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The Wretched of the Screen

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Contents

Cut! Reproduction and Recombination

A cut is a cinematic term.[1] It separates two shots. It also joins two shots. It is a device that constructs cinematic space and time and articulates different elements into a new form.

A cut is obviously also an economic term. It refers to a reduction. In the context of the current economic crisis, cuts mostly concern government spending on welfare, culture, pensions, and other social services. It can refer to any reduction in resources or allocations.

How do both of these types of cuts affect bodies? And which bodies? Do they affect the bodies of artificial or natural persons, corpses or corporations? And what can we learn from cinema and its techniques of reproduction that might help us deal with the effects of post-continuity cutting in the economic realm?

Cuts in Economic Discourse

In current economic discourse, cuts are often described using metaphors of the human body. In the language of austerity and debt, states and economies are often compared to individuals, which need to lose (or are losing) body parts. Suggested interventions into the body politic range from dieting (cutting fat) to amputations (to keep so-called contagion from spreading) to trimming down weight, tightening belts, getting lean and fit, and eliminating superfluous parts.

Interestingly enough, a tradition of cutting into the body is at the heart of the creation of the notion of the subject itself, which is strongly connected to the idea of debt. In his new book, Maurizio Lazzarato discusses Nietzsche's description of the making of the subject as a historical form.[2] In order to remember debt and guilt, people need memory, and both debt and guilt are inscribed into the body very

literally in the form of cuts. Nietzsche mentions a whole range of methods used to enforce debt, memory, and guilt: human sacrifice as well as mutilations such as castration. He brims with enthusiasm as he details a full catalog of torture, pointing out with delight that Germans are especially creative when it comes to the design of cuts into the body: quartering, cutting off pieces of flesh from the breast, cutting off strips of skin, and so on.

The clearest connection between debt and cutting the body is expressed by Roman law. The so-called Twelve Tables mention explicitly that the body of a debtor can rightfully be split among creditors, which means that the latter are entitled to cut off parts of the debtor's body. And whether they cut a little more or less shouldn't really matter, according to this view of law.

> Where a party is delivered up to several persons, on account of a debt, after he has been exposed in the Forum on three market days, they shall be permitted to divide their debtor into different parts, if they desire to do so; and if anyone of them should, by the division, obtain more or less than he is entitled to, he shall not be responsible.[3]

This brings us to the question of whose body we are talking about. There are always several bodies implied in this traffic of metaphors: a literal body, which is really or metaphorically cut, as well as a metaphorical body, which represents a national economy, a country, or indeed a corporation. There is a natural body as well as a body politic involved in the equation, and the body being cut is a node of exchange, or rather an edit in between both kinds of bodies. If we follow the famous definitions by Ernst Kantorowicz, who analyzed the trope of the body politic and its emergence in the legal sphere, the body politic is immortal and ideal, whereas the body natural is fallible, foolish, and mortal.[4] And in fact both are undergoing cuts, both literally and metaphorically.

Bodies in Postproduction

While cuts have moved center stage in economic discourse, cutting or editing is also a traditional tool of cinema. While editing is usually understood as a modification in the temporal dimension, cinema also cuts bodies in space by framing them, retaining only what's useful to the narration.[5] The body is disarticulated and rearticulated in a different form. As Jean-Louis Comolli dramatically states, the frame cuts into the body as "sharp, crisp, and clean as a razor's edge."[6]

While a long or full shot will mostly leave the bodies represented intact, medium shots or close-ups will chop off large parts of the bodies. The most extreme of these incisions is the so-called Italian shot, named after Sergio Leone's Dollar Trilogy, which focuses on vigilante guns-for-hire in an imaginary Wild West.

But the economy of editing is also crucially tied to more general economic narratives: editing was introduced into the world of cinema in 1903 with the film *The Great Train Robbery*, which deals with questions of private property, privatization, appropriation, the frontier, expansion, and other common topics of Western movies. To underscore its message, it introduced cross cutting and narration across several locations.

Other groundbreaking advances in editing equally deploy economic narratives. One of the first films to use parallel montage—D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1908)—is about futures trading

on the Chicago stock exchange and the ruin of wheat farmers through speculation.[7] While it widely refrains from using close-ups or medium shots, the film dramatically shows a shot of a single hand—that of a suffocating wheat speculator—to perhaps convey the idea of the invisible hand of the market severed from any actual body.

