

VIDEOLOGY

Louis Armand,
Director, Centre for Critical & Cultural Theory, Charles Univ. Prague

This seminar will discuss “videology” as a nexus of aesthetic/ideological forms in recent and contemporary culture, from Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” and the widespread emergence of image technologies during the industrial revolution (photography, cinema), to “Big Bother,” “virtual reality,” and the discourse of post-humanism. It will examine the work of writers, artists, architects, filmmakers, philosophers and theorists, including Karel Teige’s ciné-poetics, the Gilbreths’ time-motion studies, the video art of Nam June Paik, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville*, and more.

I believe... that the future belongs to ghosts, and that modern image technology, cinema, telecommunications, etc., are only increasing the power of ghosts.

—Jacques Derrida, *Ghost Dance* (dir. Ken McMullen, 1982)

In his June 1964 “Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television, 1963,” published in the New York Fluxus newspaper *Fluxus CC Five Three*, Nam June Paik claimed, “My experimental TV is the first ART(?) in which the ‘perfect crime’ is possible...”¹ Thirty years later, Jean Baudrillard entitled his major statement on the “murder of reality,” *Le crime parfait* (1995) – in it he writes, “the radical illusion is that of the original crime, by which the world is altered from the beginning, and is never identical to itself, never real. The world exists only through this definitive illusion which is that of the play of appearances – the very site of the unceasing disappearance of all meaning and all finality. And this is not merely metaphysical: in the physical order, too, from its origin – whatever that may be – the world has been forever appearing and disappearing.”²

For Baudrillard, reality isn’t murdered by illusion, since it’s the *illusion of the real* that is the first victim of the panoptical, televisual, indeed pornographic cult of veracity, of global self-verisimilitude, that today everywhere makes this absence felt by its insistences to the contrary. “Our culture of meaning,” Baudrillard insists, “is collapsing beneath the excess of meaning, the culture of reality collapsing beneath the excess of reality, the information culture collapsing beneath the excess of information...”³ Paik’s gesture was to subtract the personality of the artist from this image feedback system, whose perturbation – by means of a reversed diode – reduces the metaphysics of the new videology to the form of something like Maxwell’s demon: a mechanical glitch in the Cosmological Entropy System which, in the absence of any other subjectivity, produces indeterminacy, or what Baudrillard calls “clues” to the (determinate) world’s “non-existence.” For the “ART(?)” of the perfect crime – to say nothing, to leave no trace – doesn’t constitute a concealment (absolute or even partial), but rather the unconcealment of its own impossibility. For it aspires to be nothing other than an “alibi” for a world whose disappearance *behind the recurrent image of its disappearing* is precisely what cannot be *presented*. This is what Paik calls the indeterminacy of the image, which is no longer an image of anything as such, but an *ex-tasis* (“I AM ALWAYS WHAT I AM NOT. I AM ALWAYS NOT, WHAT I AM”).

Paik’s 1965 *Black and White Scrambled Television* in this sense marks something like a de-evolution of media verisimilitude, harking back to the experimental, pre-commercial television of the ’20s – a gesture in tandem with the post-McLuhanesque rage against the TV (as the apotheosis of corporate capitalism) by other ’60s and ’70s video artists like Wolf Vostell, the Vasulkas, the Ant Farm collective (Doug Hall, Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Judy Procter), Bruce Nauman, Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, and later ’80s guerrilla activists like Paper Tiger Television and Martha Rosler. What’s singular about Paik’s early manipulations, however, is their ambivalent materiality: it’s not the so-called content that serves as the object of a détournement, but the armature of the “image” itself – which is to say, a certain technicity (“trace” or “glitch” as feedback operations in the further production of disillusionment (“the perpetual unsatisfaction is the perpetual evolution. it is the main merit of my experimental TV”). In an essay entitled “Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan” (1967), Paik wrote:

¹ *Videa 'N' Videology: Nam June Paik (1959-1973)*, ed. Judson Rosebush (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art & Galeria Bonino, NY: 1974).

² Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996) 8.

³ Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 17.

McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" also existed implicitly in the science of communication since the 1940s. Norbert Wiener wrote that the information, in which a message was sent, plays the same role as the information, in which a message is not sent. It sounds almost Cagean... Cage might say, "a notation, with which music is playable, plays the same role as the notation, with which music is not playable."

By manipulating sync pulses and distorted found TV broadcast/propaganda images with electromagnetic coils (as in *Nixon* (1965-2002)), as well as live feed and video-replay in performance pieces like *Concerto for TV, Cello and Videotapes* (with Charlotte Moorman (1971)), Paik's interventions extend the idea of video and television from the visible/perceptual into the realm of the constitutive ambivalence of image technologies broadly speaking: from instrument of passive spectacularism to interactive site of aesthetic/counter-critique.⁴ Paik's 1984 distributed performance piece, *Good Morning, Mr Orwell* (between Paris and New York) – anticipating later cybernetic work like Stelarc's *Ping Body* (1998) and (via the add-on concept of a "Video Common Market") user-driven web platforms like YouTube – pointed to the materially diffused character of "panoptical" image technologies as the *stuff* of a *détournement*. By foregrounding the materiality of the video image, Paik (who described TV as "physical music") refused the supposed metaphysical turn identified by Rosalind Kraus in her essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" (1976), in which the critic produced a series of vacant, pleonastic statements about video art as a "mirror-reflection" of "absolute feedback... bracketing out the subject": the reason, she claims, that it "seems inappropriate to speak of a physical medium in relation to video."

The supposition that a kind of ectoplasm might be at work here calls to mind Derrida's succinct dissection of narcissistic spectrology during a brief cameo appearance "as himself" in Ken McMullin's 1983 film, *Ghost Dance*, where he discusses cinema as "an art of ghosts" and "psychoanalysis *plus* cinema" as "the science of ghosts." The very materiality of the medium is permeated by, its reality is constituted by, the recurrence of its own simulacrum – a perpetual feedback that in turn forms the subject of one of Paik's most illustrative works, *Three Eggs* (1975-1982): a CCTV triptych in which a chicken egg is filmed by a video camera and its image transmitted live to a neighbouring monitor (egg number 2), beside which is another monitor in place of whose screen is another (actual) egg (egg number 3) – a tableau that could easily have been entitled *The Chicken and the Simulacrum* (with a wink to the pigeon gonad in Lacan's "Mirror Stage").

Between the materiality of the image and the ideology of perception, and vice versa: the margin of entropy, noise, irreducibility, *ambivalence* (as Joyce said).⁵ Entropy as motive force, noise as contentless information, irreducibility as the perpetual non-normalisable element, ambivalence as counter-reduction: each pointing to what, in the one crucial moment of his 1979 "Report on Knowledge," Lyotard identified with the *existence of the unrepresentable* – which, as the title of his book specified, *is not some thing* but a "condition" (a *technicity*).⁶ In Paik's pre-formulation (via Douglas Davis): *Man = Media = Selection* (an evolutionary mechanism). Thus, by declensions: "Video, Videa, Vidiot, Videology."⁷

Course Texts / Recommended Reading

Louis Armand, *Videology and Videology 2*
Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*
Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*
Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*
Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace*
Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

⁴ With the caveat that Paik's own work inevitably feeds in turn into the art market spectacularism of '70s postmodernity.

⁵ Cf. Charlotte Moorman with Chroma Key Glasses in Paik's "Experiment" (with Jackie Chassen)(1971) at New York's Net-TV Workshop.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

⁷ Nam June Paik, "Binghamton Letter," 8 January 1972.