

Ilka Becker, "The Image as Revenant: Retroactivity and Remediation in the Works of T. J. Wilcox,"
Texte zur Kunst, December 2009, pp. 126-131

ILKA BECKER

THE IMAGE AS REVENANT

Retroactivity and Remediation in the Works of T. J. Wilcox



The talk of an historical event always promises a moment of immediacy – a notion that can hardly be maintained in the face of a series of historical media changes. It is precisely the mediality of events that is becoming increasingly visible and itself the subject of history. Since 2000 a term has been coined for this: "remediation".

In the following, Ilka Becker makes this conception productive with regard to the work of U.S. American artist T.J. Wilcox. Wilcox works not only with veritable media events such as the "Rocky Horror Picture Show", but also reflects on the relation of film, history and reenactments.

Academic art history traditionally and still today follows the idea of a linear progression of works, events and epochs. When talking about the specific media used in a given work, oftentimes concepts are evoked that are inherent to the discipline's classic notions of genre. The chronology of technological developments (photography – film – video – digital media) can be conveniently embedded into a teleological narrative in which the materiality and functionality of optical apparatuses guarantees the facticity of a historic chronology. Even advanced theories still have a problem with intermedial art forms, particularly with installations.¹ For example, in the recent writings of Rosalind Krauss the specificity of artistic works is not identified vis-à-vis their technical support but tied to their historically changeable practice of dealing with media conventions. Still, intermedial art forms are generally considered

to be in cohorts with capitalism and its globalized media images. In the work of James Coleman, William Kentridge and others, we can find a counterconcept, an updated version of medium-specificity, aimed at the self-differential character of media and their rearticulation.²

In his work the New York based artist T. J. Wilcox focuses on this neuralgic point at the intersection of media specificity and hybrid media techniques. Wilcox uses historic characters citations and fictional, partly autobiographically motivated narratives, analogue and digital procedures, montages and installations. The re-articulation of media becomes a retrospective process in his work, relating back to the historic modus operandi of artistic media, particularly that of film. Wilcox' treatment of history and temporality connects to the concept of retroactivity, thus inviting a discussion about historical and media theoretical models beyond the attempt to salvage modernist ideas of medium specificity.

RETROACTIVITY: FACT AND FICTION

Among the insights of poststructuralist art history is that activity of the historian is always one of „making history“³, an activity defined by its retroactive effects.⁴ The task of the historian is therefore certainly not confined to merely reconstructing a continuous process of historic events. The actors creating such a history are constantly being recast, their dialogues rewritten. Even the seemingly unshakable pillars of the architectures of the factual – dates – are subject to retroactive effects. They fall out of a chronological structure and become fragments of overlapping, historic temporalities.⁵

Already French philosopher of time Henri Bergson, whose theses entered the contemporary debate on cinema in the 1980s by way of Gilles Deleuze's discussions of his work,⁶ offers an example of this historic dynamic: He emphasizes that "(...) the romantic aspect of classicism" was created only "through the retroactive effect of romanticism" on classicism.⁷ Bergson compares this effect to the image of a cloud which can be

seen as a form only through the act of projection. Retroactivity does not mean that the present is superior to the past (that it can claim a prerogative of interpretation) but rather that it produces and reveals new past times and (on its way through these past times) its own present time. Even if Bergson himself was skeptical of photography and film, optical media figure prominently in his critique of linear concepts of history. In the 20th century making history becomes a central activity of technical images not least because of the documentary film, news and reality formats: according to Hayden White, technical images create historic events by becoming visible as mediated events. But the past in these events is an imagined place where the historic text as well as images are subject to a blending of fact and fiction.⁹ White is interested in incorporating the photographic and filmic image into the idea of the historic narrative. Here he follows Walter Benjamin's idea that the past and the present produce, in the dialectic image, a flickering or erratically appearing constellation.¹⁰ White calls this mode of representation "historiophoty",¹¹ a monstrous term to provide theoretical significance to the visual aspects of producing historical knowledge. The reference to Benjamin shows however that neither narrative nor image, nor their different modes of representation, provide reliable references for the course of history. Rather they create relationships to what is past while simultaneously appropriating the present. The creation of constellations replaces realistic representation.¹² It is tempting to extend White's argument and use film theory to understand the image itself not as substance but as a relationship creating historic coherence.¹³

