audiovisual media has adopted glitches as an aesthetic element that is often intentionally added to evoke a sense of disorientation or uneasiness in the viewer, particularly in regards to fears of the encroachment of technology into everyday life. The glitch has become a familiar aesthetic refrain that is especially visible in artistic forms that are generated in the internet, due to the ease of their digital circulation.

In this text, I argue that among these forms, the case of Vaporwave (an internet-native and decentered aesthetic movement that is thematically associated with the idea of the “end of history” propagated mainly during the 1990s)²⁾ is illustrative of how the habituation to an element like the glitch, which originally carried the potential to create “a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought and action with the ‘inadmissible,’”³⁾ can reduce its capacity to be a truly critical aesthetic device and instead transform the images to which it is applied precisely into the familiar, the admissible and the assimilated.

By describing the interplay between the aesthetics of Vaporwave and the glitch itself, this article aims to describe the process through which a once-destabilizing aesthetic element can transform into an enabler of a purely aspirational (or self-deluded) view of history and, as a contrast, I present the case of Chris Marker’s films *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *Level Five* (1997) which here are regarded as early harbingers of the problems inherent in succumbing to the temptation of modifying and altering historical images through glitches as a means to underscore their condition as discrete representations instead of accentuating their role as part of larger historical narratives. I close the text by proposing the film *Pulse* (2001) by Kiyoshi Kurosawa as an exemplary case of a coherent and challenging questioning of the concept of “end of history” that also uses glitches as aesthetic elements, but in a more subversive way than that in which Vaporwave did so to approach similar questions about historical engagement.

1) Patrick Mackie, “Mental muzak,” *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2000), 59.

2) A very thorough historical reassessment of the idea of an “end of history” can be found in: Yascha Mounk, “The End of History Revisited,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020), 22–35.

3) Debra Benita Shaw, “The Aesthetics of Retrieval: Beautiful Data, Glitch Art and Popular Culture,” *Anthropocenes — Human, Inhuman, Posthuman* 1, no. 1 (2020), accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.anthropocenes.net/article/id/666/>.

The *Intentional* Glitch as an Aesthetic Marker

Glitches — i.e., “artifacts of errors in electronic transmission” but which, very importantly, “do not stop transmission”⁴⁾ — are amongst the forms of interference and error that have been turned into prominent aesthetic elements. Because glitches, as they are commonly understood in terms of “mismatches and deviations from the expected norms of machine function”⁵⁾ are unexpected, short-term disturbances in physical systems that are miniaturized, delicate, compact, and ultimately *intangible*, they complicate the relationship between the essential invisible forces that make electronic transmission possible and the physical media — whatever they might be — in which the end-user, a viewer, a listener, or a consumer is ultimately experiencing their manifestation. The association of the glitch with the ghostly and the uncanny has been well established: their startling presence enabling a machine to appear “haunted,” “sentient” or, at the very least, “*alive... living, real, not dead.*”⁶⁾ This makes of glitches a seducing and yet troubling form of imperfection, with their abruptness being a crucial characteristic that dislocates the receiver’s expectations and brings attention to the medium of transmission itself, but which, instead of producing a distancing effect, only heightens the disquieting realization of the inseparability of the medium from its message, where any attempt at a rupture would demand violent intervention (with the radical act of shooting the TV set being a prominent illustration.⁷⁾)

The glitch, or, more precisely, the *intentional* glitch as opposed to its fundamental *unexpected* variant — bereft of its accidental nature —, has therefore turned into a particularly effective, persistent, and reliable visual or aural *refrain*, capable of both de- and re-territorializing mediatized experience,⁸⁾ conventionally used as a shorthand to indicate the presence of stealthy immaterial forces, but steadily decreasing in its capacity to induce anxiety when intentionally placed, and as technology itself has increasingly moved towards intangibility and inscrutability. Unlike machines of the not so ancient past, which could be disassembled, repaired, or, in essence, tinkered with, the subsequent sleek and permanently interconnected *devices*, with their nanoarchitectures and their dependence on immersive, all-encompassing networks whose complex internal workings are hard to commensurate with the routine-like behavior with which most users engage with them, might well be delicate slabs of materials imbued with fairylike properties: small, shiny, nimble, sleek, glistening, even *transparent*.⁹⁾

These interconnected devices turned out to be not inscrutable monoliths but rather

4) Sean Cubitt, “Glitch,” *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 1 (2017), 19–33.

5) Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Theory: Art and Semiotics* (Savannah: I’m Press’d-Cinegraphic Media, 2023), 6.

6) Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 2–3. Author’s emphasis.

7) In his introduction to *Haunted Media*, Sconce describes various incidents of people violently attacking the medium of the television with the intention to somehow *kill it* as a defense mechanism against the unbearable notion of it being a living, breathing being. See: Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 1–20.

8) Janne Vanhanen, “Loving the Ghost in the Machine: Aesthetics of Interruption,” in *Life in the Wires: The CTheory Reader*, eds. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Victoria: New World Perspectives — CTheory Books, 2000), 380–387.

9) Carolyn L. Kane, *High-Tech Trash: Glitch, Noise, and Aesthetic Failure* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 9–11.

soft machines: so soft in fact that they integrate seamlessly into the weightless space of dreams and expectations. They anticipate our thoughts and react to our mood (“the dawning realization that our computer knows us more intimately than any person ever could.”¹⁰) They behave like portable membranes granting osmotic access to a ceaseless stream of basically *everything*. And even though they might ostensibly be “designed to fail”¹¹, they remain eternally aspirational devices and their latent obsolescence only adds to their potential as backwards-incompatible media to later feel nostalgic about, continuing the cycle.

Paradoxically, as technology shed so much weight, it became somewhat less mysterious. In this way, the consolidation of previously distinct realms was accentuated, the flexible and the rigid became indistinguishable, large amounts of information turned into mere feedback, and the opportunities for the glitch to manifest multiplied enormously but now in the form of a familiar aesthetic twitch. Consequently, the glitch would no longer need to crawl out of the TV screen in the form of a haunted creature like it used to (as in the iconic image from Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ring*) because it is there looking at us *all of the time* (and shooting at the screen would no longer be an ultimate recourse to find closure because all screens are intermingled anyway: as David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* predicted in 1983, media-machines could become coextensive not only with the human psyche but with flesh itself, and their effects felt even as they were disconnected from their power sources, going as far as being capable of pointing the gun back at the viewer, as embodied in the infamous image of the white-noise-hand holding a pistol and emerging menacingly from the membrane-screen.)

Glitches are therefore a part of the particular hauntology that characterizes the internet era. Following Mark Fisher, we can outline this concept as the persistence of remnants of cultural life that are “no longer actually present from the *past* but which remain effective as a virtuality” and, concomitantly, as “that which has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual.”¹² The “virtual” here can be understood as sharing many common elements with the aspirational, since a condition of aspirationality is to always preserve a virtual, idealized alternative to the actual past. Similar to ghosts whose presence one would have become accustomed to, glitches constantly descend from the virtual to haunt the historical, they “represent the past, but they are not from the past.”¹³ They are haunting more because they're everywhere and because they can easily evoke nostalgia, than because they represent any inherent threat. Their presence is only haunting in the sense that, as Fisher also articulates in his view of hauntology as a cultural force, they are part of those mediatized cultural elements that “can trigger a sense of temporal disjuncture.”¹⁴

10) doctorb, “The Transcendental Art of Wardrobe Malfunction in a time of Post-Everything,” *Private Suite*, no. 3, October, 2018, accessed September 22, 2024, 31–34, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-3>. [Note: All references from *Private Suite* refer to the magazine issue first, since his contributors were anonymous and used pseudonyms that do not adjust well to academic formatting].

11) Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 4.

12) Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 18.

13) Sadeq Rahimi, *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* (Boston: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 5.

14) Lisa Perrott, “Time is out of joint: the transmedial hauntology of David Bowie,” *Celebrity Studies* 10, no. 1, (2019), 119–139.

Contemporary consumers reflect on the past and feel nostalgic for a variety of unrealized futures in the company of glitches because after all they have become a very recognizable symbol for the apparently interminable parade of high-frequency and low-intensity quotidian anxieties that act as a form of late-capitalist background noise: the glitch has been domesticated (it is, for example, a staple preset in multiple video editing software¹⁵⁾) while ironically maintaining its identity as a marker of unpredictability because it is recognizable and yet can assume many forms.

And if the glitch is made of the same predictable-yet-frustrating materials that make up the multiple apprehensions that accompany materialistic life in late capitalism, then it is at the very least part of the stuff of which aspirations are made of too: technological possibilities have always aroused new fears as much as new expectations, and the spaces that separate one group from the other are now the loci occupied by the glitch, being a stand-in for malaises and illusions that are no longer phantasmal or monstrous except in their persistence; more irritating than frightening. Glitches, as noted above, do not halt the flow of transmission, they simply make things exasperatingly less smooth.

The Character of Vaporwave

Glitched visual and aural markers — spasmodic audio and video signals, pixels out of place, deformations of a graphic matrix, etc. —, utilized as much allegorically as literally in order to artificially instill dread or evoke a haunting aspirationality into transmedial interactions, infuse all forms of media as convenient solutions to the problem of how to represent the “new kind of outside,” the unrelenting form of uncertainty brought by the emergence of new media in the “technological unconscious.”¹⁶⁾ However, they are particularly evident in internet-centric forms of art, since online life is a perfect ground for re-contextualization: as Xtine Burrough argues, “contemporary artists tactically manipulate noise on the internet to demonstrate that noise has evolved from an erroneous part of a communication system into a central channel for revisionist practices,”¹⁷⁾ and, as we have seen, “noise” here could be almost taken as synonymous with glitch, in the sense of being an error transfigured into a prominent aesthetic feature.

Among these internet-centric forms, glitches stand out as a key attribute that since its inception has accompanied Vaporwave, an internet-native musical and visual phenomenon,¹⁸⁾ or what may as well be (or *have been*, since one of Vaporwave culture’s main characteristics is that it insists on repeating that the genre itself is dead¹⁹⁾) the first truly distinct

15) To mention one example, the popular editing software plug-in provider FOUR Editors offers a package for Adobe Premiere Pro and DaVinci Resolve named “glitch presets” that includes more than 100 varieties of pre-generated glitches (<https://foureditors.com/en-de/products/glitch-presets>).

16) Vanhanen, “Loving the Ghost in the Machine: Aesthetics of Interruption,” 381–382.

17) Xtine Burrough, “Add-Art and Your Neighbors’ Biz: A Tactical Manipulation of Noise,” in *Error – Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, ed. Mark Nunes (New York: Continuum, 2011), 93–94.

18) Laura Glitsos, *Somatechnics And Popular Music In Digital Contexts* (Lincolnshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 99–114

19) A succinct summary of the history of the ubiquitous phrase “Vaporwave is dead” that also decries its commercialization can be found, fittingly, in an undated blog post by the Vaporwave-inspired fashion and life-

and genuine music genre belonging to the “end of history” and able to come to terms with its “emptiness,”²⁰⁾ if for no other reason than, as Roisin Kiberd writes, it was “a way of seeing, of being, pitched somewhere between the internet and real life”, adding that it was a form “native to the internet, where nothing is ever real enough to grant satisfaction.”²¹⁾

Kiberd's position anticipates Vaporwave's everlasting aspirational condition — discussed below —, but it is just as central to establish firstly that having originated inside the internet was what introduced in Vaporwave a profound sense of deterritorialization that is simultaneously liberating: its scene remains scattered all over the world, there is no borderline where gatekeepers can stand, there are no Vaporwave pilgrimage places beyond fleeting and imaginary virtual topographies, with the *Digital Plaza*, a virtual, idealized image of the shopping mall, which stands as a nostalgic symbol for consumer culture in the late 1980s and 1990s (hence the presence of distorted TV commercials of that era in a large number of Vaporwave videos), being an important landmark that nobody ever actually visited, although it was known to be submerged in “pink hues.”²²⁾ But, as the above quote highlights too, an even more important attribute of the genre is that it embodies the conflicting condition of occupying a liminal space, a completely new inside/outside dynamic, which is why it has been constantly linked to the hypnagogic²³⁾, with liminality being central to its success, suggesting that leading online and offline lives and oscillating between them — or even being unable to distinguish between the two — is basically a form of sleepwalking.

Vaporwave has changed so much during its lifespan and therefore proven to be so hard to pin down that it has eventually reached *I know it when I see it* status. Vaporwave is in fact hard to pin down because it is very easy to produce and therefore it multiplies and disseminates at a very fast pace; proliferating, as it still does, in an environment where all of a sudden virtually all existing music, enormous amounts of audio tracks from all possible sources (but especially commercial jingles, videogame music, TV and film soundtracks and radio broadcasts from the 1990s) and a large variety of audio editing software are available to be easily downloaded — this often meaning *pirated* — the Vaporwave compositional impulse, influenced by the idea of plunderphonics, which championed sampling as a creative act,²⁴⁾ “enables anyone with a computer to produce amateur or perhaps professional-grade sampled music.”²⁵⁾ The genre has flourished haphazardly along a large va-

style brand Vapor95 titled *Did Vaporwave Die and Who Killed It?*, written by Adan Kohnhorst, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://vapor95.com/blogs/darknet/did-vaporwave-die-and-who-killed-it>.

20) Ross Cole, “Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse,” *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2, (2020), 297–326.

21) Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2021), digital e-pub version.

22) m a t t スベト, “Letter from the editor,” *Private Suite*, no. 1, June 17, 2018, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-1/>.

23) Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-mediated Musics, Online Methods and Genre,” *Music & Letters* 98, no. 4 (2017), 601–647.

24) “Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative,” presented by John Oswald to the Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference in Toronto in 1985,” *plunderphonics*, accessed September 22, 2024, <http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html>.

25) Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016), digital e-pub version.

riety of styles and subgenres often verging on the absurd, with notorious cases such as *Simpsonswave* or *Mallsoft* (the first one being the glitching of audio snippets from *The Simpsons*, with its accompanying videos being looped and distorted images from different episodes of the series, and the second the modification of easy-listening music that used to be played as background noise in shopping malls) coexisting with a myriad others.

As it developed during the early 2010s Vaporwave retained its core identity through all these iterations until at some point it simply “died.” And then died again. And again.²⁶⁾ Vaporwave, at first proudly, then ironically, and finally self-parodyingly,²⁷⁾ has announced (and continues to announce) its death as insistently as punk announces that it hasn’t died yet.²⁸⁾ This obsession with its own demise stems from the genre’s own self-deprecating and decentralized nature. Vaporwave has always demanded and thrived in paradox; it has never been neither fully dead nor only half alive. The genre is primarily known for maintaining an unexpected sense of unity amidst alarming levels of haziness and incoherence.