Partes Secando

Griffiths's form of montage not only deals with advanced and extremely contemporary economic mechanisms, like robbery and speculation. It also derives from economic necessities. Parallel montage—the narration of two strands of the story in parallel—is cheaper and more efficient in terms of production because one doesn't need to shoot chronologically. Tom Gunning has shown it to be an extremely efficient method of adapting cinema to a Fordist system of production.[8] By 1909 this type of editing became universal.

At this stage, editing or postproduction becomes a crucial device to tell the story, to dismember and rearticulate individual and collective bodies, to separate and rearrange them according to economic efficiency. Even though *A Corner in Wheat* is—on the level of its narration—a romantic and essentialist call to return to subsistence farming, its own form is perfectly consistent with capitalist rationalization and pushes it ahead.[9]

But one can also reverse this logic, specifically by affirming the fragmentation of the subject—but without capitalism. The potential of recombinant bodies is emphasized in a text written by Siegfried Kracauer in 1927 called "The Mass Ornament." He analyzes a group of showgirls named the Tiller Girls. At the beginning of the century they became extremely popular because of their invention of what was called "precision dance"—a formation dance in which female bodies, or rather body parts, as Kracauer emphasized, moved synchronously and in unison. Kracauer analyzes precision dance as a symptom of a Fordist regime of production, comparing the articulation of the Tiller Girls on stage to the composition of a conveyor belt. Of course, they first had to be disarticulated in order to be rearticulated, and this was done by cutting time and activity into fragments and assigning them to separate elements of the body.

Kracauer doesn't denounce this arrangement, though. He doesn't call for a return to a more natural body, whatever that could mean. He even thinks it's no longer possible to restore the Tiller Girls to human beings. Instead, he faces this constellation in order to see how one could, so to speak, break through to its other side, radicalize fragmentation, to reverse it as one would in a reverse shot. In fact, he even thinks that the cutting of the body—and its reediting—are not radical enough.

The industrial body of the Tiller Girls is abstract, artificial, alienated. Precisely because of this, it breaks with the traditional and, at that time, racially imbued ideologies of origin, belonging, as well as with the idea of a natural, collective body created by genetics, race, or common culture. In the artificial bodies and the artificially articulated body parts of the Tiller Girls, Kracauer saw an anticipation of another body, which would be freed from the burden of race, genealogy, and origin—and we can add, free of memory, guilt, and debt—precisely by being artificial and composite. The recombination of the cut-off parts produces a body without subject or subjection. In fact, this is what has been cut: the individual, as well as its identity and its unalienable rights to guilt and debt bondage. This body fully

affirms its artificial composition while opening itself up to inorganic flows of matter and energy.

But Kracauer's views at the time of debt crisis and economic depression were not shared. On the contrary, a hyperinflation of metaphors of pure national-social and racial bodies set in, which were realized using all possible means of violence. Bodies were cut, exploded, and violated—and their dispersed remains constitute the grounds we walk on today.

Postproduction

This is how editing is historically embedded into an economic context. It came to define an area called cinematic postproduction. And even though the name "postproduction" made it appear to be a supplement to production proper, its logic flipped back to influence and structure production itself.

With digital technologies, these processes have accelerated substantially. Traditionally, postproduction meant synching, mixing, editing, color correction, and other procedures performed after shooting a movie. But in recent years, postproduction has begun to take over production wholesale. In newer mainstream productions, especially in 3-D or animation, postproduction is more or less equivalent to the production of the film itself. Compositing, animation, and modeling now belong to postproduction. Fewer and fewer components actually need to be shot, because they are partially or wholly created in postproduction. Paradoxically, production increasingly starts to take place within postproduction. Production transforms into an aftereffect.[10]

A few years ago, Nicolas Bourriaud pointed to a few aspects of this shift in his essay "Postproduction."[11] But now in times of crisis we have to dramatically revise his fragmentary hints, which were mostly referring to processes of digital reproduction within art and its repercussions for the art object. The impact of postproduction goes way beyond the world of art or media, even far beyond the world of digital technology, to become one of the main capitalist modes of production today.

The things that people used to do after work—for example, the so-called reproduction of their labor power—are now integrated into production. Reproduction concerns both so-called reproductive labor, which includes affective and social activities, and processes of digital and semiotic reproduction.[12] Postproduction in a very literal sense *is* production today.