REMIEDIATION: TO IMITATE, TO REPEAT, TO PERFORM

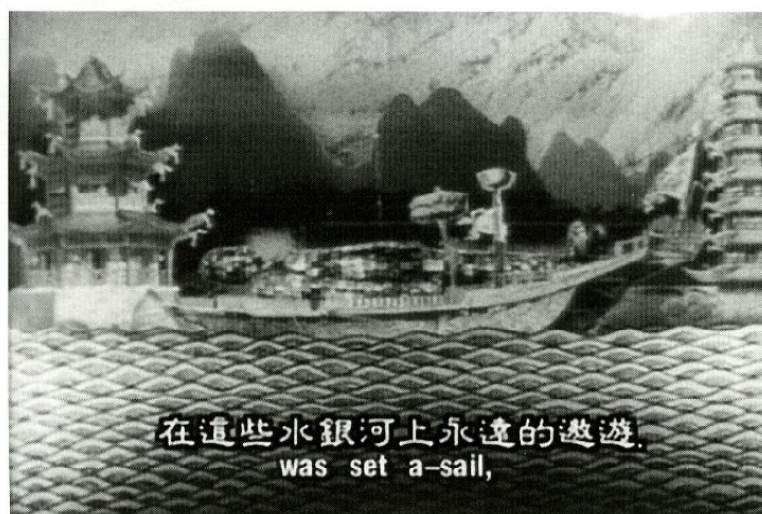
Here, it is important to point to a recent debate about the media-theoretical implications of retroactive processes. It revolves around the concept of remediation first developed by US-American media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to analyze digital media. In a similar way the above mentioned retroactive dynamics, this

debate does not presuppose a given medium but focuses on performative processes.¹⁴ In her discussion of Bolter and Grusin, Andrea Seier describes this as follows: "Media are understood as open processes of mediation that are forced to relate to, deal with and act against each other. The emphasis in this definition is on performance ("a medium is that which remediates") while performance and presentation coincide. The process of remediation is simultaneously one of refashioning, i.e. remodeling other media or the medium itself. The way in which old media are imitated, repeated and presented therefore marks the novelty of media."¹⁵ Media theorists like McLuhan and Kittler see old media as antecedent to new ones and emphasize their continued existence. In contrast, the topic here is how media constantly appropriate, alter and arrange constellations which create relationships to the past and make it visible at the same time. In discussions about aesthetic modernity, references of a work to its own medium are usually discussed under the rubric of self-referentiality. Not so in the case of Bolter/Grusin, who consider these references as acts of remediation, moderating the relationships between adoration, rivalry or competitiveness.¹⁶ Seier reminds us that the concept of remediation is not easily exhausted: Film, for example, does not gain its identity by serving as an already defined foil for the performance of 'older' media. Rather we need to ask how film constantly constitutes itself anew via these references.¹⁷ This question promises to shed light on the discussion about artistic approaches, transcending the modernist concept of self-referentiality which seems to taint the work of Rosalind Krauss. Within the concept of self-referentiality, remediation would be nothing but one option of relating and positioning among others, and does not epitomize what constitutes art and how it substantially differs from commercial media formats.