Vaporwave has never been mainstream and yet it is undoubtedly very popular, seeing as its streaming numbers in Bandcamp and YouTube — where it mainly circulates — remain very healthy.²⁹⁾ The genre is, for the most part, if not necessarily anonymously created, then produced attempting to draw as little attention as possible to its composers, with artists publishing their music using such a large number of aliases that the notion of identity itself became muddled and wound up as a form of self-mocking, concealing an identity being beside the point, since the goal has ultimately been to make the music appear as coming from a disembodied fissure, and when the music “comes from nowhere” then it “can be attributed to no one.”³⁰⁾ Unsurprisingly, this is one of its strengths and one of the reasons why it is so easy for it to catch unsuspecting listeners (and viewers: the importance of YouTube for its diffusion cannot be overstated) and lull them into states of hypnagogic half-remembrance and wakeful dreaming; the fact that Vaporwave is largely presented as hollow and incorporeal enables deterritorialized selves to submerge in it and fluidly adopt a new persona with each Vaporwave release.

26) A 2015 Vaporwave album by Sandtimer available in the Internet Archive is titled precisely *Vaporwave is Dead* (<https://archive.org/details/sandtimer-vaporwave-is-dead>) and the phrase recurs in many descriptions of Vaporwave albums and tracks in Bandcamp, SoundCloud and other spaces where the genre continues to be showcased as in, for instance, the album Vaporwave is dead again, by 空隙 (<https://antifur.bandcamp.com/album/vaporwave-is-dead-again>).

27) Adam Harper, “Personal Take: Vaporwave is Dead, Long Live Vaporwave!,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, eds. Nicolas Cook et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), digital e-pub version.

28) Nick Fulton, “Vaporwave’s little known roots are anti-capitalist and totally punk,” *Document Journal*, August 28, 2019, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2019/08/vaporwaves-little-known-roots-are-anti-capitalist-and-totally-punk/>.

29) Vaporwave YouTube mixes like *Employee of the Month* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMPfEnltdM>) or *Vaporwave / Chillwave — Ultimate Mix* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SolEjKrcg4E>) count 1.2 and 4.2 million views respectively and mixes like ΣTERNAL SPA (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CZHL-8w52Co>) accumulated tens of thousands of views in just weeks, with several channels dedicated to Vaporwave mixes having thousands of subscribers. On the other hand, in Bandcamp’s search page, when selecting experimental genres, where Vaporwave is featured, there are always at least a few Vaporwave releases featured, see: <https://bandcamp.com/discover/experimental>.

30) Tanner, “Babbling Corpse.”

Many descriptions of the feelings evoked by albums found in reviews published in the short-lived Vaporwave-centric magazine *Private Suite* (2018–2020) depict the music as allowing for the immersion into a virtual landscape, often in synesthetic and disjointed terms, where the listener might have found themselves blissfully submerged: one review portrays a listening experience as having “found myself cruising down the overpass of my imagination” while “a distant sun set on the horizon of my mind” leading into feeling “immersed in bursts of ebbing neon blues and pinks, backlit with black-light purples and ombres [sic] of luscious yellows.”³¹⁾ Some venture into stranger territories, describing how the tracks “flow unpredictably between human sadness and digital apathy like rose water and absinthe snaking down a pulsing river” pushing the listener to “understand what it’s like to astral project into a discarded, coffin-shaped flash drive floating freely on the Dead Sea,”³²⁾ inviting them to discover new virtual ground “plugging in to your old dial-up modem and finding a gateway to a forgotten internet that’s teeming with new life” offering access to a “pristine virtual wilderness,”³³⁾ or even to envision the interactions between imagined digital spaces like videogame environments: “what if like, we took that banging soundtrack from *Minecraft*, and then made it sound like it was playing on the Water Temple from *Ocarina of Time*?”³⁴⁾

These experiential images are invitations to enact modes of wandering by, being inside or floating through motion-blurred spaces or hallucinating inside something akin to a Windows 95 screensaver, and in this the Vaporwave audiovisual experience could be said to resemble phantom rides, those early disembodied “actuality films” that showcased cinema’s special relationship with space.³⁵⁾

Vaporwave’s territorializing entails a spatial enactment by a wandering figure, but this *flâneur* of the deep internet is no longer a person, instead it is a deeply lonely aspirational creature that accumulates virtual memories, an intruder that irrupts and skips through different spaces with awkward, jerking motions in the same way the glitch does, a self as disembodied and anonymous as the makers of the music. This also explains the genre’s lyrical barrenness: no actual singing is to be found in Vaporwave, only pitch-shifted samples of anonymized voices that converge into incorporeal and reverb-saturated utterances.

As the above description shows, Vaporwave’s character is dependent on a form of virtuality that is almost synonymous with depersonalization. This anticipates its association with the “end of history,” where historical engagement is negated, and which finds its roots in its reliance on a nostalgic and aspirational understanding of its own themes and imagery.

31) Review of sheepo, “LFO Dreams: Nitewind,” *Private Suite*, no. 3, October 12, 2018, 6, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-3/>.

32) Review of deliriously...Daniel, “「彼女の死」 Her Death by Neko Furēku,” *Private Suite*, no. 8, August 20, 2019, 15, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-8/>.

33) Review of DJ Nonn, “NETSCVPE by NETSCVPE,” *Private Suite*, no. 12, April 30, 2020, 29, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-12/>.

34) Review of sheep, “Alpha v1.2.3_04 by Digital Haunt,” *Private Suite*, no. 7, June 17, 2019, 24, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-7/>.

35) John Edmond, “Moving landscapes: Film, vehicles and the travelling shot,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 5, no. 2 (2014), 131–143.

Aspirationality and Nostalgia as Core Elements of Vaporwave Aesthetics

Vaporwave has established a complicated relationship with nostalgia, which has been recognized as “the main affective dimension of the movement.”³⁶⁾ As a contributor to *Private Suite* put it: “most music will play on your feelings, but Vaporwave plays on your memories,”³⁷⁾ conceiving the past “as a genuine refuge from the artificiality of the present”³⁸⁾ by yearning for cultural artifacts and gestures of the pre-internet or early internet eras, mainly taken from different forms of lifestyle advertising, video games, late-night TV, slice-of-life anime series, etc., offering “an amplified focus on past things, reflected in a partial detachment from everyday life,”³⁹⁾ which, as a matter of fact, is one of the strategies of nostalgic marketing: exploiting idealized visions of the past to influence consumerist behavior extending a supposed opportunity for a “redemption sequence” where reconciliation with the past is possible because its negative aspects are transmuted into positives,⁴⁰⁾ as there is a “re-shaping of incidents and relationships stored in memory so that they yield pleasure in the recollection, even if they were not pleasurable at the time they were experienced.”⁴¹⁾ Moreover, Vaporwave’s images of the past are always blurred, modified, decolorized, saturated, looped — which, again, is to say *glitched*, suggesting that disruption is necessary to highlight the source of their historical detachment.

The irony here is that this past is purely imaginary and in Vaporwave aesthetics there is never any attempt at confronting or even performing what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory work,” i.e. seeking the testimony, narration and actual lived historical perspective of other embodied memory-subjects to make sense of past crises and enable a process of intergenerational mnemonic continuity.⁴²⁾ Vaporwave remains satisfied with engaging only with artificial and aspirational images of neon-lit streets, new gadgets, happy office workers, sparkling soft drinks, the texture of plastic, toy commercials, the pixelated aura of video games and many more markers of late 20th century conspicuous consumption: these are the images that accompany its videos, album covers and other visual elements. Thus, the genre has shaped its (distorted) idea of the past exclusively through images that are devoid of proper historical context (not unlike the aliens that presumed to have understood the complexities of human life on Earth by having seen nothing but broadcasts of American sitcoms in a notable episode of *Futurama*.⁴³⁾)

36) Gytis Dovydaitis, “Celebration of the Hyperreal Nostalgia: Categorization and Analysis of Visual Vaporwave Artefacts,” *Art History & Criticism* 17, no. 1 (2021), 113–134.

37) m a k i, “Five Days in Tokyo 20XX,” *Private Suite*, no. 4, December 12, 2018, 34–39, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-4/>.

38) Marco Pichierri, *Nostalgia Marketing: Rekindling the Past to Influence Consumer Choices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 2.

39) *Ibid.*, 4.

40) Darrel D. Muehling and Vincent J. Pascal, “An involvement explanation for nostalgia advertising effects,” *Journal of Promotion Management* 18, no. 1 (2012), 100–118.

41) B. B. Stern, “Historical and personal nostalgia in advertising text: The fin de siècle effect,” *Journal of Advertising* 21, no. 4 (1992), 11–22.

42) Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18–25.

43) The episode in question is 1–12 *When Aliens Attack*. It originally aired on November 7, 1999. It was written by Ken Keeler and directed by Brian Sheesley.

The past being exulted in Vaporwave imagery never truly belonged to anyone, and that is why its hauntology remains purely aspirational: it is a past shaped by inwardly-oriented images, a set of artificial remembrances, meant to work as “cushions” for subjects to fall back on in order to suppress their confrontation with less palatable versions of the past or even absent and vacant territories.

The past thusly transformed into an aspirational background hum mutates into a complicit form of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as “silent silencing,” a form of suppression that he then calls one of consumerist society’s most crucial characteristics, vital for its own “self-equilibrium,” which is its “capacity,” developed to an “unprecedented degree,” to “absorb all and any dissent it inevitably, in common with other types of society, breeds — and then to recycle it as a major resource of its own reproduction, reinvigoration and expansion.”⁴⁴⁾ In this way, any action directed at transcendence is thwarted (“nipped in the bud,” in Bauman’s words) by being assimilated and integrated.

The search for sanctuary into the “end of history” that accompanied the supposed victory of neoliberalism during the 1990s — a notion popularized by Francis Fukuyama’s triumphant text from 1989, where he asserted that economic liberalism was the ideological last-man-standing of the post-cold war geopolitical order⁴⁵⁾ — elevated an artificial horizon that made any attempt at dissent seem pointless, considering that historical perspective is one of its necessary prerequisites. Peeking behind that horizon would only bring unnecessary discomfort that could be easily traded for simpler forms of contentment to be found in the new modes of quotidian silence: being a good employee, taking care of a virtual pet or a penchant for passivity that was not the result of a lack of imagination but, on the contrary, of hyperactive tendencies to daydream inspired by newly available possibilities.

But unlike in Fisher’s conception of hauntology, where the stagnation of cultural forms and therefore of imagination signaled the loss of several “futures” and where “the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live,”⁴⁶⁾ it was not necessarily utopian ideation (or a disappointment at unmaterialized utopias) that propelled the creative forces behind Vaporwave. The aspirations that haunt its music and images are located neither in the present nor in the actual past, only in fragmentary symbols that arose from a bottomless pit of well-marketed self-delusions.

These impressions and sensations gave shape not to a pastiche but to a ceaselessly overwritten, self-sustaining palimpsest. Vaporwave is ultimately only self-reflexively nostalgic and there is no true object of yearning behind it except for an idealized version of the past as seen through neoliberal-tinted glasses.

44) Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (London: Polity, 2007), 47–49.

45) Francis Fukuyama, “The end of history?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989), 3–18. Fukuyama would confidently assert in an interview from 2013 that he stood by his claims: “The basic point — that liberal democracy is the final form of government — is still basically right. [...] The real question is whether any other system of governance has emerged in the last 20 years that challenges this. The answer remains no.” — Francis Fukuyama, “The ‘End of History’ 20 Years Later,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2013), 31–39.

46) Mark Fisher, “What is hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012), 16–24.

Vaporwave and the Retreat from Historical Involvement

This brings us into the inherently paradoxical political dimensions of Vaporwave, which, unsurprisingly, are often nebulous and mistrustful, but not quite nihilistic or rebellious. One of the genre's best known tricks is to engage with Muzak, smooth jazz, chill-out and other easy-listening musical genres which typically flow, like a natural resource in commercial spaces "through channels parallel to those providing air, electricity and information."⁴⁷⁾ In his review of *Floral Shoppe*, a seminal album by Macintosh Plus, Miles Bowe writes that Vaporwave

is music designed to be ignored. Often built from corporate Muzak samples, it lingers in your perception, the way something might flicker in the corner of your eye. If Brian Eno conceived ambient music as something one could choose to focus on or comfortably let slide into the background, vaporwave turns that prescriptive power against the listener.⁴⁸⁾

And by altering this music — meant to operate only at the shallowest of registers within the psyche — applying glitch-like behaviors onto it, what resulted was a dissonant subversion that strengthened feelings of numbness, distrust and apathy while opening a space for embracing the soothing qualities of the music anyway. But this *assimilative* music is part of the program that Bauman describes, so in a political sense Vaporwave's engagement with its aesthetics is akin to declawing and defanging an animal that presents no possible threat to begin with. What exactly is there to fear then?

As a genre that, as I am suggesting here, primarily relies on a *glitched* aesthetic, Vaporwave attempts to imbue glitches with the capacity to act as disruptors not of an assimilated and contextualized past, not of the *system*, but of the way in which the internet reflects its particularly distorted version of ahistoricity into its users, thus questioning the relationship of the lonely and hyperactive Vaporwave listener-consumer with technology in general and, clearly, with the internet in particular, doing so from within; one could say from *really deep* within. Vaporwave indeed recruits glitches as frequent elements of (unsuccessful) protest and subversion, "to reformat error as an act of resistance,"⁴⁹⁾ chiefly against agents of silent silencing, or, also fittingly for Vaporwave's contradictory aims, as symbols of failure and fallibility.⁵⁰⁾ In its engagement with assimilative music, Vaporwave transformed the inherent pusillanimity that this music-as-wallpaper demands from the contemporary subject into a *hyperactive* pusillanimity, one which was furiously aware of its futility but at least was in charge of its own process of production and proliferation and did not come imposed from the top (i.e. the music industry.) The fear, it turns out, is of staying idle and getting bored.

47) Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 1 (1997), 22–50.

48) Review of Miles Bowe, "*Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus," *Pitchfork*, April 21, 2019, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/macintosh-plus-floral-shoppe/>.

49) Andie Shabbar, "Queer-Alt-Delete: Glitch Art as Protest Against the Surveillance Cis-tem," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3&4 (2018), 195–211.

50) Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 62–66.

