

Research in Film and Video: Artists Using Their Bodies in Cinematic Experiments

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to study the relationship between author and camera, the different aspects of this subtle relationship with technology. From the whole cinema history, many artists and film directors played different roles in front of the camera. Whether they interpret a scenario character, in case of fiction films, or use their body in search of cinematic effects, for video art, they choose to be in both parts of the camcorder at the same time. Why does this “video eye” sometimes turns towards the artist? Is it only meant to explore the outside world of the artist? Or is it a mirror which is sometimes inviting you to take a glance at yourself? The term used was first introduced by Gene Youngblood “The video eye” as it is a subtle metaphor for the main function of the camera.

Why do so many artists use the camera with the purpose of showing themselves or their bodies into video experiments? Is it an expression of narcissism or is it a self-exploring tool? To find the answers for all these questions, the research looks into the playful role that the “video eye” has in experimental films and videos. This role was revealed by examining different kinds of esthetic results in comparison with the artist’s intention. For example, the body mirrored or reflected, seen in its choreography or as a performer in non-narrative films, are aspects which could draw a conclusion about the self-representation aesthetics.

Keywords: Artists’ bodies, camera, reflected bodies, video art.

Artists exploring the medium

Between the mainstream cinema, that depends too much on public responses and the video installation, that is rather seen as a sculptural object,

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one can find the experimental films or video art somewhere in-between. The grey area between what we call the “black box” and the “white cube”² is combining artists with different backgrounds. Some of them are searching for aesthetics, others may be performers or could be involved into conceptual art. What is their relationship with the camera? The famous adage of Marshall McLuhan “*the medium is the message*” makes the focus of this article shift from artists themselves to the actual significance of the medium in a reverse perspective. From this new perspective we can identify three features of the camera which engage the author in performing in front of it: *Camera as pen, camera as mirror, camera as a soul keeper*.

Creation as a research method in the use of audiovisual technology has been present since the beginning of cinema, but it flourished when equipment has become available. The image of the “termite artist” seen as an effervescent, non-conventional, heretic person, not demanding any recognition or proud ideal is revealed by the film critique Manny Farber in 1962. In his article “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art”, Farber compares the two types of films: the mainstream cinema, compared to a white elephant and the author films, blossoming once the 16 mm cameras appeared, compared to termites. In Farber’s view, the termite-like films, made with no budget, are not meant to become famous because they don’t have a commercial interest. They appear out of the pure desire of expression, within the spirit of creative adventure and artistic knowledge, digging secret galleries like termites. The termite keeps digging with small steps into *the walls of the particular* without experiencing the illusion of capturing the truth in a coherent formula.

A peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious unkempt activity.³

2. Gregor Stemmrich, “White Cube, Black Box and Grey Areas: Venues and Values,” in *Art and The Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (New York: Tate Publishing, 2008), 430–43.

3. Manny Farber, *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies, The New Wave* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 135.

The introspective, self-reflexive attitude of experimental artists has its roots in that kind of termite behavior mentioned before. Instead of being inspired by a story or a subject, they find inspiration within the medium itself. By playing with the camera they reveal its character, its expressiveness, finding all the possibilities of transmitting their ideas, their moods and thoughts. Experimental and video artists are as genuine as babies playing with their own hands and fingers. They discover themselves reflected by the monitor. Some of these artists participate to their own work of art only once (generally at the first contact with the medium) while others repeatedly turn to their bodies as means of expression.

Camera as stiló (pen) – artists exploring their minds and dreams.

When Alexandre Astruc published his essay *Du Stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo* in 1948, the emergence of the portable camera was to open a new era in the field of cinematography. The New American Avant-garde film announced the first generation of independent filmmakers, who were not coming from the traditional art background. The 16 mm equipment was affordable and the rise of cine-clubs opened a network of exploratory and experimental film consumption.

The advantages of these new cameras enable filmmakers to communicate their thoughts and feelings, being far away from the practices of entertainment cinema. Artists can link images using the most abstract logic of the mind, thus being able to communicate philosophically. In his essay, Astruc introduces the notion of camera-stilo to express the relationship between the non-narrative film language and the written language. Astruc was a visionary of his time, taking into the consideration that the theorists of the structural cinematic semiotics were to appear only twenty years later. He writes:

By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of camera-stylo (camera-pen).⁴

4. Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," in *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 20.

On this rich ground of ideas about the perspectives of film language, artists would focus especially on montage. One of the most important figures of the New Narrative Avant-garde in America was Maya Deren. In her short but intense life and career she made films about the world of dreams in which she explored the continuity and the discontinuity of montage. In many of her poetic films, the human body moved continuously from one cut to another while the background was changing. What is coming out of this kind of montage? It is poetry of symbols or a strange feeling of a dream-like world. The choreography of the body in frame is very precise, therefore she works with choreographers not with actors. Nevertheless, she plays in many of her films using her gestures and her body movement in a very symbolic way. The films *At Land* and *Meshes of the Afternoon* are examples in which her presence is linked to the revelation of her introspective mind and unleashed fantasies. Thus, the viewer becomes the reader of the artist's mind and obsessions. In other words, she succeeds to write with the camera-pen.