REENACTMENT: TECHNIQUES OF BENDING TIME

T.J. Wilcox' video "Midnite Movie" (2001) can be seen as a prime example of the filmic reflection

T. J. Wilcox, „The Death and
Burial of the First Emperor
of China“, 1997, Filmstills



on a performative practice in which the referent – in this case “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” – is appropriated and newly constituted. For decades, fans in late-night shows worldwide have reenacted mostly the transvestite scenes of the 1975 film.¹⁸ “Midnite Movie” is a montage of these sequences, focusing on backstage footage and free dance improvisation, mainly of the “Time Warp”, against the background of the opening credits on the big screen. These scenes are reenacted, again in front of the screen, by amateur actors whose costumes resemble those of the film’s protagonists. To mark an autonomous visual level in his video, Wilcox edits short sequences of the “Time Warp” and creates the acoustic impression of a skipping record. The images, however, are taken from different performances. Some takes also feature the city of the performance (like “Milan” or “Tacoma”) in the blood dripping, gothic letters of the opening credits in front of shots of the actors. One can therefore speak of a cross fading of two filmic levels, in which the protagonists who are imitating the original film screening blend in with the viewers applauding both levels of performance. Here, Wilcox uses and explicitly cites the montage idea of Jean-Luc Godard, which is not limited to the mere clash of two images or shots.¹⁹ Godard locates montage in both production and reception: It is the viewer her- or himself “defining the third point alongside both images”.²⁰

“Midnite Movie” has to be understood in relation to practices of reenactment as they have also been used by various artistic approaches in recent years. In these, a retroactive understanding of history becomes apparent, for example the re-stagings of performances and speeches from the art world, (e.g. Andrea Fraser), reenacted scenes from films (e.g. Pierre Huyghe) or screen adaptations of historical reenactments (e.g. Jeremy Deller). Strictly speaking reenactment means to stage or produce again. In recent years, the term has established itself as a generic term to describe a highly authentic and detailed depiction of historic events by non-professional actors. More specifically, reenactment refers to the re-staging or

T. J. Wilcox, „Midnite Movie“,
2001, Filmstills





T.J. Wilcox, „The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich“, 1999, Filmstill



T.J. Wilcox, „The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)“, 1996, Filmstills

reproduction of historic events, of series of events (criminology) or of ways of life (living history) as theatric events with different participants, often mediated mostly in filmic form.²¹