An extremely ungenerous criticism of assimilative music could dismiss it as the soundtrack to accompany the comings and goings of the *little Eichmanns* of the world, those supposedly willing cogs in the machine, toiling cheerfully at the rhythm of neoliberalism's unstoppable march, but although excessive, this is a useful critique that reveals how Vaporwave and its images have never been banally evil, but evilly banal: equally subversive *and* naïve, clearly embodying elements of transgression and disdain for late-stage capitalism and consumerism just as much as admiration and aspirational longing, in ways that could be mordantly satirizing and yet comical, self-deluded and sincerely hopeful even if they ultimately remain turned inwards: the revolution is never going to happen to the tune of a Vaporwave track. It spoke only to itself and it resisted the kind of self-mythologizing and the longing for reputation, credibility or cultural relevance that has characterized other music genres like, for instance, Punk, to which it frequently alludes with its insistence on being dead and its adoption of DIY methods of production.

In its *aspirationally haunted* character, where disarticulated fragments of imaginary memories float around like free radicals, Vaporwave attempts to investigate the end of history “from within,” questioning the “promise and idealism” of the 80s and 90s, “a time when capitalism had prevailed over communism, when greed was good and, crucially, a time when computers became commercially available for the first time, offering a brighter and easier future” as Jack Mangos has suggested in a well-known article.⁵¹⁾ However, this questioning is self-defeating, as it is accompanied by an absence of historical consciousness because whatever “techno-utopia” had been presumably promised to the public during the early days of interconnected personal computing and neoliberal freedom, it was never a coherent narrative but rather a mishmash of aspirational contradictions mediated by capitalist intents.⁵²⁾ Vaporwave, in an irony that reverses a commonly held truism by means of Benjamin's assertion that “history decays into images, not into stories,”⁵³⁾ was tricked by trusting what the techno-utopia was *showing* instead of the narrative it was actually not *telling*.

The Function of the Glitch in Vaporwave's Visual Language

Vaporwave's visual aesthetics are characterized by many contradictory and unreliable visual markers. Its haziness, ambiguity and, especially, its glitch-like nature, fusing and remixing the iconography of the optimistic-yet-empty promises of the early days of neoliberalist intrusion. The “multilayered” visual symbolism of the genre has been pointedly categorized by Gytis Dovydaitis into seven categories: 1) “nostalgic commodities,” meaning its fetishistic relationship with gadgets — especially computers and video game consoles — and other consumer products of the 1980s and 90s; 2) “idyllic classics,” which refers to the bizarre presence of statues of Greco-Roman mythological figures as elements of

51) Jack Mangos, “Welcome to the Virtual Plaza,” *Tharunka*, August 24, 2017, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://tharunka.com/welcome-virtual-plaza/>.

52) Thomas Streeter, *The Net Effect — Romanticism, Capitalism and the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 72–88.

53) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 476.

past melancholy and longing; 3) “melancholic landscapes,” or empty, lonely urban spaces from where actual human beings tend to be conspicuously absent and where loneliness is revealed as an affective sign of the genre as important as nostalgia; 4) “gentle geometry” consisting of simple geometric solids that appear as reminders of a primitive engagement with computer generated images; 5) “depressive texts,” often appearing as ironic, self-deprecating computer error messages asking questions like *Do you wish to log off and get a life?*; 6) “ecstatic brands,” understood as the obsession of Vaporwave with specific products and brand images, which are treated as iconic, semi-religious artifacts; and last but not least, 7) “harsh distortions,”⁵⁴⁾ or the category that I would like to suggest not as simply one more element in the characterization of the aesthetics of Vaporwave but as its general and overarching refrain: its glitch-like nature, the fact that *glitching* the music and all its extra-musical accompaniments was a precondition for anything to be able to evoke and resonate within the sphere of the genre.

Whether adding analog noise to digital media, adding filters that interrupted the flow of voices and melodies until they were unrecognizable, or inserting noise, aberrations, sudden repetitions and recurrent signal twitching in videos or soundtracks, or even obvious visual anachronisms (i.e. hiccups in historical understanding) like a voluminous Roman statue quietly watching over noisy videogame characters, the glitch is the agglutinant that holds the Vaporwave aesthetic together.

Glitchiness is what affords Vaporwave its ghostliness, it is also what connects it with the contradiction that was articulated earlier in regards to the lightness and translucency of new media, in the sense that Vaporwave is what transpires when a thin — or semitransparent — veneer of discontinuity is added to other sounds and images in order to interrupt their potential encoding as collective memory. Vaporwave’s glitchy images, as they thrive in the seemingly hostile environments of digital piracy, appropriation, anonymity, incompleteness, incoherence, detachment and (mis)remembrance, are a flawed but at least genuine and grassroots way to understand how certain uncritical visions of the future that were projected according to an idealized, aspirational past refused to leave and continued to superimpose themselves over a present where they simply couldn’t and wouldn’t fit.

To summarize: the satisfaction found by the disembodied flâneur-listener in the images that accompany Vaporwave music — images of consumerist nostalgia, of early home computing and therefore of an engagement with a simpler internet, and also images of an idealized past that was perceived as having been more innocent than the complicated present — was supposed to be counterbalanced by the presence of the glitch, therefore adding a layer of dissension to its version of the past. However, as a completely assimilated, accessible and admissible aesthetic component, the intentionally-added glitch itself is no longer useful as an indicator of subversion, at least in the way in which it is utilized by those tinkering with the vast archive of “end of history” imagery and creating Vaporwave videos.

54) Dovydaitis, “Celebration of the Hyperreal Nostalgia,” 2021.

Historical Engagement with the Image as a Counterbalance to Its “Glitching”

Vaporwave aesthetic relies on adding the patina of the glitch, but the glitch in this case does not point exclusively in the direction of the ghostly. It also signals in the direction of an impossible remembrance enabled by an incapacity to distinguish fact from fiction (or aspirational gestures from truly historical ones): memory-images — even those that are the product of imagined memories — are haunting enough by themselves and glitching them is a dangerous proposition.

Chris Marker recognized this process and brought an awareness about the temptation of allowing images to be stripped away from their narrative in order to make them more bearable in the face of the complexities of history, when, in his film *Sans Soleil* (1982), an essay film made completely from archival imagery collected during his travels, he introduced the work of his friend Hayao Yamaneko, a young man who processes video images from news reports via a synthesizer, working under the assumption that “electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination.”⁵⁵⁾ In the film we see how he converts these images into solarized, pixelated, saturated, almost irreco gnizable (i.e. *glitched*) non-historical images, which he keeps in a liminal space, pinned down “like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time” inside his computer “Zone,” where the images of history are forced to change, since “the images of the present don’t.”⁵⁶⁾

Yamaneko is a deeply lonely character, locked inside his Zone with nothing but images which, very tellingly, are removed from his own experience. The distorted newsreels he shows to Marker’s alter ego in the film are of a protest against the building of the Narita Airport in Tokyo during the 1970s, a manifestation in which he himself did not take part. He treats the images with detachment because that is all he can do as a lone image-synthesizer and image-onlooker. And the narrator wonders of the possibility of a world “where each memory could create its own legend,”⁵⁷⁾ where these images could actually lead independent lives, free of the need for a larger narrative, only to swiftly concede that it is an impossibility, since the worlds of appearances and memory can communicate but can only see in each other the pieces that are missing from themselves. And if projections of the past and visions of the future have become interchangeable through the glitch, then what’s left is only self-delusion, a total retreat into the virtual world.

Discussing the period when film anxiously transitioned from its silent era into the new territory opened by its relationship with synchronic sound, Marker asserted that transitional periods between mediatic eras are common and precede concrete definitions: “like in any self-respecting cosmogony, a period of chaos, vague images of gods and goddesses, untied, disorderly, full of gaps and black holes, that shadowy period that always comes before the structured mythology.”⁵⁸⁾ Vaporwave might be an audiovisual embodiment of this

55) All the quotes from *Sans Soleil* were taken from the English version transcript available on: https://www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm.

56) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See preceding note.

57) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See note 56.

58) Chris Marker, *Silent Movie* (Exhibition Catalog) (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 16–17.

period of chaos in our relationship with the internet, when cultural forms that could harness its potential to undermine the belief into an “end of history” were still being sought out.

Marker, for his part, seems to have been one of the first filmmakers to recognize the importance of the glitch as a powerful symbol in the relationship between image-making and computing. He became so interested in the way computers could distort images of the past that, in the 1990s, he announced that he would leave film behind and work exclusively with computers, an impulse that took him to create the film *Level Five* (1997), where we find a woman who, like Hayao, is in a room surrounded by nothing but warped images of historical events, only that this time, she is not the one modifying them but only anxiously sifting through them. The protagonist of the film — named Laura — is performing a work of digital archaeology, navigating through the images left behind by someone else, a man — her late husband — who was working on a videogame⁵⁹⁾ about the battle of Okinawa during World War II. She ruminates on the asymmetrical relationship between her own private pain at the loss of her partner and the enormity of history with its endless list of victims and catastrophes. Eventually, realizing that she is facing an impossible task, Laura decides to erase herself: she slowly unfocuses the camera that is recording her with a remote control until she dissolves, becoming enmeshed with the digital realm and in this way “the empty space of her workroom opens onto the ‘other space’ in which the narrative closure of the film is put into reverse, and the price of accepting the past as it happened is revealed as not the fulfillment, but the eradication of the subject.”⁶⁰⁾ The film ends with the actual owner of the workspace, Marker himself, arriving to discover the empty workstation and attempting to find a trace of Laura by typing her name into the computer, getting in return a both amusing and disturbing error prompt that could perfectly fit into Vaporwave’s list of “depressing texts”: *I don’t know how to Laura*.

Marker had said in *Sans Soleil* that the cyclical nature of historical becoming implied the existence of “a kind of amnesia of the future that history distributes through mercy or calculation to those whom it recruits,”⁶¹⁾ since nobody would be willing to accept their role as a responsible historical subject if they knew that each time they are risking their own self-dissolution. It is difficult then to blame the hyperactive Vaporwave subject for being unwilling to accept the task of facing history directly and being satisfied with its aspirational byproducts.

The haunting ending of *Level Five*, with the disappearance of Laura into the digital ether, is uncannily similar in its understanding of the weight of confronting images of the

59) Interestingly, the genre of “videogames that could have been” and Vaporwave-coded videogames remains unexplored: many Vaporwave albums carry the titles of imagined computer games. A recent example being *Salary Man Simulator: ‘Executive Edition’* (2023), published by the label My Pet Flamingo whose liner notes amusingly read: “Have you got what it takes to climb the corporate ladder? Welcome to the high stress, high reward world of corporate life. This exciting and immersive simulator invites players to step into the polished shoes of an ambitious office worker, as they navigate the tumultuous waters of the modern corporate world,” <https://mypetflamingo.bandcamp.com/album/salary-man-simulator-executive-edition>.

60) Catherine Lupton, “Terminal replay: Resnais revisited in Chris Marker’s *Level Five*,” *Screen* 44, no. 1 (2003), 58–70.

61) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See note 56.

past to a sequence in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film *Pulse* (*Kairo*,⁶² 2001), a film that, if not for the fact that it precedes the appearance of the musical genre by almost a decade, could have been shaped by the negative space left behind by Vaporwave, and offers a counteractive perspective of the falsely mythologized neoliberal past.

The film's vision of a supposedly post-historical reality is, in many aspects, a mirror-image of what Vaporwave is not: if a reliable memory is an impossibility for the world of Vaporwave, illusory appearances are what is missing from the world of *Pulse*. Unlike the colorful and shallow aspirational images of Vaporwave aesthetics, with its shiny *discmans* and *walkmans*, upbeat aerobics classes with smiling participants, bubble gum-colored products and adorable cartoon characters, where Japan is a lively, colorful, neon-lit, techno-utopia, the Tokyo of *Pulse*, where a group of young people are facing strange disappearances as people are slowly and willingly allowing themselves to be absorbed into a ghostly realm, is instead monochromatic and empty.

In *Pulse*, Japan is being slowly invaded by ghosts that, subverting horror film tropes, look like unassuming people instead of like monstrous beings or spectral apparitions, and many young people are shown killing themselves in a robotic and preemptive manner, giving up before they are reached by these phantoms that are only perceived as uncanny because they move like machines attempting to imitate human beings. These ghosts, as one character theorizes, come from a parallel (virtual) reality that has become overcrowded and are spilling out, claiming the space of the living, and their chosen form of communicating with this realm is via the internet, which they have realized is not a medium for connection but for isolation.

One of the criticisms that has been leveled at the idea of an "end of history" is precisely that it misplaced a great deal of confidence on the assumption that because post-cold war societies enjoyed "a level of connectivity never before seen in history" this "facilitated communication could lead to a safer world by bolstering mutual understanding and cooperation,"⁶³ while, in fact, ideologically-fueled conflicts continued to multiply everywhere and what *Pulse* offers is, poignantly, the vision of an isolating internet that entraps and dissolves, causing a retreat from history. Vaporwave's aesthetics, having their origin in unfulfilled promises of interconnectivity as a way towards a more empathetic political order, are a reflection of the reluctance of the current misinformed and terminally-online era to admit that it once truly believed into the post-historical utopia and, in this sense, the genre can perhaps be seen as a harbinger of how nostalgia and self-delusion continue to preclude an imagining of a future for the historical image beyond the invisible line demarcated by this "end" that, in fact, was never really there. But in *Pulse*, I believe, there is a fully realized vision of what might have been on the other side of that horizon.

Later in the film, we are shown how, in a computer lab, a young student has built a simulation resembling a screen saver, where a multitude of white dots move around a map on the display, never being allowed to connect with one another because contact would mean

62) The word *kairo*, 回路, means closed-circuit, or loop. The translation of the title as *Pulse*, while very suggestive, does not accurately represent the intention of the original title, which conveys how a self-feeding loop is established between the internet and the world of the "ghosts."

63) David Akhvediani et al., "After the End of History," *Transition Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2010), 311–319.

their cancellation. The phantasms soon start to appear in this simulation as semitransparent spots that leave faint traces behind themselves and accompany the fully-opaque points that represent actual people never interacting with each other. Interestingly, the ghosts don't interrupt the flow of the simulation, they just go on, carefully following the opaque spots, although this term seems inexact as it implies a sort of predation or stalking. What these ghosts actually do is to accompany, to place themselves alongside the living, and, seemingly, feed on the loneliness of this satellite-like individuals that never seem to want to crash into each other, preferring the endless void to any form of confrontation.