This also shifts the temporality inherent in the term postproduction. The prefix "post-," which denotes an immobile state past history, is replaced by the prefix "re-," which points at repetition or response. We are not after production. Rather, we are in a state in which production is endlessly recycled, repeated, copied, and multiplied, but potentially also displaced, humbled, and renewed. Production is not only transformed but fundamentally displaced to locations that used to form its outside: to mobile devices, scattered screens, sweatshops and catwalks, nurseries, virtual reality, offshore production lines. It is endlessly edited and recombined.

With the loss of the idea of production all goes the loss of the figure of the heroic male worker, replaced by Foxconn employees wearing Spiderman outfits to ward off the temptation to jump out the window. By kids living off the scrap metal of industrialism, scavenging for the bones of imperial or socialist factories. By picture people reproducing themselves via enhancements, anorexia, and digital

exhibitionism. By invisible women who keep the world going. In the age of reproduction, Vertov's famous man with the movie camera has been replaced by a woman at an editing table, baby on her lap, a twenty-four-hour shift ahead of her.

But as production is cut and dismembered, so can it be recombined and renewed within reproduction. Today's reproducers are updates of Kracauer's Tiller Girls, artificially remodeled online, slapped together from resurrected debris, spammed by offers for penny stock, flat rates, and civil warfare, sleepless with fear and yearning.

The Angel of History

We can find an example of a space of reproduction in the image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) inflated and replicated on a giant balloon inside an artificial entertainment world called Tropical Islands close to Berlin. This structure used to be a factory space for huge zeppelins, when it was still believed that this specific post-socialist region in the former GDR could be economically defillibrated and somehow industrially reanimated. When the enterprise went bust, a Malaysian investor transformed it into a multiexotic spa landscape, complete with replicas of rainforests, jacuzzi look-alikes of Mayan sacrificial pits, as well as giant photoshopped infinity-horizon wallpapers. It is cut-and-paste territory, jumbled, airbrushed, dragged and dropped in 3-D—quintessential bubble architecture with a stunning number of inflatable elements.

Why does this site embody the basic tensions of the age of reproduction? It literally transformed from a space of industrial production to a space of postproduction, showing the aftereffects of production, so to speak. This space is not produced, but reproduced. There is no final cut but ever-morphing

Reproduction of Paul Klee's etching *Angelus Novus* painting at the Tropical Islands theme park near Berlin. The image found in this artificial paradise setting inadvertely evokes Walter Benjamin's citation of the same painting in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

edits, hard cuts, and blurred transitions between different chunks of contained exoticas.

And Klee's *Angelus Novus* is no longer dragged away toward a future horizon as it surveys historical catastrophe. The lateral movement is gone, and with it a movement toward a future. Gone are horizon and linear perspective. Instead, the angel shuttles up and down like an elevator on patrol. It looks down on a paradise without sin and without history, in which the future has been replaced by the promise of temporary upward mobility. The horizon loops. An angel becomes drone; divine violence divested into killing time.

Reverse Shot

But what is the reproduced angel looking at now? What can we edit to its gaze? Who are we, its spectators, and what form will our bodies assume under the angel's gaze?

In a fantastic work from 2009, Natalie Bookchin made a pertinent suggestion. She updated Kracauer's "Mass Ornament" essay as a multichannel video installation. By recombining videos of lonely teenagers dancing in their bedrooms to the gaze of their webcams, Bookchin catapulted precision dance into the age of mediated disconnection. Instead of body parts severed by the stroke of the conveyor belt, atomized bodies relegated to domestic spheres move in unison. Just as the Tiller Girls were equally separated and recombined into mass ornaments by precision dance, so are the teenage protagonists postproduced by the combined forces of social media and enforced occupation synchronized to Lady Gaga soundtracks.

On the one hand, these are the ripped and cut bodies the economy wants to see—isolated in their homes, producing themselves as subjects beset by mortgages and the perpetual guilt of not being fit and lean enough. But on the other hand, it is equally important that the moves are nevertheless fabulous, because energy and grace cannot be cut, ever.

As Kracauer rightly emphasized, we should not shy away from the ornament of multitude and lament some natural state that never existed. Instead, we should embrace it and firmly break through it. One example of how to do this is given by the fact that the version of the video I am describing here is not necessarily Bookchin's at all.[13] A user (who may or may not be the author) uploaded it, removed parts of the music because of YouTube copyright concerns, and replaced it with the sound of laptop keys. In fact, this is the only conceivable soundtrack for this piece. Collective postproduction thus generates not only composite bodies but composite works.