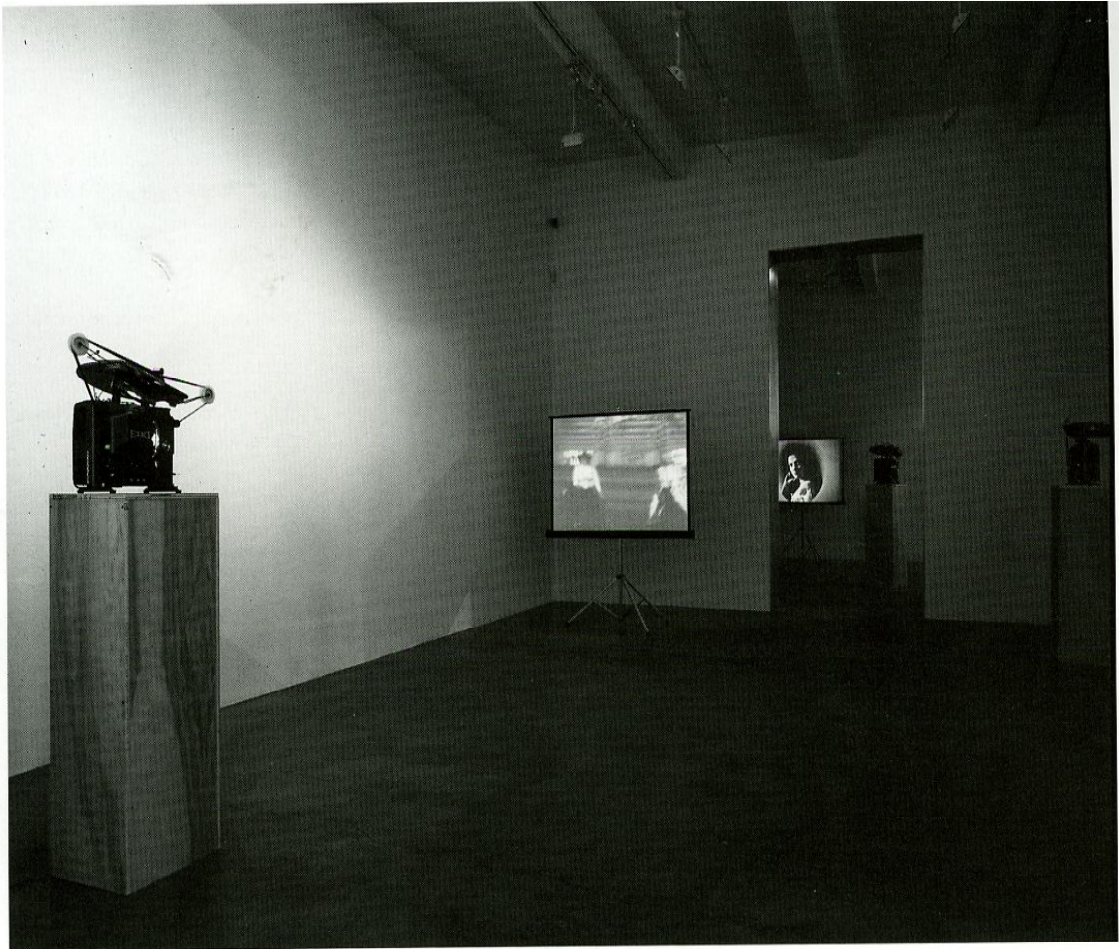
Obviously, reenactment in Wilcox' "Midnite Movie" does not refer to a specific, historic situation. In line with the concept of remediation, the film consciously refers to a media event which itself can be repeated indefinitely.²² The history of showing this film is transformed with every update and in this way it is a retroactive history, as the most recent show always invites a new reading or writes its own history. In his film collage, Wilcox highlights this via consecutive, fragmented sequences of the different sites of performance. Instead of seeing the reenacted scene in its entirety, the technique of montage itself becomes visible. Montage can be understood as a "dialectic of construction and destruction" in the interest of "a heightened anti-illusionism plus removal and destruction of the old idyll".²³ In this case, Wilcox deconstructs one aspect along with the technical dispositif: the eccentric emphasis of reenactment itself and the accompanying attempts of the actors to perform – with their own bodies – the filmic construction of freely selectable gender identities. From the perspective of Wilcox' video, this practice can be experienced as an update – every new show is a reenactment of all the previous amateur performances of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show", those in the past and those yet to come. Repeating a paradigm of repetition is already inscribed into technical reproduction as such, yet here it is subjected to a playful examination.²⁴ Not coincidentally, the protagonist Frank N. Furter is a modification of Dr. Frankenstein, who breeds his creation not by heterosexual reproduction but in a laboratory. One could conclude that the productivity of reenactment created in film lies in a minimal shift. Or to quote the "Time Warp" in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show": "It's just a jump to the left!"

REMEMBRANCE: IMAGES, POST MORTEM

Also beyond "Midnite Movie", Wilcox is interested in forms of reenactment. However, they

are less obvious as they refer more to the staging of mediality itself. Since 1996, Wilcox has been working with montages, combining filmic and photographic found footage with his own 8 mm sequences and animated material, using video postproduction before finally creating a 16 mm copy. In his installations this copy is projected onto walls or freestanding screens. The noise of the projector becomes part of the installation itself since it is centrally located and accessible. This layout consciously breaks with the black-box situation of large-format and quasi-cinematographic video projections. Wilcox experiments with the artistic re-articulation of obsolete technologies and with references to their artistic and social adaptations, commonly used in Expanded Cinema, experimental or amateur film. Besides exhibiting the technique of projection, Wilcox's work also refers to the moment of adding value through a time-consuming artistic process. In his 1997 film "The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China" the meticulously designed animation sequences resemble historic drawings, an example of linking manually connoted production to advanced media techniques. The complex and tedious transfer processes between different media formats are emphasized. Thus, the recourse to filmic montage and traditional collage can be understood as a strategy of appropriating the means of artistic production: In the era of postproduction with personal computers, the work of montage can be regarded as kind of mediated memory work. This technique relates to remediation in as much as the media techniques themselves become objects of artistic appropriation. In so doing, they enter into (tentative) relationships free of referentiality. Various steps of analogue and digital postproduction leave traces, often resulting in ghostly, faded or grainy images. They refer to the process of development but one which we are not able to reconstruct from the results.