A young woman named Harue succumbs to the irresistible calling of the ghosts who appear as neighbors or random strangers, neither angry nor haunted, and especially non-violent. As she puts it: "the ghosts won't kill people, because that would just make more ghosts. Instead they'll try to make people immortal, by quietly trapping them in their own loneliness." This seems to be the birth of a new post-internet kind of monster, a pusillanimous ghost that, rather than killing, prefers to suspend, like a computer eternally left in sleep mode. Harue looks at the screen, where she had previously seen the image of another young man who disappeared after killing himself, slowly becoming a black stain on a wall, and suddenly we shift into the impossible point of view of one of the ghosts, observing Harue as she feels its presence. Then the image glitches, jerking uncontrollably, displaying her own image reflected on the screen, and finally transforms into a recursion, awkwardly oscillating between the infinity projected into the screen and her vacant stare. Becoming a glitch is how the ghosts finally entrap her into her own loneliness.

Harue and many others finally succumb to their own fear of confrontation, afraid to face the world that comes after the supposed end of history, which in the film is portrayed as the slow vanishing of every single person in Japan (portending fears of depopulation): in one of the final scenes, we see a TV set on which a disembodied voice matter-of-factly announces the names of people who have been reported missing while displaying their photos. At this point, another character named Michi — she's what Carol Clover labelled a Final Girl, but who in this case has no killer or monster to destroy ahead of her, only the always-receding horizon of the future⁶⁴ — who has been the only one not to surrender to total apathy by frequently displaying compassion and self-awareness, witnesses a plane falling from the sky in the middle of the city (a haunting allusion to the September 11 attacks) and boards a boat, hoping to leave the island. The film begins and ends in the same way, with a wide shot of the boat dwarfed by the vastness of the ocean and another shot of Michi, looking into the distance from aboard the ship, seeing nothing but water, hopeful and unaware that she has survived the end of history.

By refusing to revel in the typical utopian view of a post-historical world, the panorama that Kurosawa describes in *Pulse* restores the glitch to its rightful place as a truly frightening and disrupting force and shows us what was waiting for those who woke up from the aspirational fantasies of the virtual plaza and the pink-infused online world of Vapor-wave: a world less colorful, but more real.

64) Carol J. Clover, "Her body, himself: Gender in the slasher film," *Representations*, no. 20 (1987), Special Issue: *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, 187–228.

Conclusion

Vaporwave's use of glitches, which once could have been regarded as a subversive, disruptive aesthetic tool, in fact merely perpetuates a haunting form of nostalgia that detaches itself from historical context. Through its aesthetic, Vaporwave evokes a sense of longing for a past that ever truly existed, driven by the commodification of nostalgia congealed in dream-like visual creations that have at their basis images from aspirational advertising and consumerism, which are removed from historical discourse because they were created with purely aspirational purposes and were never intended to be anything but illusions.

The movement proposes a flawed but unique interaction with history, presenting a distorted yet familiar vision of the past. This transformation underscores Vaporwave's role in exploring the complexities of memory and historical awareness, highlighting how technology can alter our perception of history itself. Vaporwave offers a space to explore the tension between memory and history in the digital age, where the line between reality and idealized memory is increasingly blurred. It also reflects a broader cultural trend in which nostalgia is increasingly detached from historical context, leading to a longing for a past that is more imagined than real.

In its development into a mostly nostalgic expression, Vaporwave highlights the fluid nature of cultural memory and its glitched imagery continues to resonate, if not as a critique, then perhaps as an invitation to reflect on how to reconstruct the past in the digital age. And while Vaporwave embraces the disconnection from history at its core and highlights the importance of the glitch as a symbol of technological fears, films like Marker's *Sans Soleil* or *Level Five*, and Kurosawa's *Pulse* use similar techniques in a different direction: to underscore the persistence of memory and the inescapability of history.

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Filmography

Level Five (Chris Marker, 1997)

Pulse (Kairo; Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001)

Sans Soleil (Chris Marker, 1982)

Biography

David Álvarez is a doctoral candidate at the Media Faculty of the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany. Álvarez studied film and TV production at the National University of Colombia and has an MFA in film studies from the Meishi Film Academy in Chongqing, China. His main academic areas of interest are East Asian cinema, expanded forms of cinematic media and film phenomenology. His current doctoral project, titled “Cinematic Intuitions”, is a study of various forms of cinematic metaphorization and their relationship to the question of medium-specificity.

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Karlovarský festival jako platforma kulturní výměny i zbraň hybridní války

Jindřiška Bláhová, ed., *Proplétání světů: Mezinárodní filmový festival Karlovy Vary v období studené války* (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2023).

Ondřej Zach (Univerzita Palackého, Česká republika)

Kolektivní monografie *Proplétání světů* je prvním soudobým pokusem o zpracování dějin karlovarského filmového festivalu do roku 1990. Tedy období, jež se v souvislosti s nejstarší a nejdůležitější filmovou přehlídkou u nás snažíme spíše zapomenout nebo se vůči němu pro jeho spojení s komunistickou historií různými způsoby vymezujeme. Tak to alespoň vidí ve svém „Úvodu“ editorka knihy a autorka tří kapitol Jindřiška Bláhová. Deklaruje záměr vyrovnat se se zjednodušujícím pohledem na předrevoluční éru, souvisejícím s „vyhroceně antikomunistickou rétorikou transformační dekády“ (17) a s deficitem výzkumné pozornosti věnované kulturním institucím socialistické éry, a chce přinést radikálně nové čtení minulosti současného filmového svátku. Publikace usiluje dokázat, že festival před rokem 1990 nebyl jen uzavřen v bublině komunistické ideologie, ale v kontextu tehdejší národní i mezinárodní politiky byl důležitým prostorem kulturní výměny mezi Východem a Západem.

Namísto běžného chronologického uspořádání strukturuje Bláhová knihu pomocí „tematických řezů“ (25). Takový přístup umožňuje autorům orientovat se na aspekty festivalu, jež v současných „zautomatizovaných předpokladech o funkcích a roli festivalu během studené války“ (20) podle editorky chyběly. Dlouhá historie festivalu se díky tomu otevírá interpretacím, v „nichž ani zdaleka nehrají prim politika a ideologie v komunistické diktatuře“ (20). Se zřejmou inspirací v historiografických konceptech každodennosti a revizionismu se tak kniha pokouší rozebrat velkou ideologickou historii festivalu na dílčí „malé“ dějiny jeho programové a provozní praxe, se značnou pozorností věnovanou rovněž přesahům do dalších kulturních, společenských i ekonomických oblastí na úrovni lokální (jako je například sféra filmové distribuce nebo práce s publikem) i přeshraniční, kam patří vztah festivalu k zahraničním mezinárodním přehlídkám, jeho význam v rámci kinematografií východního bloku i úloha při zviditelňování rozvíjejících se kinematografií globálního Jihu.

Na tomto základě je práce rozdělena do čtyř kapitol rámuujících jednotlivé tematické okruhy: 1) vznik a zařazení MFF Karlovy Vary v kontextu poválečného fenoménu mezinárodních filmových festivalů, 2) vývoj jeho role v rámci zemí socialistického tábora i politiky internacionalismu, expanze takzvané pokrokové kultury a fenoménu socialistické modernity, 3) úloha festivalu v kulturním transferu mezi Východem a Západem a 4) jeho globální pozice na ose Sever – Jih a ve vzájemném ideovém i distribučně-ekonomickém vztahu východního bloku s behemotem Hollywoodu. Skutečnost, že tato rétorická vnější struktura nakonec nekoresponduje zcela přesně s obsahem zařazených příspěvků, lze

spíše než za nedostatek považovat za klad: jednotlivé texty se v souladu s intencí editorky ve svých tématech různě překrývají a funkčně doplňují.

Stejně kladně lze vnímat skutečnost, že přes deklarovaný revizionistický étos se jednotlivé kapitoly někdy zdají spíše potvrzovat „Úvodem“ kritizované chápání předrevolučního festivalu jako „ideologicky zdiskreditované akce“, než aby jej zcela vyvracely. V konečném efektu se totiž právě tím naplňuje chvályhodná ambice autorského kolektivu představit karlovarský festival jako mnohohrstevnatou a komplexní „východoevropskou kulturní instituci“ (19) a ústí do neméně mnohohrstevnatého textu, pestrého tematicky i co do úhlů pohledu. Tento přístup čtenáři dovoluje nalézat si v textu své osobní vektory, jež pak může ve více než pětisetstránkové publikaci sledovat napříč různými příspěvky i sintetizovat do svých vlastních závěrů. O něco takového se nyní pokusí i tato reflexe.

Podoby mezinárodnosti

Při čtení se pro mne ústředními liniemi monografie staly tři texty Jindřišky Bláhové, věnované povýtce historii festivalu a jeho ideologických paradigm, a tři texty Jaromíra Blažejovského, jež tato paradigma zpracovávají z pohledu jejich konkrétních projevů v programové strategii festivalu a praxi festivalových cen. Dohromady tyto texty vytvářejí historiografickou kostru, kterou další kapitoly knihy v dílčích aspektech rozvíjejí. Navzájem se tyto texty doplňují, zároveň se však ve svém pohledu na realitu socialistického režimu, reprezentovanou festivalem coby jeho přední kulturní institucí, poněkud liší. Což nebudiž chápáno jako negativum.

V hutné historické studii „Svět? Domov!“, jež kolektivní monografii otevírá, se Jindřiška Bláhová věnuje zrodu festivalu v atmosféře poválečného Československa. Všimá si toho, jak umístění festivalu do světově známých západočeských lázeňských měst vnějškově korespondovalo s tendencí první vlny evropských festivalů symbioticky využívat prostředí kosmopolitních letovisek (Benátky, Locarno, Cannes). V geopolitické realitě poválečného Československa ovšem mělo toto rozhodnutí i řadu vnitropolitických aspektů. Bláhová zdůrazňuje, jakou roli zde hrál étos počestování pohraničí, legitimizující násilný poválečný odsun německého obyvatelstva. Tato motivace vedla mj. k zavržení možnosti navázat na zlínskou přehlídku československého filmu Filmové žně, karlovarský festival si však ponechal národní ráz její programové koncepce a dále jej rozvíjel. Ten ladil jak s národním nimbem nedávného protifašistického odboje, tak s narůstající slovansko-nacionalistickou rétorikou stalinského komunismu po roce 1948, sledující cíle „nenásilného“ [sic!] ¹⁾ upevnění pozice Moskvy v regionu (46). Bláhová si všimá, jak tento trend souzněl se snahou formulovat národní specifčnost českého filmu, ²⁾ jež byla zároveň jedním z argumentačních východisek probíhajícího zestátnění filmového průmyslu. Znárodnění pak bylo druhým významným motivem pro založení festivalu jako jeho důležité legitimizační platformy. „Domácká“ orientace karlovarské přehlídky ji odlišovala od globálního zaměření ostatních filmových festivalů té doby, ač se přitom dostávala do paradoxního rozporu s ekonomickými

1) Používání tohoto adjektiva v souvislosti s aktivitami sovětského hegemonu ve východním bloku (též na s. 30) považuji za dost nešťastné, protože bezděky relativizuje imperialistickou agresivitu sovětské vnitřní i zahraniční politiky. Její inherentní násilnost se zdaleka neprojevovala jen akty policejního teroru nebo vojenských intervencí, jež má zřejmě v tomto případě autorka na mysli. Srov. též pozn. 3.

2) Pojmenovává tak výstižně trend hledání esenciální české „jinakosti“, jenž v té době navázal na předválečné národovecké proudy v přístupu k české kinematografii a rétoricky se prolíná jejím vývojem až dodnes. Tato kapitola jej tak zviditelňuje jako lákavé téma pro další zpracování.

zájmy i kulturními návyky v té době dosud kosmopolitně orientovaných lázní.³⁾ S postupující ideologickou kontrolou kritizovaný „elitní“ kosmopolitismus uvolnil místo formálně a rétoricky „lidovému“ socialistickému internacionalismu, jenž se stal do budoucna definičním jádrem karlovarské festivalové identity.

V kapitolách „Do Karlových Varů se nejezdí za hvězdami“ a „Se zbrání filmu po boku“ se pak Bláhová věnuje dílčím projevům této strategie „národní mezinárodnosti“ a „jinakosti“ a jejímu spojení s ideovým rámcem rozvíjejícího se festivalu. Cíl prezentovat národní, znárodněnou a posléze socialistickou československou kinematografii se postupně proměnil v záměr demonstrovat ve vztahu k domácímu publiku i vůči zahraničí potenciál filmové tvorby celého socialistického tábora a zemí aspirujících stát se jeho satelity. Jak se tento projekt postupně rozšiřoval také do propagandistické prezentace socialismu a jaké problémy to v reálných podmínkách málo výkonné socialistické ekonomiky přinášelo organizátorům, popisuje v samostatné kapitole „Zaprášená výkladní skříň“ Martin Franc.

Výzkumný přístup Bláhové nicméně neakcentuje zjevnou politickou služebnost festivalu jako platformy mezinárodního šíření komunistické ideologie – studuje spíše její věcné projevy jako konkrétní kulturní fakta. V popisu propagační práce festivalu s fenoménem hvězdnosti si tak autorka všímá, jak festival v různých chvílích balancoval mezi nepříznávanou přitažlivostí „západního“ modelu hvězdného diskurzu a politickou povinností jej odmítat a nahrazovat „východní“, deklaratorně lidovou a masovou alternativou. Výstižnou vizuální ilustraci této diskurzivní ekvilibristiky nalézá ve fotografii Tonyho Curtise opékajícího si s poněkud konsternovaným výrazem špekáček na festivalové společenské akci.

Z přesvědčivé analýzy utváření hvězdnosti v rámci socialistického festivalu vyplývá, jak se její vnímání ubíralo přímo úměrně aktuální míře rigidity politického systému od negativního příkladu buržoazní dekadence v raných 50. letech směrem k jejímu pragmatickému akceptování jako nástroje budování lokální i mezinárodní relevance. Tento proces byl zahájen, když se festival v druhé polovině 50. letů začal měnit v obchodní platformu pro východoevropské kinematografie a usiloval o takzvanou kategorii A FIAPF⁴⁾ (kteréžto kapitole se věnuje užitečný samostatný příspěvek „Historie sporu o jedno písmeno“ Davida Čenka). Vstřícnost k hvězdnému prachu narůstala spolu s uvolněním cenzurního sevření v 60. letech, aby se prudce zlomila k novému moralistnímu odmítání hvězdnosti na začátku normalizace. To později v 80. letech znovu opadlo, jakmile se degenerující socialistický systém plně zanořil do normalizační politikou standardizovaného konzumerismu.