Cameras are mirrors - artists exploring immediacy

Immediate playback is the essential characteristic of video. Starting with the first recorded video tape experiment of Nam June Paik, this medium was soon further explored by artists like Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and many others.

The performance artists started by using video to document their actions but gradually they came to use it as a medium structuring their actions. Joan Jonas and Vito Acconci are only two examples of performance artists who embraced video as a working tool. Focusing on the body movement they perform in front of the camera which becomes the unique silent witness of their actions. When Vito Acconci describes his first video work, he underlines the essential characteristic of the video which is the **immediate playback** "The immediacy of video was the most startling thing. The first video I made tried to make use of that.... I could use video as a mirror"⁵.

5. Apud William Kaizen, "Live on Tape: Video Liveness and the Immediate," in *Art and The Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (New York: Tate Publishing, 2008), 259.

It is not only Vito Acconci who discovers the mirror-like quality of the video monitor. In 1972, Joan Jonas and Bill Viola both speculate the reflected image using real mirrors in their works. *Tape "I"* was the first piece of work of Bill Viola while he was still at university. The letter "I" from the title comes from the word "me" or "myself". This experiment speculates the multiplied realities by positioning the author between the mirror and the monitor.

The same means of expression are used by Joan Jonas in her *Left Side Right Side*. She reveals the esthetics of distortion by using the immediacy of the video both as a mirror and a mask at the same time. She splits her identity into pieces of virtual images which, when put together, are reconstructing her face in a strange, distorted manner.

Another example would be a Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu who activated within a group of artists who were struggling to stay connected to the contemporary art world in a communist country. Despite all the pressures made by the communists for propagandistic art, Ion Grigorescu borrows the video concept of mirroring from Jonas and translates it into his works.

The list of the authors who use the immediacy feature of the mirror-like camera is immense, therefore is worth taking into consideration a well-known article written by Rosalind Krauss named: *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*. She noticed this main function of the camera, which was embraced by many video artists and generalized it to the entire genre of video-art. Referring to Acconci's work *Center* she states:

In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to work of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of entire genre. Yet, what would it mean to say: 'The medium of video is narcissism?'.⁶

It is Rosalind Kraus' statement which intrigued and triggered the writing of this paper. Furthermore, she noticed the center position of the artist's body related to the camera. Artists are situated always in the middle. But this is only one view, as in many cases artists are situated always in between.

6. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976): 208, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778507>.

The works just mentioned define the *reflected image* videos placing the artist's body between the mirror and the camera. The next example is *Horror Film* from 1971, a performance of Malcom Le Grice in which he explores the *projected image* that places the artist's body between the projector and the screen. He performed in front of three colored projectors offering a colorful dynamic show of a superimposing body with shadows. The relationship between film and real-time or real-space is one theme of the artist's research as a theorist. For this reason, he will choose the real event projection, ignoring the option of processed image. While the narrative films were focused on a time-space illusion, eliminating all the activities behind the sets, video would be more interested in showing the real time. From this perspective *Horror Film* belongs to those performances which connect the physical presence with the projected image in a manner launched by Andy Warhol.

"Camera as soul keeper" - the awareness and the retrospective

This instance of the camera was revealed by Bill Viola, one of the most representative figures of video art, when he describes his work *Nantes Triptych* conceived in 1992. He didn't record himself, but he recorded the most intimate moments of his life: the first breath of his son and the last breath of his mother. The spiritual experience that he had, in a moment as short as the blink of an eye, when the beginning and the end were one, was shared with generosity by exhibiting privacy.

In one of his interviews he pointed the fact that the camera which can hold the ephemeral moments is giving us a sort of awareness about our feelings. Most of his works are short moments of body movements, seen in slow-motion, as he would want to catch the moment and hold it as long as possible in order to reveal the mystery of life. Viola explains the impetus behind his belief that cameras are *keepers of the soul* "This medium has a life and it holds lives, and it is not the actual person but it holds it well enough to understand that, like in a photograph, we have some feeling, so the feelings don't die."⁷

7. Christian Lund, *Bill Viola: Cameras Are Keepers of the Soul* (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2011), <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/bill-viola-cameras-are-keepers-souls>.

The relation between the modern society and the recording machine was analyzed by Gene Youngblood the author of an important theory on video and television. He had noticed a similar feature of the camera since the '70s when he wrote his book *Expanded Cinema*.

"We become aware of our individual behavior by observing the collective behavior as manifested in the global videosphere."⁸ He uses, the term Noosphere to define the sum of global information systems that carries the messages to the social organism. In his opinion this so called "the third eye" (the recording machine) has the role of increasing our consciousness being aware of our past and our future. Youngblood labeled this phenomenon *the mood of retrospective man*.