The work of Wilcox is characterized by suggestive and subjective biopic montages of historic characters revolving around closely connected



T.J. Wilcox, „Garlands“, Metro Pictures, New York, 2005, Ausstellungsansicht

themes of fashion, extraordinary life and death, the living body and the inorganic world. Most of the films are based on opulently presented stories which at first seem remote and implausible. For example, in "The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)" (1996) Wilcox tells the story of the queen's alleged plan²⁵ to escape the guillotine in a luxurious carriage designed according to her extravagant wishes. The plan disappears into its own Rococo refinement – the obsession with form, with fashion and materials, the pursuit of detail all ultimately are given more time than actually escaping death. The design of the upholstery in the carriage is more important than the actual escape. The film dialectically contrasts the aristocratic enjoyment of wasting one's life with the economy of labor. In "The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich" (1999) a female voice-over from the perspective of Marlene Dietrich comments on her fictitious funeral ceremony while stills and slow motion shots of Paris sights, celebrity portraits and TV footage of John F. Kennedy's funeral are juxtaposed. The spoken text is based on Dietrich's anecdotal fantasies about her own funeral.²⁶ Here, Wilcox breaks with the generic law of autobiography by constructing a character who does not comment on her past. Instead, she designs cinematographic images of future events after her own death. However, the voice of the dead diva suggests a post mortem narrative. This creates the impression of a figure who has outlived herself and who now melancholically comments on the last triumphal procession of her cinematically deformed body as a corpse. Among other things, Dietrich comments on the black Balenciaga dress which she will be wearing in the coffin. She also refers to the camp reception of her persona, a result of her own gender performance: "Gays from around the world have arrived. They push through the masses to stand closer to the pretty foreign legionnaires. They all have copied costumes from my film. With their feather boas and small, veiled hats they look like me in 'Shanghai Express'". Looking back to the travesties of "Midnite Movie", Dietrich's self-reflection as a queer

icon reveals a central aspect in Wilcox's work: The deconstruction of history and the emphasis of fictitious and flamboyant moments through procedures of remediation are inseparable from a queer reading of the references. Starting from a position of "de-identifying repetition of socially dominant gender ideals" they are associated with camp as a historic articulation of the gay subculture.²⁷

Reenactments are not limited to the performers in "Midnite Movie". They can also affect the technical devices themselves as we can see in Wilcox's "Garlands", a series of short visual vignettes in production since 2003. Like garlands (hence the title) they are composed of different types of images: found footage, photographs, postcards, animations, as well as reenacted and newly shot scenes by Wilcox. As loops they present a kind of self-referentiality by infinitely repeating the gesture of self-reference. The first of these films were shown in an installation in 2007.²⁸ A line of home movie projectors rattled loudly in the gallery space. It was impossible to view the films all at once explicitly prompting viewers to "zap"²⁹ between sequences, thus becoming memory engineers. This layout entails similar effects as in television viewing "when effects between zapped sequences can occur".³⁰ Viewing thus becomes a form of postproduction, reflecting Godard's description of montage. Although not part of the film's audio track, the noise of the projectors influences the reception of the films as an acoustic component of the visual material. Therefore, the devices become as much parts of the montage framework as the freestanding screens and the viewers of the exhibition. They themselves become actors of a mediated reenactment and protagonists of a remediated historic reference.

(Translation: Michael Lattek)

Notes

- 1 Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt/M. 2003, pp. 82–101.
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 1999, pp. 7, 53, 56.