Bláhová si však všímá, že tyto dílčí zvraty probíhaly v rámci diskurzivní strategie průběžného přerámování hvězdnosti tak, aby její samotná existence nenarušovala oficiální ideologické postoje. Identifikuje tři diskurzivní vzorce užívané ve festivalové rétorice – deklarovanou preferenci umělců před hvězdami, ideál socialistické hvězdy jako součásti pracujících mas⁵⁾ a „lidovost“⁶⁾. Zvláště poslední jmenovaná kategorie tvoří kontext, v němž byly hvězdy prezentovány a kvůli němuž festival plnil

3) Na s. 51 uvádí Bláhová pozoruhodnou citaci sovětského režiséra Ivana A. Pyrjeva, jenž si v roce 1948 postěžoval, že si v Mariánských Lázních připadal „skutečně jako za hranicemi Sovětského svazu“. Jeho výrok vypovídá jak o dosud přezívaném kosmopolitní kultuře lázeňského města, tak o tom, že kolonizační mentalita sovětských přátel se zdaleka netýkala jen představitelů politické sféry.

4) S rostoucím počtem festivalů zahájila v 50. letech Mezinárodní federace producentů asociací (FIAPF) jejich kategorizaci, původně aby svým členům usnadnila orientaci ve festivalovém kalendáři. Příslušnost do doporučené skupiny festivalů (A) znamenala, že se festival stával zároveň prostorem mezinárodního trhu s filmy a snáze získával do programu filmy producentů členů FIAPF.

5) Respektive spíše příslušnice masy pracujících žen, protože velká část hvězdné rétoriky festivalu i k němu se vázící publicistiky se zabývala především herečkami. Tento inherentní dobový festivalový machismus či sexismus, kterého si na straně 164 všímá i autorka textu, by sám o sobě vydal na téma pro další studii.

6) Ta znovu přišla ke slovu zejména s nástupem normalizace, jak upozorňuje ve svém příspěvku Lukáš Skupa (99).

program svých hvězdných hostů návštěvami výrobních podniků a situoval je ve svých referátech do civilního prostředí kaváren, kolonád a front na lázeňské oplatky. Ewa Ciszewska to ve svém příspěvku „Slovanské krásy“, který Bláhové stať výstižně doplňuje o studii vytváření ženské hvězdy socialistického státu (a konkrétně Polské lidové republiky), nazývá velice výstižně „překladem hvězdného systému do jazyka socialistické kultury“ (187).

Je trochu škoda, že se tomuto jazykovému aspektu festivalového diskurzu, odhalujícímu se v inter-ní i vnější komunikaci festivalu coby rituální manifestace individuální i institucionální loajality k totalitní komunistické moci, nedostává v knize více prostoru. Postrádám jej zejména ve třetím příspěvku, v němž se Bláhová zabývá ideologickými vlivy formujícími festival v období stalinismu. Celá kapitola je velmi přesným popisem využití karlovarského festivalu v imperialistické kulturní politice Sovětského svazu a jeho kolonialistických ambicích, ale jazykové a rétorické projevy této situace ve festivalové komunikaci jsou k tomuto historicko-společenskému kontextu vztaženy pouze ve své denotativní rovině. Podobně jako když v kapitole o hvězdnosti cituje Bláhová tiskem publikované vyjádření herečky Poly Raksy, že ve Varech se „setkávají ne hvězdy s hvězdami, ale lidé s lidmi“ (157), aniž by přitom reflektovala diskurzivní situovanost takového vyjádření, referuje zde o heslech a proklamacích organizátorů i hostů stalinizovaného festivalu, aniž by se zabývala jejich konotacemi a symbolickými významy. Bližší zájem o to, do jaké míry zaznamenané výroky aktérů prezentovaly rituální demonstraci povinného diskurzu, by poskytl této kapitole další cenný rozměr.

Internacionalizace, kolonizace, indoktrinace

Že symbolická a rituální rovina byla v jednání jednotlivců i zástupců institucí v poválečném komunistickém Československu nepominutelná, úspěšně odhaluje druhá ústřední linie knihy. Tři texty Jaromíra Blažejovského v důkladném a zasvěceném popisu ukazují programovou strategii festivalu vůči kinematografii sovětské, socialistických zemí a zbytku světa jako specifický vyjadřovací nástroj aktuálních postojů moci, tedy jazyk nacházející konkrétní textuální manifestaci ve zdůvodněních programových rozhodnutí i udělovaných cen. Tento jazyk se proměňoval v přímé závislosti na vývoji centrální politické linie komunistického státu a celého východního bloku. Lze v něm mimo jiné číst i to, jak pod heslem internacionalizace festival systematicky motivoval západní levicové umělce a novináře k šíření komunistického narativu na jedné straně a podchycoval potenciální nové objekty sovětské kolonizace mezi rozvojovými zeměmi na straně druhé. Jakou často paradoxní roli v tomto kontextu hrála pozice domácí filmové tvorby ve festivalovém programu, zejména v 60. letech, pak doplňují kapitoly „Rozmarné léto karlovarského festivalu“ Jakuba Jiříšetho a „Perly ukryté na dně festivalu“ Lukáše Skupy.

„Mezinárodní filmový festival v Karlových Varech“, konstatuje Blažejovský v úvodu kapitoly „Malé a menší“, věnované pozici středoevropských socialistických zemí na festivalu, „fungoval jako mocenské pole, kde prvenství náleželo sovětské kinematografii. [...] Soutěžní výsledky byly průsečíkem dvou procesů: vnitřního vývoje zastoupených kinematografií [...] a směřování festivalu, jenž v závislosti na kulturní politice Československa a SSSR tyto tendence odměňoval, nebo k nim zaujímal distancovaný postoj“ (189). To odpovídá i poznatku Bláhové, že „festival měl v tomto ohledu trojí funkci: propagační, evaluační a disciplinační“ (315). Z Blažejovského pečlivé rekapitulace projevů těchto funkcí v oblasti programu, sestavování (četných) porot a udělování (množství) cen vyvstává obraz toho, jak se na ní formou symbolických a rétorických gest podíleli konkrétní jedinci na straně vedení festivalu a Československého státního filmu, festivaloví hosté i referující novináři.

Zejména text „Hledání národních duší“ pak vyznívá i jako fascinující portrét spiritu agentis festivalu a pozoruhodné osobnosti znárodněné kinematografie A. M. Brousila, jež by si ostatně zasloužila samostatnou kapitolu, ne-li monografii. Brousil dokázal po desetiletí působit jako hlavní autorita výběru festivalových filmů, aby jim pak vzápětí coby dlouholetý předseda poroty zajišťoval někdy i umělecky relevantní, ale vždy ideologicky vhodná ocenění. Tento postup názorně ukazuje, jak velkou moc politický systém zaklínající se lidovostí v praxi svěřoval elitě několika málo jedinců schopných se v jeho mantinelech odpovídajícím způsobem pohybovat, a jak se tato skutečnost odrážela v provozní realitě zestátněné kinematografie. Brousil měl zřejmě také podstatný podíl na postupném zaměření festivalu na kinematografie Latinské Ameriky a rozvojových zemí Asie a Afriky. To sice jednak vyhovovalo kolonialistické doktríně socialistického internacionalismu, ale zároveň skutečně pomáhalo karlovarskému festivalu vytvořit si mezi konkurenčními přehlídkami svébytný profil, na nějž v mnoha směrech navazovali i pokračovatelé festivalu po roce 1990. Význam festivalu na ose globální Sever – globální Jih pak zpracovává v samostatné kapitole Eva Razlogova.

Skutečnost, že dlouholetý sluha stalinského i normalizačního režimu Brousil byl vedle kariérismu a absence svědomí vybaven i kultivovaným vkusem, intelektem a oborovými znalostmi, ilustruje obtížnost hodnocení osobností i událostí té doby ze současné perspektivy. O tom ostatně svědčí i kapitola „Kde festival nestačí“, v níž se Martin Mišúr zabývá synergiemi mezi karlovarským festivalem a Filmovým festivalem pracujících. Přestože se faktograficky jedná o užitečné porovnání dvou paralelně probíhajících přehlídkových praxí, jejich značná odlišnost a současně zařazení obou v komplexním systému státní kinematografie do značné míry problematizuje snahu uvažovat o nich z pohledu současných festivalových studií jako o samostatných či propojených distribučních okruzích. Přínosnější se mi stran místa karlovarského festivalu v distribučním systému státního filmu jeví kapitola Lukáše Skupy „Od řízení ke spontánní návštěvnosti“, odhalující mimo jiné, jak se v úsilí o naplňování festivalových sálů prolínaly interní (ve vztahu k festivalovým hostům) i externí (v prezentaci festivalu navenek) propagandistické potřeby s ekonomickými cíli. Posledně jmenované však měly často, například v podobě spolupráce se západočeskými podniky a patronátů nad projekci konkrétních filmů, spíše funkci přerozdělování státních prostředků mezi různými kapitolami plánované ekonomiky.

Závěr

Z množství zpracovaného dokumentárního materiálu, zahrnujícího mimo jiné každoroční zprávy vypracovované vedením festivalu pro nadřízené podnikové i stranické orgány, zápisy z nesčetných porad Ústředního ředitele a dalších činitelů různých odborů Československého státního filmu, dobový tisk i vlastní festivalové tiskové materiály, texty autorského kolektivu monografie postupně skládají dohromady komplexní obraz významné kulturní instituce komunistického režimu ve vší jeho nutné rozporuplnosti. Ku prospěchu věci přitom po většině odolávají pokušení interpretovat shromážděná fakta tak, aby odpovídala úvodnímu předsevzetí revidovat simplifikovaný pohled na předrevoluční festival jako na ideologicky zdiskreditovanou akci — a právě díky tomuto přístupu tohoto cíle do značné míry dosahují. Výjimku tvoří snad jen dva příspěvky Richarda Nowella, věnované vztahu mezi karlovarským festivalem coby platformou východoevropského filmového importu a aktivitami zástupců amerického filmového průmyslu. Způsob zpracování faktograficky a historicky cenných informací o roli festivalu při pronikání americké kinematografie k československým divákům působí dojmem, že se zde téma karlovarského festivalu stalo hlavně bitevním polem autora vlastního ideového sporu s in-

stitucionálně chápaným Hollywoodem a jeho reprezentanty. Ti se tak zejména v kapitole „Všichni se nudili“, shrnující jinak docela zábavně obraz karlovarského festivalu v referátech časopisu *Variety*, proměňují v rozporu s věcným tónem zbytku monografie spíše v pruhy s hvězdami oděné karikatury.

Byl tedy karlovarský festival nástrojem propagandy, nebo prostorem pro „proplétání světů“, jak sugeruje název knihy? Práce autorského kolektivu přesvědčivě dokládá, že byl obojím. V realitě komunistického bloku, vnímajícího film jako důležitý propagandistický nástroj, jehož zahraničně-obchodní aspekty navíc přesahovaly i do bezpečnostní agendy, zcela zřetelně sloužil jako platforma pro export komunistické ideologie a nástroj šíření sovětského kulturního imperialismu; jako jedno z mnoha bojišť hybridní války vedené pod vlajkou socialistického internacionalismu. Zároveň však nepochybně v obtížně rozlišitelné směsi vedlejších efektů oficiální politické agendy a upřímného úsilí konkrétních programových aktivit vytvářel cenný prostor pro zviditelňování marginalizovaných kinematografií a chtěl nechtě i pro kulturní výměnu mezi rozličnými geopolitickými bloky. Díky tomu pak v neposlední řadě představoval i okno příležitosti pro alespoň omezený počet vyvolených československých diváků a novinářů nahlížet přes ostatný drát obepínající československou hranici do alternativních kulturních realit.

Texty knihy, již symbolicky uzavírá kapitola Vítězslava Sommera „Festival na rozcestí“ portrétem přelomových festivalových let 1986–1990, taky ukazují, jak velkou vnitřní kontinuitu ve skutečnosti soudobý festival s tím předrevolučním má. Odhalují, že před- i po-revoluční organizátoři v mnohém řešili stejné problémy, jakkoliv samozřejmě rozdílnými, dobové politické realitě odpovídajícími prostředky: úlohu hvězd v kontrastu se soustředěním na film jako umělecké dílo, otázku zajištění návštěvnosti (jež byla v letech 1992 a 1994 traumatickým problémem nových vedení festivalu), hrozbu inflace udělovaných ocenění, diktované nutností uspokojovat více strategických cílů, místo národní kinematografie v programové nabídce i napětí mezi lokální pozicí festivalu jako významné kulturní akce a nutností stálého hledání relevance v narůstající globální konkurenci.

Je také zřejmé, že mnohé charakteristické rysy současného festivalu, jako je programové zaměření na okrajové kinematografie nebo marketingové využití civilnosti festivalu – nová reartikulace jeho někdejší proklamované „lidovosti“ – mají kořeny sahající koncepčně hluboko před rok 1990. Má tedy pravdu editorka, že předrevoluční historie festivalu si zaslouží více než jen být odbyta jako zapomenutá studenoválečná kapitola. A zasloužila si zcela jistě i tuto knihu.

Poznámka o autorovi

Autor tohoto textu byl od roku 1994 do roku 1998 pracovníkem programového oddělení karlovarského festivalu a poprvé festival navštívil až v jeho novodobé historii v roce 1992 jako novinář. Protože však část jeho rodiny z Karlových Varů pochází, fenomén festivalu a jeho vizuální prezentace v ulicích lázeňského města pozdních 70. let patří nerozlučně k nesmazatelným, i když rozmazaným obrazům paměti jeho dětství a počátku prázdnin.

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Seriously Unserious: Theoretical Implications of the Gimmick for Film and Media Studies

Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

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Imagine a mechanism that, upon waking you up, could wash you, brush your teeth, dress you, and seamlessly transport you from bed to a dining table, where freshly brewed coffee and breakfast await. One variation of this whimsical and gimmicky morning mechanism is humorously depicted in *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Nick Park and Steve Box, 2005), tied to the character of an eccentric inventor (Fig. 1–2). This is likely the fantasy of many who dread leaving the warmth of their bed each morning. It reflects one of the recurring dreams of modern convenience — emerging from the promises of mechanization and automation — allowing individuals to rationalize the workload of boring and mundane tasks and devote time and energy to labor that truly and genuinely matters. Typically, such a mechanism occupies a significant portion of the living space, comprising an intricate network of wires, pulleys, and gears.

However, these contraptions rarely function flawlessly. The journey from bed to breakfast often becomes slow, cumbersome, or chaotic, resulting in comedic mishaps. Thus, the promise of such a gimmicky mechanism highlights the tense and fluctuating balance between labor, time, and value. While the humor of such a contraption captures the imagination, it also invites a deeper reflection on the nature of gimmicks, a theme explored in Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020). After briefly introducing key points from the book, our focus will turn to how



Fig. 1–2: A pleasant morning routine for Wallace

“gimmick-ness” can be further examined through the lens of film and media studies and how the theoretical gesture of the gimmick might benefit from closer dialogue with audiovisual media.