And we have a new important tool in order to do so, namely parallel screens. If a part of the body is cut, we can add a substitute for it on the next screen. We can reedit the cut-off parts of the body to create a body that doesn't exist in reality, only in editing, a body composed of limbs cut from other bodies, limbs deemed superfluous and inconvenient or excessive. We can recompose a new body with these cut-off pieces, a body that combines the bones of the dead and the folly of the natural bodies of the living. A form of life that exists in editing and by editing.

We can reedit the parts that were cut—whole countries, populations, even whole parts of the world, of films and videos that have been cut and censored because they do not conform to ideas of economic viability and efficiency. We can edit them into incoherent, artificial, and alternative political bodies.

A Kiss

But there is an alternative interpretation. Let's take a look at a differently postproduced image of cut and censored bodies. In the film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), a man watches a film roll made from the parts that a projectionist had to censor from fiction films. The result is a reel made of kisses that were too provocative to be shown in public, as they jeopardize ideas of family, property, race, and nation sustained by sexual norms and restrictions.[14]

A reel of ousted kisses. Or is it the same kiss passed on from take to take across different protagonists? A kiss that replicates, travels, spreads uncontrollably; a kiss that creates vectors of passion and affect, of labor, and, potentially, violence?[15] A kiss is an event that is shared and consists precisely of sharing, exchanging, and happening in between bodies. It is an edit articulating affect in ever-different combinations. It creates new junctions and forms between and across bodies, a form that is ever shifting and changing. A kiss is a moving surface, a ripple in time-space. Endless reproductions of the same kiss: each one unique.

A kiss is a wager, a territory of risk, a mess. The idea of reproduction condensed into a fleeting moment. Let's think of reproduction as this kiss, which moves across cuts, from shot to shot, from frame to frame: linking and juxtaposing. Across lips and digital devices. It moves by way of editing, exquisitely flipping around the idea of the cut, redistributing affects and desire, creating bodies joined by movement, love, pain.

1
Many of the ideas in this text are based on dicussions around a seminar called "Crisis" (given in 2009), on the ideas of Alex Fletcher about cinematic cuts, and on my response to Maija Timonen's PhD presentation, which dealt with the idea of the body cut by austerity. Other ideas in the text derive from discussions around a seminar called "junkspace," especially dicussions with Boaz Levin around postproduction. This text is dedicated to Bifo and Helmut Färber.

2
Maurizio Lazzarato, *La fabrique de l'homme endetté: Essai sur la condition néolibérale* (Paris: Éditons Amsterdam, 2011).

3
Samuel Parsons Scott, ed., *The Civil Law: Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions*, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1973), 64.

4
Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

5
In French, the word for "frame" is *cadre*. This implies that the body framed is disciplined and managed, as Jean-Louis Comolli has emphasized. Thank you to Charles Heller for mentioning this work to me.

6
"Coupant, tranchant, et net, comme peut l'être le fil d'un rasoir." Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cadre et corps* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2012), 538.

7
See Helmut Färber's invaluable analysis, "*A Corner in Wheat" von D. W. Griffith 1909: Eine Kritik* (Paris: Helmut Färber, 1992).

8
Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

9
This applies more to its editing than its framing.

10
There is also another important component in the relation of cinematic postproduction to production: its relation to reality. While the cinema of production had—even in the case of completely fictional stories—an indexical link to reality by virtue of, for example, being filmed with analog 35 mm film cameras, digital postproduction completely renegotiates that indexical link to the scene in front of the camera. Contemporary post is the area of the making over of images, not the making of. In postproduction, the indexical link to reality is loosened by including composited backgrounds, animated protagonists, and generally modeling reality. Of course, the indexical link was always rather fictional, but newer technologies permit doing away with it to an unprecedented degree, creating perspectives with the liberty of painting.

11
See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay; How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005).

12
For feminist perspectives on reproductive labor, see the works of Silvia Federici, Arlie Hochschild, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, and Precarias a la Deriva.

13
See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAIjpUATAWg.

14
Thank you to Rabih Mroué for mentioning this film to me.

15
These ideas refer to the kiss mentioned by Boris Buden in the introduction of his book *Zone des Übergangs—Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*: a kiss received by an anonymous black man from the militia man who abducted and probably killed him in the Bosnian War. A kiss which is still out there, being passed on via rape camps and teenage parties, in children's hospitals and bordellos—with love or condescension, ennui or elation, gentle, duplicitous, incisive.