- 3 Peter Lambert/Phillipp Schofield (l.cs.), *Making History: an Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, New York 2004.
- 4 See for example the discussion about the reception of Duchamp in Martha Buskirk/Mignon Nixon (l.cs.), *The Duchamp Effect. Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, Cambridge, MA/London 1996. See also Ilka Becker, *Agencement und Amusement. Duchamp, Slapstick und retroaktive Geschichten der Moderne*, in: Ilka Becker/Michael Cuntz/Astrid Kusser (l.cs.), Munich 2008, pp. 95–123.
- 5 Patrick Sjöberg, *The World in Pieces. A Study in Compilation Film*, Stockholm 2001, p. 149.
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis 1989.
- 7 Henri Bergson, "Einleitung", in: *Ibid.*, *Denken und schöpferisches Werden. Aufsätze und Vorträge [1939]*, Hamburg 1993, pp. 21–41, here: p. 35.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Hayden White, "Literary Theory and Historical Writing", in: Hayden White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Baltimore 1999, p. 8.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Frankfurt/M. 1971–89, Vol. 5, p. 589.
- 11 cited in Sjöberg, *World in Pieces*, loc. cit., p. 150.
- 12 Olaf Berg, "Film als historische Forschung", in: Richard Heigl/Katja Naumann/Philip Starzel/Petra Ziegler (l.cs.), *Kritische Geschichte. Positionen und Perspektiven*, Leipzig 2005, pp. 61–86, here: p. 15.
- 13 Alexander Kluge, "Bild, kinematographisch", in: Alexander Kluge, *In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*, edited by Christian Schulte, Berlin 1999, p. 153.
- 14 Jay David Bolter/Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge/MA 2000, p. 65.
- 15 Andrea Seier, *Remediatisierung. Die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien*, Münster 2007, p. 71.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 80
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 81
- 18 Since 1977 the Lichtspiele in Munich has been showing the film regularly.
- 19 T. J. Wilcox in conversation with the author, New York, December 2007.
- 20 Volker Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie. Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard*, Bielefeld 2006, p. 72.
- 21 Inke Arns, "History will repeat itself. Strategien des Reenactment in der zeitgenössischen (Medien-)Kunst und Performance", in: *History Will Repeat Itself*, edited by Inke Arns/Gabriele Horn, exh. cat. Hardware MedienKunstVerein Dortmund / KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin, Frankfurt/M. 2007, pp. 36–63. See also: *Life, Once More. Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Sven Lütticken, exh. cat. Witte de With – Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam 2005.
- 22 See also the definition of event in Jacques Derrida, *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen*, Berlin 2003, pp. 58f
- 23 Diedrich Diederichsen, "Montage / Sampling / Morphing. Zur Trias von Ästhetik / Technik / Politik", http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/bild-ton-.relationen/montage_sampling_morphing/6/, accessed on October 15th, 2009.
- 24 Wenn sonst nichts klappt. *Wiederholung wiederholen*, edited by Sabeth Buchmann et al., Hamburg/Berlin 2005, pp. 8., and Gilles Deleuze, *Differenz und Wiederholung*, Munich, p. 367.
- 25 Wilcox cites the work of Stefan Zweig as a source. Marie-Antoinette. *Bildnis eines mittleren Charakters*, Frankfurt/M. 2003.
- 26 the biography by Maria Riva. *Meine Mutter Marlene*, Munich 1994.
- 27 Mirjam Thomann, "'Illegal fun/under the sun'. Zur desidentifikatorischen Wiederholung des Camp", in: *Wiederholung wiederholen*, loc. cit, pp. 61–70, here: p. 66.
- 28 The work was on display as part of the exhibit "Talking Pictures, Theatralität in zeitgenössischen Film- und Videoarbeiten", August 18 – November 4, 2007, curated by Doris Krystof at K21, Düsseldorf.
- 29 "Docking Station", T. J. Wilcox in conversation with the channel of the Stedelijk Museum, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKSZLyh-BoI>, 08.11.2009, as well as an interview with Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, in: T. J. Wilcox, "MATRIX 198", June 16 – July 28, 2002, University of California Berkeley Art Museum, http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/images/art/matrix/198/MATRIX_198_TJ.Wilcox.pdf, last accessed on November, 8th, 2009.
- 30 Hartmuth Winkler, "Zapping. Ein Verfahren gegen den Kontext", <http://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/zapping.html>, accessed on October 1st, 2009.