Gimmick 101: Flashy, Bold, Futuristic, Yet Flimsy, Outdated, and Forgettable

What is often designed to save time and effort can swiftly degenerate into a spectacle of inefficiency, prompting deeper inquiries into the paradoxical nature of such gimmicky devices — their simultaneous allure and frustration. Sianne Ngai explores the gimmick as a concept operating at the intersection of aesthetics, labor, and critique of capitalism. This juxtaposition reflects broader socio-economic conditions under capitalism, where (for example, the already mentioned) labor-saving technologies are both desired and condemned. On the one hand, these technologies promise increased efficiency, convenience, and comfort, aligning with capitalist ideals of productivity and progress. They aim to streamline labor, reduce costs, and maximize efficiency in both personal and industrial spheres. By automating monotonous tasks, they promise individuals to focus on more meaningful or profitable pursuits, increasing personal freedom and economic output. Yet, these mechanisms or gadgets might reveal the fragile link between time, labor, and value production. The promise of greater agency for workers may often prove false, as technological solutions can lead to the opposite effect — the work may change, but it is still there, with value being passed up the hierarchical ownership structure and individual agency being reduced by automatization, abstraction, and fragmentation. Even though such processes occur daily without much reflection, it is the gimmick — whether tied to technology, gestures, or art forms — that can expose the shifting modulations of value in relation to labor. Thus, Ngai’s primary intervention lies in rethinking the gimmick as a complex and contradictory phenomenon — one that encapsulates both excess and insufficiency, often promising more than it delivers while overextending itself in the process.

Examples such as labor-saving devices, futuristic visions of smart homes, and speculative financial instruments like cryptocurrency illustrate the defining characteristics of the gimmick. These objects and technologies demonstrate an oscillation between extremes — being “too much” and “not enough,” “working too hard” and “working too little,” “sav[ing] us labor” and “not sav[ing] us labor,” “outdated, backward” and “newfangled, futuristic,” or “mak[ing] capitalist production transparent” as well as “mak[ing] capitalist production obscure” (72). Audiovisual representations of gimmicky mechanisms, alongside gadgets and applications embedded in our daily lives, challenge our fundamental understanding of the relationship between labor, value, and time. These devices prompt us to reconsider the role of technology in mediating these concepts, particularly within capitalist frameworks. For instance, shall we understand the “irritating yet strangely attractive gimmick” (1) as something emerging from capitalist form or as something transgressing it? Is it a feature attached to an object, mechanism, or tool, or is it rather a matter of aesthetic judgment?

Ngai’s work positions the gimmick both as a product of capitalist systems and as an aesthetic judgment, which suggests a deeper entanglement between economic structures and cultural perceptions, further complicating our understanding of its role in contemporary life. The book opens with an in-depth presentation and theoretical implications of gimmicks, followed by chapters analyzing concrete examples across consumer culture and the avant-garde. The examples range widely — from the tricks of illusionist David Blaine to Torbjørn Rødland’s photographs, from the American suburban teen thriller *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) to the Italian giallo horror film with gothic twist *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977), from Marcel Duchamp to a Rube Goldberg machine, and others.

Far from being peripheral or anomalous within capitalist systems, the gimmick, as Ngai suggests, is emblematic of the fundamental economic and aesthetic contradictions of late capitalism. She adds, “the gimmick implies an awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously” (2). This observation reflects a broader cycle of “planned obsolescence and routinized innovation,” (6) in which commodities are designed to lose their value or be replaced, forcing consumers into an endless loop of consumption. The intrinsic instability of the gimmick, characterized by its temporal sensitivity, showcases its constant adaptation to contemporary trends, including technological advancements, claims of labor efficiency, and shifting standards of value. For instance, the rapid turnover of consumer electronics — devices marketed as essential tools for convenience and productivity — illustrates how products quickly become obsolete, with newer models touted as superior alternatives. In its very nature, the gimmick might be understood as a mirror that exposes the complex and evolving relationship between labor, time, and value. It persistently prompts us to ask: for whom is this efficiency truly intended, and how has the equilibrium between these elements been recalibrated in the context of late capitalism?

Gimmick in Movement

Ngai explores the concept of the gimmick dialectically, emphasizing its inherent tensions. The gimmick simultaneously embodies excess and inadequacy — it is overproduced and underwhelming, intricate yet cheaply made, an object that intrigues while also frustrating. Often marketed as a labor- or time-saving device, the gimmick frequently fails to deliver on its promises, leading to skepticism and disappointment. Applying this perspective to audiovisual form and history, we might find various technologies, artifacts, and moments that embody the contradictory nature of gimmicks. Some artifacts promised increased immersion and viewer agency (Virtual Reality), while others aimed to enhance visual rendering (LaserDisc) or proposed different forms and affordances of video editing (such as the star wipe).

Taking the example of special editing transitions, the star wipe may have once seemed like a “futuristic” or innovative option, yet it simultaneously evokes a sense of obsolescence, provoking laughter or disdain rather than admiration due to its overt and clumsy performance in contrast to contemporary cinema’s more seamless and “invisible” editing norms. By exceeding the historically established editing standards, the star wipe exemplifies the gimmick par excellence: once a novel-looking feature, it has found itself out of time and out of place. The star wipe’s exaggerated visibility distorts the balance between labor, time, and value, dazzling the viewer with its novelty while ultimately exhausting their attention. In this way, the star wipe complicates our perception of technological progress as a linear trajectory toward simplicity, usability, and sustainability. Let us follow the star wipe and see how this particular artifact might extend the theoretical gesture of the gimmick as described by Ngai.

Working Gimmick or Gimmick Is Working: Sophistication and Disaster

Ngai’s exploration of the gimmick is closely tied to questions of aesthetic judgment, particularly how aesthetic critique intertwines with economic evaluation. She argues that the gimmick is often dismissed as aesthetically inferior precisely because it appears to be a cheap trick or shortcut — a way of

maximizing profit while minimizing labor. This raises the question: for whom is the labor minimized? For users, employing a star wipe might be as simple as clicking a button; nonetheless, integrating a star wipe into the realm of digital editing was not a straightforward task for developers, who had to simulate and create a digital version of the effect, capturing its shape and temporality while ensuring ease of access and use. In addition, once a gimmick is lost, trying to simulate it can be more laborious than creating it in the first place. As Ngai reminds us, we might understand the gimmick as a form of aesthetic failure, a product that reveals the unevenness of labor relations under capitalism. The gimmick exposes the hidden labor involved in commodity production, even as it seeks to obscure it. To make another step, the gimmick serves as a never-ending reminder of the connection between work and technological foundations, continually redefining value, capability, performance, and affordances of both everyday and creative labor. As Ngai argues, the gimmick compels us to confront the inseparability of aesthetic and economic categories, making the presence of gimmickry inherently visible, exaggerated, and comic.

Accidentally Non-Accidental

The irritation we feel when confronted with a gimmick stems from its challenge to our assumptions about value. A noteworthy example is presented in the star-wipe commercial (Fig. 3) from the TV show *Better Call Saul* (episode “Off Brand,” 2017). This precise moment is encapsulated in the quote by James “Saul Goodman” McGill: “The guy at the station said he has never seen so many star wipes in a row. It has never been done.” From James’s perspective, the star wipe is a fascinating editing technique — visible, prominent, and eye-catching. However, for others, the star wipe might be perceived as repulsive in its unprofessionalism, clashing with our shared understanding of an invisible style, even as it remains undeniably striking. This moment can be understood as a contemporary reuse of the star wipe, a gimmicky editing technique, for the fictional introduction of Saul Goodman, the flashy alter ego of James McGill. It represents an artistic appropriation of an effect perceived in popular imagination as too bold, too flashy, and too eccentric. What is the position of this artistically appropriated star wipe in relation to the “original”? While the gimmick in itself evokes a certain disparity between form and content, in this instance, our awareness of this disparity contributes to the development of Saul Goodman as an extravagant character with loose morals. In summary, the gimmick transforms into a narrative and stylistic device.



Fig. 3: One of the many star wipes in the Saul Goodman commercial

Under What Tag Can I Find the Gimmick?

If the gimmick results from a constantly evolving relationship between labor and time to produce value, then it is also inherently fleeting. What is perceived as a gimmick today may not be seen as such tomorrow; conversely, what was considered a gimmick yesterday may not be one today. Ngai situates the gimmick within the abstract and modifiable realm of late capitalism. In her previous work on aesthetic categories — zany, cute, and interesting — each category reflects “how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism.”¹⁾ Nonetheless, according to Ngai, gimmick “is not its missing fourth category but an undercurrent running through all three — and indeed, all of capitalist culture” (32). The gimmick is not singular but plural; it is an aesthetic category linked to material and technological affordances that may change over time. Thus, while the gimmick is an aesthetic category of late capitalism, it is equally mutable, transient, and difficult to grasp. Rather than discussing it on a general level, it is crucial to examine it in specific instances.

How do we capture and preserve the singular forms of the gimmick? Where is the (audiovisual) archive that preserves the fleeting and often overlooked remnants of culture, such as the star wipe? Where can we find the archive that houses these visual effects and the ephemeral gimmicks of technology, art, and everyday tools — the once-innovative devices like early smartphone apps or 3D television sets that captivated attention but have since slipped into obscurity? As Ngai reminds us, “no obviously delimited archive for the gimmick exists,” (39) as the gimmick is often absent from archival and historical narratives. The star wipe, as a prominent example, underscores this absence. It is a technique or effect not tied to any specific author, studio, time, or location, further complicating its preservation. The star wipe lacks a distinct form of its own, functioning as a transition between two images in an audiovisual work. This raises the question of whether the star wipe even qualifies as an artifact. Its traceability is further hindered by the possibility that film and television archives may not have dedicated tags or categories for editing effects.²⁾ Therefore, locating the star wipe in repositories is more a matter of chance than the outcome of systematic preservation efforts.

Moreover, the star wipe is an artifact associated not only with cinema and television but also with early digital technology. In this respect, we can understand the star wipe as being tied to a specific combination of software and hardware. However, existing archival and heritage institutions often lack a clear strategy for managing the diverse artifacts that emerged with the advent of digitalization. Thus, the gimmick serves as a counterforce to challenge our understanding of the status of audiovisual heritage. Gimmicks are more than mere throwaways — they encapsulate the cultural zeitgeist of their moment, embodying a unique intersection of novelty, function, and spectacle. Nonetheless, they can disappear with a single update, become incompatible, or be forgotten. Therefore, capturing the gimmick is as challenging as capturing the star wipe. Although it may initially seem like a timeless artifact, it actually consists of a group of sub-instances linked to various material, technological, and cultural environments, each fostering distinct aesthetic perceptions.

1) Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

2) Veronika Hanáková, “Lost Media: Collecting and Archiving of Artefacts from the Digital Era” (Master’s thesis, Charles University, 2022).

Do I Remember It Correctly?

The continued use of the star wipe across audiovisual productions from the last century to the present raises the question of whether certain elements now regarded as gimmicks were perceived as such in their own time. This prompts an inquiry into the historical understanding of gimmickry: was what we deem as gimmicky today also considered so in the past? In this context, gimmicks not only exemplify the ephemerality of trends but also expose the instability of value production and recognition within a capitalist system, illustrating how what was once seen as innovative and worthy of attention can quickly lose its worth as newer distractions emerge. The temporal nature of the gimmick itself becomes a gesture, capturing both the moment of its emergence and its decline. A more nuanced analysis could illuminate the processes through which certain artifacts, mechanisms, or tools come to be perceived and labeled as gimmicks. Moreover, we might question why we understand and remember certain elements as gimmicks.

The dual character of the gimmick — both as a form and as an aesthetic judgment — introduces a theoretical framework that encourages reflection on alternative notions of functionality and affordances stemming from the possibilities of technology, as well as conventions of the period that were never realized. For instance, the design and functionality of personal technological gadgets (Fig. 4) from *Totally Spies* (Vincent Chalvon-Demersay and David Michel, 2001–2005), illustrate a utilitarian technology that, while innovative for its time, appears less functional by today’s standards. Similarly, old websites from the 1990s, although graphically exaggerated, were constructed on a digital architecture devoid of cookies and algorithmic curation.

Ngai’s analysis situates the gimmick as both a critique of and a reflection on the contradictions of labor, time, and value within capitalist systems, where the promise of functionality often conceals deeper contradictions regarding value and purpose. In this respect, the gimmick can also serve as a reminder of the speculative “what if.” What if the balance between time, work, and value were set differently? What if utilitarian design were built on a different foundation? What if different algorithms bound the digital architecture of the connected world? Such questions extend beyond mere hypotheticals; the notion of “what if” questions whether simply suggesting unrealized possibilities is enough or whether it risks remaining an abstract articulation of potential that never comes to fruition. Yet, even



Fig. 4: Jerry is showcasing a new technological gadget to Clover, Sam, and Alex for their mission

as speculation, the “what if” can catalyze critical reflection. In this way, the gimmick evolves into a productive space for imagining alternative histories and futures — an invitation to reconsider the structures that define our current technological, aesthetic, and economic realities.

Ending in the Virtual Realm

Connecting the gimmick to the theme of this special issue — understanding the various and contradictory representations, formations, and implications of computer labor in and through audiovisual media — Ngai’s perspective opens up a space of detailed reflection on the current forms of labor, time usage, and labor production. The current interconnected, virtual, constantly evolving dispositif desperately wants us to forget the technological, material, energetic, and labor-intensive inputs that have already been provided and still remain necessary. Understanding what is presented as a gimmick, what is seen as a gimmick, and what is perceived as a gimmick should go hand in hand with a broader critical analysis of labor, technology, time, and value in a world where labor is increasingly intertwined with information technology.

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VÝZVA K AUTORSKÉ SPOLUPRÁCI

NA MONOTEMATICKÝCH BLOCÍCH DALŠÍCH ČÍSEL

Prostřednictvím monotematických bloků se *Iluminace* snaží podpořit koncentrovanější diskusi uvnitř oboru, vytvořit operativní prostředek dialogu s jinými obory a usnadnit zapojení zahraničních přispěvatelů. Témata jsou vybírána tak, aby korespondovala s aktuálním vývojem filmové historie a teorie ve světě a aby současně umožňovala otevírat specifické domácí otázky (revidovat problémy dějin českého filmu, zabývat se dosud nevyužitými prameny). Zájemcům může redakce poskytnout výběrové bibliografie k jednotlivým tématům. **Každé z uvedených čísel bude mít rezervován dostatek prostoru i pro texty s tématem nijak nesouvisející.**

S nabídkami příspěvků (studií, recenzí, glos, rozhovorů) se obraťte na adresu: lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz.