The information explosion is not an open window to the future as much as a mirror of the past catching up with the present. The intermedia network, or global communications grid, taps knowledge resources that always have existed in discrete social enclaves around the planet and saturates them into the collective consciousness.⁹

Research in the contemporary film language: blending perspectives on Romanian film scene

Most of the mentioned artists in this article used the new technology in its infancy. When video was first explored it had no editing possibilities. When film was first explored it didn't have the image control and the immediacy of the video. So, it is evident that these two different tools have been exploited in different ways. Now, in the digital era, film and video have merged, being characterized by both features and also more evolved capacities.

The first era of the "laboratory for moving images", was as simple as the Modernism. Artists used their bodies to communicate ideas, or to find new aesthetics for dynamic images. Before using the medium as a tool for precise purposes or effects, artists inquired the medium in a more playful way. In their works there is a strong relationship with the medium, functioning in both directions. By these introspective representations, artists were to open

8. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P Dutton & Co. Inc., 1970), 78.

9. Youngblood, 66.

a path for the multitudes of ways a camera could be used. Today and from now on the film and video are to emphasize the usage well beyond the narcissism.

In order to draw the conclusions of the self-exploring relation between the author and the camera and the way they are integrated in the language of the film, the focus should be moved from the edge of cinematic experiments to the cinema industry. We will keep focus on the young Romanian filmmakers who lately grabbed the attention of the European film critiques. The youngest director on the field of Romanian documentary film, Cristina Haneș, won the *Pardino d'Oro* prize at Locarno Film Festival in 2017 with her debut short documentary *António e Catarina*. Her film is based on an intimate dialogue between the author when 26, behind the camera, and the protagonist in his 70's, apparently having nothing in common with each other. All at once, she leaves the camera on the tripod entering the film scene, thus, breaking the rule of the screenplay setup. Her engaged presence switched the balance from a confessional portrait to a close relation, near but not too intimate, between two different people sharing the same room and camera. In this case the storyline was made by the camera, passively active towards the subject and the author.

The winner of the Golden Bear at Berlinale 2018 is the most recent and sophisticated film from the perspective of the relationship between camera and the artist. It is not an experimental film, although it pushes the boundaries of its genre and rises controversy about intimacy. It uses elements of experimental film with a very clear purpose and awareness. Adina Pintilie's film, *Touch Me Not*, is situated in-between fiction and documentary, called by the author a research upon intimacy. There could be spotted mixed perspectives of the three camera features mentioned above in the article.

The first perspective, the camera as a mirror is capturing the opening scene when Adina Pintilie, the author, becomes a part of the film. She reflects herself on a recording device in a superimposition aesthetics between the person and the camera. Construction and deconstruction of the recording device at the beginning and at the end of the film, has a symbolical meaning of a game played between reality and illusion. Those two worlds are challenging the cinema conventions. The world behind the camera is seen as a fake comfort zone, whereas, opposed to what we are used to see, the world in front of the camera is more authentic. Its heroes face whole heartedly their deepest desires that is close to fear and anxiety.

The camcorder is a symbolic borderline between those two worlds that are crossed not only by the author of the film, but also by the main character Laura Benson. Adina Pintilie switches the role for a short period of time with her confessional partner, leaving Laura to watch her behind the camera. By exposing herself, the director of the film becomes part of the same psychological experiment. There is no distinction between the crew, the actors and the story. Everything that happened in front of the audience as a documented research upon the human intimacy is leaving the camera to become a *soul keeper* thus becoming the second perspective of the three features.

Camera as pen is the third perspective in Adina Pintilie's film and maybe the most innovative, experimental aspect that deserves to be discussed. Going back to Astruc's visionary article where he considered the language of the film not only a medium of expression but also a tool for research, his words are meant to become reality nowadays: "Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express satisfactory."¹⁰

The film medium in hands of Adina Pintilie becomes a research tool. The screenings of *Touch me not* are followed by a series of discussion between the crew of the film and the audience. This program of debates, entitled *The body politics*, is initiated by the author to engage the audience in this anthropological quest upon intimacy. Her new concept linked to the practice of cinema, is reframing not only the feature film, taking it out of the meaning of entertainment, but also enlarging the boundaries of documentary filmmaking. Thus the author is not only reflecting a reality, but also an enquiry of hypothesis that are meant to be discovered together with the audience. This research is not aiming to conclude but to start raising questions.

The second era, the digital networking videos, is as complex as the Postmodernism. How will artists express themselves within this new medium which is strongly connected to the internet? I think it is premature to categorize while we are still in the middle of the transformational process and the whole picture is characterized by a rapid innovation, change and adaptation. This technology is now in the hands of everyone like a pen or a pencil. The video

10. Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style," 20.

environment was generated by the so called 'social media' network which was coined as Web2.0. Social media platforms give users unlimited space for storage and a plenty of tools to organize, promote, and broadcast their thoughts, opinions and behaviors to others. The democratization of the media distribution system allows users with no professional education in the field of art to enter "this laboratory for moving images which they generated from materials of everyday media and pop culture."¹¹ The Internet is used mainly as a mirror. YouTube's slogan, "Broadcast Yourself" has unleashed a video sharing universe. How artists will use and play with this Agora of media is another quest for a continuous search from now on.

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