V nabídce stručně popište koncepci textu; u původních studií se předpokládá délka 15–35 normostran. Podrobné pokyny pro bibliografické citace lze nalézt na webových stránkách časopisu: www.iluminace.cz, v rubrice Publikovat — Pokyny pro autory.

A Conversation Beyond the Script

Deadline for abstracts: November 15, 2024; deadline for submissions: February 15, 2025.

Guest editors: Jan Trnka (Národní filmový archiv), **Jan Černík** (Palacký University)

Since the last issue of *Illuminace* focused on screenwriting (4/2014), the field of writing for the screen and its academic reflection has undergone several changes. The biggest challenges for the screenwriting community (mainly in the USA but not only there) have been the financial remuneration of screenwriters, their job opportunities, and the rise of artificial intelligence. It resulted in another WGA strike, with which many regional screenwriting associations stood in solidarity. Screenwriting studies are responding to this with a gradual change of perspective. Alongside the continued interest in teaching screenwriting and narrative patterns, we are increasingly encountering case studies on regional approaches to writing, scripting for short formats and VR which can be understood as a tendency to broaden the field of interest and opportunities for screenwriters.

Issues affecting screenwriting are reflected each year at the annual Screenwriting Research Network Conference. In 2024 the conference will take place in the Czech Republic and its topic is “A Conversation Beyond the Script”. The aim of the conference is to reflect on the changes in formal aspects (especially dialogue and voice), the ways in which audiovisual works are developed and produced, and the changes in the craft of screenwriting.

We are calling for contributions that address the complex and multifaceted nature of dialogues and conversations in the screenwriting and audiovisual industry. This theme can be grasped in two ways: either as a reflection of dialogues in scripts and audiovisual art or as an insight into the filmmakers’ debates during the development and production phases or as ways of negotiating between screenwriters and production companies. Papers may reflect both traditional approaches to writing and new technologies such as AI and VR.

Neither of the meanings of ‘conversation’ is new to the literature. Film dialogue, although given less space than other elements of film form (such as framing, editing, and music), has been more researched in the last thirty years than it used to be. At the turn of the millennium, Sarah Kozloff rehabilitated dialogue as an object of inquiry (Kozloff, 2000). Paolo Braga pointed out that dialogue needs to be considered in the context of other formal aspects of film (Braga, 2015). Warren Buckland has shown how the tools of quantitative linguistics can be used to clarify what dialogue can tell us about film characters and authors (Buckland, 2019). Besides there are reflections on the realism of film dialogue (Nelmes, 2011) or research approaching dialogue as a side topic in texts on acting (Ganz and Price, 2020), or in a number of formal analyses and interpretive texts.

Dialogues in screenwriting are more than mere exchanges between characters; they are the lifeblood of storytelling, driving narratives and revealing the depths of characters’ emotions and motivations. This focus on dialogues and conversations recognizes their role in not just advancing the plot but also in creating a connection with the audience. Dialogues are where characters’ inner worlds are externalized and conflicts are brought to life.

Similarly, conversations among filmmakers during the creation process are crucial. These collaborative discussions shape the final output, blending diverse creative visions into a cohesive narrative. Understanding these conversations offers insights into the collaborative nature of filmmaking, highlighting how collective creativity and shared decision-making impact the storytelling process. Formal or informal conversations between filmmakers during the development and production of films is a topic that has been treated much more thoroughly from a scholarly perspective, as studies on production culture in audiovisual industries have shown (we are referring here primarily to studies following the tradition of sociological approaches to the development and production of film, building on authors such as Bourdieu, 1996; Caldwell, 2008; Macdonald, 2013; and others). Thus, we have new knowledge not only about final versions of scripts but also new insights into their development from the first simple idea, more broadly about the essence of screenwriter's job, their analog and digital instruments (used for communicating personal and shared visions), different kinds of multiple- and collaborative authorship, functions of writing departments and organizational structures of locally or media-specific dramaturgical systems, which altogether changing our understanding of what happens during the development of a screenplay (or any non/narrative content), and which presents screenwriting into considerable extent also as art of constant, ongoing discussions (usually democratic in nature) about each detail of future work/creative output (Price, 2010; Bloore, 2012; Macdonald, 2013; Tieber, 2014; Millard, 2014). However, the question arises whether and possibly to what extent our knowledge of the field will be relevant after the advent of artificial intelligence.

For the forthcoming issue, we invite authors to send us abstracts dealing with any of these possible (but not exclusive) topics:

- Dialogues and Discourse in Screenplays: Examining how character dialogues function within scripts to convey subtext, emotion, and narrative progression.
- Plurality of Voices and Polylogues: Analyzing scripts that feature multiple voices and complex conversational structures, reflecting the diversity of perspectives.
- Dissemination of Information: Investigating how information is shared through dialogue, affecting audience perception and engagement.
- Storytelling Through Conversation: Exploring the role of conversational dynamics in shaping narrative and character arcs.
- Collaborative Conversations in Filmmaking: Understanding the impact of dialogue between writers, directors, and other stakeholders on the creative process.
- Intercultural Dialogue in Film and Television: Studying how cross-cultural interactions are represented and negotiated through dialogue in screenplays.
- History and Theory of Screenwriting: Reflecting on the evolution of screenwriting practices and theoretical approaches.
- Teaching Screenwriting Techniques: Discussing pedagogical methods and strategies for teaching dialogue writing and screenplay construction.
- Narrative Strategies in Audiovisual Media: Examining innovative narrative techniques in film, television, and new media, focusing on the integration of dialogue.

Submission Guidelines:

We invite scholars and practitioners to submit papers that engage with these topics, offering fresh perspectives and rigorous analysis. Submissions should be original, unpublished works that contribute to the academic discourse on screenwriting and filmmaking.

Please send an abstract (250 words) and a short bio (150 words) to lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz, jan.trnka@nfa.cz and jan.cernik@upol.cz by **November 15, 2024**. The authors will be informed of the decision by December 15, 2024. The deadline for submitting the full article is February 15, 2025.

The detailed submission guidelines can be found on our journal's website.

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Illuminace 3/2025

Special Issue

Filmic Matter and Geographic Specificity

Deadline for abstracts: December 15, 2024; deadline for submissions: April 30, 2025.

Guest editor: Byron Davies (Universidad de Murcia, Spain)

Much classical film theory was marked by an explicit concern with the material foundations of the cinematic medium, including its connection to “physical reality” (Bazin 1960; Kracauer 1960). The aim of articulating a self-consciously materialist ontology of cinema later developed out of awareness of film’s technological apparatus, with an especially rich relationship to experimental film (Wollen 1976; Gidal 1978; Le Grice 1978). Of course, there are also very few agreements about what “materialism” means in these discussions. For example, an assumption often emerging from apparatus theory is that a resolutely materialist perspective should counter the impulses lying behind photographic realism (Baudry 1976). But in other contexts, realism can appear to work intricately with materialism, including when it comes to a close analysis of photographic “noise” and “interference” (Frank 2019). Materialist views, including so-called “new materialisms” (such as Bennett 2010), are also understood to bear a close relationship to photochemical film practices (Knowles 2020). Nevertheless, materialist perspectives can also help us to understand digital media—including the material infrastructure of digital projection as well as of the screen itself (Manovich 2001; Denson 2020).

But are these even the same sets of questions in all regions of the world? Or are questions of materiality in film permeated by the fundamental geopolitical fact of exploitation of the Global South by the North? Recent film scholarship has foregrounded geographically varied photochemical and handmade film practices (MacKenzie and Marchessault 2019; Coelho 2023; Doing 2024; Ramey 2024) or regionally specific challenges with collecting, preserving, and curating film materials (Fossati 2021; Hediger and Schulte Strathaus 2023; Cua Lim 2024). Attention to the geopolitics of digital *matter* would additionally turn on access to and extraction of lithium and indium (Cubitt 2017). What, then, are the consequences of geopolitics and ecology for current treatments of “matter” in film scholarship? For example, if efforts in experimental cinema in the South can result in a “shamanic materialism” (Colectivo Los Ingrávidos 2021), what then might we understand to be film’s *shamanic matter*, if anything?

Taking into account the connections between filmic materiality and corporeality (Knowles 2020; Yue 2021; Suárez 2024), parallel questions might then arise regarding the geographic variability of conceptions of *bodies* communicated on film. Is filmic corporeality the same phenomenon in all regions of the world, or does it rather reflect the geopolitics and ecology of the different materials through which it is expressed?

This special issue invites scholars to address questions about geographically specific materials in film from a range of theoretical, philosophical, historiographic, and practice-based perspectives. Contributions may engage with topics such as experimental filmmaking, archival practices, film stock production, or broader media ecologies, while reflecting on how geographic specificity shapes variegated understandings of materiality and corporeality. We are especially interested in case studies of film practices from Latin America, Africa, Asia, Ocean-

ia, and other regions of the Global South. We are also highly interested in alternatives to Eurocentric frameworks and Indigenous conceptions of matter and materialism.

A thought guiding this issue is that attending to geographic specificity might render more concrete the divergent senses of “matter,” “materiality,” and “bodies” across a variety of traditions and perspectives, including seemingly irreconcilable ones.

For this issue, we welcome **articles** (6000–7500 words) or **audiovisual essays** (5–15 minutes) with written statements (1000–2500 words).

Please send an **abstract** (250 words + 3–5 bibliographic references) and a **short bio** (150 words) to lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz, jiri.anger@nfa.cz, and byron.davies@um.es, by **December 15, 2024**. The authors will be informed of the decision by **January 15, 2025**. The deadline for submitting the full article or a completed audiovisual essay is **April 30, 2025**.

We will be pleased to consider proposals on these or related topics:

- The aesthetic significance of locally specific materialist film practices: experimental cinema, found footage, expanded cinema, animation, but also practices related to textiles, botany, ceramics, and painting (including painting directly on film).
- Materialist theories and philosophies of film articulated from the Global South, including the relationship between materialist philosophies of film and anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.
- Global circulations of film theory/philosophy and their impact on our notions of filmic matter.
- Alternatives to Eurocentric frameworks for materialist approaches to film, including Indigenous materialist perspectives.
- The geographic specificity of archival film practices: collecting, curating, preserving, and exhibiting.
- The geographic specificity of film production: manufacturing, processing, printing.
- Possibilities of attending to geographically specific film practices as a basis for articulating alternative conceptions of “matter” and of “bodies.”
- The ecological impact of geographically specific film practices, including their potential for articulating visions of degrowth.
- How geographic specificity informs questions of the materiality of digital audiovisual formats.
- How geographic specificity informs questions of the materiality of profilmic events and objects.
- Consequences of geographically specific materials for debates about whether films can “do” philosophy.

Submission guidelines:

Proposals should be original, unpublished works relating to the philosophical significance of geographically specific materials in film. The detailed submission guidelines can be found on the journal’s website:

https://www.iluminace.cz/artkey/inf-990000-1200_Instructions-for-Authors.php

Literature:

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ILUMINACE

je recenzovaný časopis pro vědeckou reflexi kinematografie a příbuzných problémů. Byla založena v roce 1989 jako půlletník. Od svého pátého ročníku přešla na čtvrtletní periodicitu a při té příležitosti se rozšířil její rozsah i formát. Od roku 2004 je v každém čísle vyhrazen prostor pro monotematický blok textů. Od roku 2005 jsou některé monotematické bloky připravovány ve spolupráci s hostujícími editory. Počínaje rokem 2022 Iluminace vychází třikrát ročně a v roce 2023 přešla do režimu Open Access. Iluminace přináší především původní teoretické a historické studie o filmu a dalších audiovizuálních médiích. Každé číslo obsahuje rovněž překlady zahraničních textů, jež přibližují současné badatelské trendy nebo splácejí překladatelské dluhy z minulosti. Velký prostor je v Iluminaci věnován kritickým edicím primárních písemným pramenů k dějinám kinematografie, stejně jako rozhovorům s významnými tvůrci a badateli. Zvláštní rubriky poskytují prostor k prezentaci probíhajících výzkumných projektů. Jako každý akademický časopis i Iluminace obsahuje rubriku vyhrazenou recenzím domácí a zahraniční odborné literatury.

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Redakce přijímá rukopisy v elektronické podobě v editoru Word, a to e-mailem na adrese lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz. Doporučuje se nejprve zaslat stručný popis koncepce textu. U původních studií se předpokládá délka 15–35 normostran, u rozhovorů 10–30 normostran, u ostatních 4–15; v odůvodněných případech a po domluvě s redakcí je možné tyto limity překročit. Všechny nabízené příspěvky musí být v definitivní verzi. Rukopisy studií je třeba doplnit filmografickým soupisem (odkazuje-li text na filmové tituly — dle zavedené praxe Iluminace), abstraktem v angličtině nebo češtině o rozsahu 0,5–1 normostrana, anglickým překladem názvu, klíčovými slovy v češtině i v angličtině, biografickou notickou v délce 3–5 řádků, volitelně i kontaktní adresou. Obrázky se přijímají ve formátu JPG (s popisky a údaji o zdroji), grafy v programu Excel. Autor je povinen dodržovat citační normu časopisu (viz „Pokyny pro bibliografické citace“).

Pravidla a průběh recenzního řízení

Recenzní řízení typu „peer-review“ se vztahuje na odborné studie, určené pro rubriku „Články“, a probíhá pod dozorem redakční rady (resp. „redakčního okruhu“), jejíž aktuální složení je uvedeno v každém čísle časopisu. Šéfredaktor má právo vyžádat si od autora ještě před započetím recenzního řízení jazykové i věcné úpravy nabízených textů nebo je do recenzního řízení vůbec nepostoupit, pokud nesplňují základní kritéria původní vědecké práce. Toto rozhodnutí musí autorovi náležitě zdůvodnit. Každou předběžně přijatou studii redakce předloží k posouzení dvěma recenzentům. Recenzenti budou vybíráni podle kritéria odborné kvalifikace v otázkách, jimiž se hodnocený text zabývá, a po vyloučení osob, které jsou v blízkém pracovním nebo osobním vztahu s autorem. Autoři a posuzovatelé zůstávají pro sebe navzájem anonymní. Posuzovatelé vyplní formulář, v němž uvedou, zda text navrhuji přijmout, přepracovat, nebo zamítnout. Své stanovisko zdůvodní v přiloženém posudku. Pokud doporučují zamítnutí nebo přepracování, uvedou do posudku hlavní důvody, respektive podněty

k úpravám. V případě požadavku na přepracování nebo při protichůdných hodnoceních může redakce zadat třetí posudek. Na základě posudků šéfredaktor přijme konečné rozhodnutí o přijetí či zamítnutí příspěvku a toto rozhodnutí sdělí v nejkratším možném termínu autorovi. Pokud autor s rozhodnutím šéfredaktora nesouhlasí, může své stanovisko vyjádřit v dopise, který redakce předá k posouzení a dalšímu rozhodnutí členům redakčního okruhu. Výsledky recenzního řízení budou archivovány způsobem, který umožní zpětné ověření, zda se v něm postupovalo podle výše uvedených pravidel a zda hlavním kritériem posuzování byla vědecká úroveň textu.

Další ustanovení

U nabízených rukopisů se předpokládá, že autor daný text dosud nikde jinde nepublikoval a že jej v průběhu recenzního řízení ani nebude nabízet jiným časopisům. Pokud byla publikována jakákoli část nabízeného textu, autor je povinen tuto skutečnost sdělit redakci a uvést v rukopise. Nevyžádané příspěvky se nevracejí. Pokud si autor nepřeje, aby jeho text byl zveřejněn na internetových stránkách časopisu (www.iluminace.cz), je třeba sdělit nesouhlas písemně redakci.

Pokyny k formální úpravě článků jsou ke stažení na téže internetové adrese, pod sekci „Pokyny pro autory“.

Knihovna Národního filmového archivu nabízí zahraniční filmové databáze

<https://nfa.cz/cz/knihovna/licencovane-database/>

Ve studovně Knihovny NFA (KNFA) jsou v roce 2020 uživatelům (pro registrované uživatele i ve vzdáleném přístupu) k dispozici pro náš obor vybrané elektronické informační zdroje (EIZ). Kromě původních databází NFA (Filmový přehled, Digitální knihovna NFA, Online katalog Knihovny NFA), jsou to licencované elektronické zdroje (mediální databáze, zahraniční filmové databáze). Konkrétně v případě zahraničních filmových databází se jedná v rámci České republiky o jedinečnou kombinaci EIZ, která bude navíc našim čtenářům dostupná až do roku 2022.

Zahraniční filmové databáze v Knihovně NFA:

1. **Screen Studies Collection** (dříve FIO — Film Indexes Online)

nabízí komplexní nástroj pro přístup k aktuálním publikacím zaměřeným na filmovou vědu spolu s podrobnými a rozsáhlými filmografiemi.

Kolekce zahrnuje indexy a filmografie

- a) American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog
- b) Film Index International (FII)
- c) FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals

a) **American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog**

Filmografická databáze zaměřená na americkou produkci poskytující podrobné informace o dlouhometrážních hraných filmech vyrobených na území USA nebo financovaných americkými produkčními společnostmi v období 1893–1972. Databáze obsahuje více než 48000 záznamů filmů s produkčními informacemi, technickými údaji, údaji o tvůrcích, hereckém obsazení a ztvárněných postavách; dále záznamy obsahují podrobný obsah filmu, poznámkový aparát, žánrové zařazení filmu a citační odkazy. Nové údaje jsou vkládány dvakrát ročně. Klíčový zdroj doporučený pro výuku, výzkum a studium filmového umění.

b) **Film Index International (FII)**

Filmografický informační zdroj vytvářený British Film Institute (BFI). Představuje světově nejrozsáhlejší profesionálně budovanou filmovou knihovnu s více než 100000 podrobných záznamů o filmech ze 170 zemí od prvních němých filmů do současnosti s více než milionem odkazů na herecké obsazení a technické údaje. Dále 500000 odkazů na bibliografické citace k jednotlivým filmům a filmovým tvůrcům, 40000 profesních profilů filmových tvůrců, informace o získaných cenách na prestižních filmových festivalech.

c) **FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals**

Databáze obsahuje více než 230 000 záznamů o článcích s filmovou tematikou od roku 1972 do současnosti z více než 345 filmových akademických i populárních periodik z celého světa. Roční přírůstek činí 12000 záznamů. Každý záznam sestává z bibliografických údajů, abstraktu a záhlaví (jména autorů, filmové tituly, předmětová hesla). Databáze obsahuje také záznamy o televizi od roku 1979 (cca 50000 záznamů), od roku 2000 se omezila na články s televizní tematikou pouze z filmových periodik.

2. **JSTOR**

zkratka z anglického Journal Storage (úložiště časopisů)

Digitální knihovna pro studenty a výzkumníky poskytující přístup k více než 12 milionům akademických článků, knih a primárním zdrojům z mnoha disciplín včetně filmu.

Představuje špičkovou on-line databázi digitalizovaných plných textů z více než 2000 vědeckých časopisů. Každý časopis je plně digitalizován od prvního čísla prvního ročníku až po pohyblivou hranici (moving wall), což je obvykle „tři až pět let od současnosti“.

3. **EBSCO**

Megazdroj vědeckých informací pro společenské a humanitní obory.

Databáze EBSCO vychází vstříc požadavkům všech výzkumníků a nabízí elektronickou knihovnu obsahující desítky tisíc časopisů, magazínů a reportů a mnoha dalších publikací v plném textu.

EBSCOHost je jednotné rozhraní umožňující přístup k vybraným bibliografickým a plnotextovým databázím.

V Knihovně NFA jsou k dispozici dvě databáze megazdroje EBSCO:

a) **Academic Search Ultimate**

Databáze byla vytvořena v reakci na zvyšující se nároky akademické komunity a nabízí nejširší kolekci recenzovaných plnotextových časopisů, včetně mnoha časopisů indexovaných v předních citačních indexech. Obsahuje tisíce plnotextových časopisů v angličtině i jiných jazycích, publikovaných na severoamerickém kontinentu, v Asii, Africe, Oceánii, Evropě a Latinské Americe, a nabízí tím pádem jedinečné regionální pokrytí. Databáze integruje lokální obsah předních územně specifických zdrojů z celého světa a umožňuje tak studentům pohled na jejich studium a výzkum z globální perspektivy. Cennou součástí obsahu je i kolekce videozáznamů (více než 74000) od agentury Associated Press. Při vyhledávání se na seznamu výsledků zobrazují v karuselu relevantní videa. Databáze obsahuje videa předních zpravodajských agentur publikovaná od roku 1930 do současnosti a je aktualizována každý měsíc.

b) **Film and Television Literature Index with Fulltext**

Online nástroj pro výzkum v oblasti televize a filmu. Databáze pokrývá problematiku filmové a televizní teorie, uchovávání a restaurování, produkce, kinematografie, technických aspektů a recenzí. Obsahuje kompletní indexování a abstrakty 380 publikací (a selektivní pokrytí téměř 300 publikací), dále plné texty více než 100 časopisů a 100 knih. Databáze Film & Television Literature Index with Fulltext navíc obsahuje i filmové recenze z předního zdroje Variety, datované od roku 1914 do současnosti, a více než 36 300 obrázků z archivu MPTV Image Archive.

Databáze Evropské audiovizuální observatoře (European audiovisual observatory)

O Evropské audiovizuální observatoři

Evropská audiovizuální observatoř (EAO) vznikla roku 1992 jako následnická organizace Eureka Audiovisuel, jejím sídlem je Štrasburk. Činnost této instituce spočívá ve sběru a šíření informací o audiovizuálním průmyslu v Evropě. V současné době sdružuje 41 členských států a Evropskou unii, zastoupenou Evropskou komisí. Je financována přímými příspěvky členských zemí a příjmy z prodeje svých produktů a služeb.

Posláním EAO je poskytovat informace profesionálům v oblasti audiovize a tím také přispívat k větší transparentnosti audiovizuálního sektoru v Evropě. EAO sleduje všechny oblasti audiovizuálního průmyslu: film, televizní vysílání, video/DVD a nová média. O každé z těchto oblastí poskytuje informace ve sféře trhu a statistiky, legislativy a financování výroby audiovizuálních děl. EAO sleduje a podrobně analyzuje vývoj audiovizuálního sektoru v členských státech.

Působí v právním rámci Rady Evropy a spolupracuje s řadou partnerských a profesních organizací z oboru a se sítí korespondentů. Kromě příspěvků na konference jsou dalšími hlavními činnostmi vydávání ročenky, zpravodaje a zprávy, kompilace a správa databází a poskytování informací prostřednictvím internetových stránek observatoře (<http://www.obs.coe.int>).

Česká republika je členem EAO od roku 1994.

LUMIERE VOD je adresář evropských filmů dostupných na vyžádání v Evropě. Najdete služby a země, kde je film uveden na VOD, a zkombinujete vyhledávací kritéria a vytvoříte seznam dostupných filmů podle režiséra, země nebo roku výroby.

Prezentační video je k dispozici https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxp_SwD3BZg.

Tento projekt, spravovaný Evropskou audiovizuální observatoří, je podporován programem CREATIVE EUROPE Evropské unie.

LUMIERE VOD je databáze evropských filmů dostupných na placených videích na vyžádání (transakční a předplatné VOD). Poskytuje seznam filmů dostupných v daném okamžiku ze vzorku služeb na vyžádání působících v Evropské unii.

LUMIERE VOD je primárně určen pro profesionály v audiovizuálním průmyslu : autory, producenty, distributory, filmové fondy a regulátory, aby jim pomohl sledovat využití filmů na VOD a posoudit složení katalogů VOD. Účelem není usnadnit pronájem nebo nákup filmů ani předplatné služby.

LUMIERE VOD řídí Evropská audiovizuální observatoř na základě maximálního úsilí. Adresář je aktuálně v beta verzi a obsahuje asi 300 katalogů VOD. Počet sledovaných katalogů a frekvence aktualizací se bude postupně zvyšovat.

Poskytnuté informace

Databáze je prohledávatelná podle řady kritérií. Upozorňujeme, že:

- všechna metadata jsou poskytována s maximálním úsilím;
- zahrnuli jsme možnost vyhledávat filmy podle originálních nebo alternativních titulů. Na stránkách výsledků se zobrazí pouze původní název;
- země produkce uvádějí různé země podílející se na výrobě filmu. Země produkce uvedená na prvním místě označuje zemi, která údajně nejvíce přispěla k financování filmu. Nejedná se o ofi-

ciální státní příslušnost filmu, jak je posouzeno národním filmovým fondem nebo národním regulátorem.

I když byla věnována maximální pozornost zajištění přesnosti, není poskytována žádná záruka, že materiál neobsahuje chyby nebo opomenutí. Naším cílem je udržovat tyto informace aktuální a přesné. Pokud budeme upozorněni na chyby, pokusíme se je vyřešit. Můžete nás kontaktovat ohledně jakýchkoli technických informací v adresáři pomocí kontaktního formuláře.

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EAO vydává Statistickou ročenku, měsíčník IRIS se speciálními suplementy (v tištěné i elektronické podobě), účastní se různých konferencí a workshopů. Na webových stránkách EAO jsou veřejnosti dostupné tyto informační databáze: LUMIERE (obsahuje údaje o sledovanosti filmů distribuovaných v evropských kinech), IRIS MERLIN (informace o legislativě upravující audiovizuální sektor v Evropě), databáze poskytovatelů AVMS. Informace o provozování televizního vysílání v členských státech obsahuje databáze MAVISE. Všechny tyto informace jsou poskytovány v angličtině, francouzštině a němčině.

Nejvyšším orgánem EAO je Výkonná rada, v jejímž předsednictví se každý rok střídají jednotlivé členské země.



**Národní
filmový
archiv**



Národní
filmový
archiv

Sbírka orální historie v Národním filmovém archivu


NFA pečuje o nejrůznější typy dokumentů se vztahem k historii českého filmovnictví včetně zvukových a zvukově-obrazových nahrávek.

Vlastníte-li takové typy materiálů (rozhovory, záznamy událostí či jiné druhy audiozáznamů, eventuálně audiovizuálních záznamů rozhovorů, vztahující se k tématu české kinematografie, a to z jakéhokoliv období), a máte zájem o jejich bezpečné uchování, nabízíme vám bezplatné uložení v depozitářích NFA.

NFA splňuje všechny podmínky, které zaručují nejvyšší možnou kvalitu archivace.

Jakékoliv obohacení naší sbírky z vašich zdrojů je cenným příspěvkem k rozšíření povědomí o minulosti českého filmu a současně i naší kulturní historie.

Kontakt: kurátorka sbírky Marie Barešová
Marie.Baresova@nfa.cz



Filmový přehled, databáze Národního filmového archivu

Objemná filmografická databáze *Filmový přehled* Národního filmového archivu přináší rozsáhlá, ověřená a doposud dohledatelná data a filmografické údaje od počátků české kinematografie. Aktualizuje a nahrazuje tak informace, které byly dříve vydány v katalozích *Český hraný film I–VI* a *Český animovaný film I*. Uživatel tak nalezne především údaje o českých **hraných** (všechny od roku 1898), **dokumentárních** (prozatím výběrově 1898–1991, všechny od 1992) i **animovaných** (všechny 1922–1945 a od 1992, prozatím výběrově 1946–1991), studentských, dlouhých i krátkých filmech, jež byly uvedeny v kinech. Databáze je pravidelně aktualizována a stále doplňována.

Údaje o filmech: filmografická (všichni tvůrci, členové výrobního štábu, herecké obsazení a další), produkční (výrobci, všechny názvy, žánry, první a poslední natáčecí den, datum cenzury, schválení literárního a technického scénáře, první kopie a celého filmu, ateliéry, lokace a další), distribuční (předpremiéry, distribuční, slavnostní, festivalové premiéry, popřípadě obnovené premiéry, distribuční slogany nebo premiérová kina) a technická (distribuční nosič, poměr stran, barva, zvuk, mluveno, jazyková verze, podtitulky, mezititulky, úvodní/závěrečné titulky, animační technika, minutáž, původní metráž) data, anotace, obsahy, zajímavosti, fotografie i plakáty.

Údaje o osobnostech a společnostech: filmografie, profese, zjištěná data i místa narození a úmrtí, alternativní jména, životopisy, fotografie.

Údaje o ocenění a dotacích: česká ocenění, festivaly a přehlídky, zahraniční ocenění udělená českým filmům. Plánováno je též zveřejnění filmových dotací za léta 1992–2022.

<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/databaze>



Rešerše ve sbírce Národního filmového archivu

Odborné i laické veřejnosti nabízíme možnost **vypracování tematických rešerší** ve sbírce Národního filmového archivu. S žádostmi o ně se prosím obračejte na e-mailovou adresu **reserse@nfa.cz**.

Podrobnější informace viz

<https://nfa.cz/cz/sbirky/reserse/>.

Přehled jednotlivých částí sbírky Národního filmového archivu viz

<https://nfa.cz/cz/sbirky/sbirky-a-fondy/>.



**Národní
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ILUMINACE

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