



I'm not like everybody else
The Kinks

E che, sono forse al mondo per
realizzare delle idee?
Max Stirner

(No ideas but in things)
W.C. Williams

MENU

YOU ARE HERE: / [HOME \(/\)](#) / [ARCHIVE \(/INDEX.PHP/30-ARCHIVE\)](#) / [LFU/23 \(/INDEX.PHP/56-ARCHIVE/LFU-23\)](#) / JONATHAN BELLER / THE CINEMATIC PROGRAM

JONATHAN BELLER / The Cinematic Program

What is cinema now? Let us spend a few hundred words on three contemporary films before giving one possible answer:

In *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People* (Thomas Allen Harris, 2014) Harris curates an extraordinary re-collecting and thus re-distribution of images from the disappeared photographic archive of African American history -- and lives -- by drawing on marginalized, hidden and ignored photographic sources, including the amazing life-long work of curator and author Deborah Willis among others. Here, in a film partially composed from photographs (McLuhan: “The content of a medium is always another medium.”), it is not so much the sometimes more familiar protest images but the images of everyday (including holiday) life, family, love and beauty that at once indict the poverty of the hegemonic archive that passes for the record of American experience and (re)call the spectator to rich, complex, loving, expressive worlds that logically had to exist in some way but also have been long denied in the rampant and vicious American suppression of black life.

Citizenfour (Laura Poitras, 2014), is a real-time chronicle of heroic NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden directed by radical filmmaker Laura Poitras. Poitras was chosen by Snowden himself from NSA watch-lists (that kept her under surveillance and regularly detained her at airports) to document the release of secret NSA documents to the world through journalists Glenn Greenwald, Ewan MacAskill, Jeremy Scahill, and others during secret meetings in Hong Kong. The film is a calculated assault on the clandestine and illegal global surveillance of “anyone anywhere” that is clearly shown to mean everyone everywhere. Media are organized against the “Free-World” media war on us all.

In *Norte: The End of History* (Lav Diaz, 2013), Diaz encodes and transmits affects and temporalities from the subaltern Philippine socius, from members of a class and participants in a history who while otherwise unrepresented (beyond statistical measures undertaken by governments and economists in order to sell-off their own populations vis-à-vis various derivatives), nonetheless underlie the world system as both consequence and condition of possibility. A massive automobile accident on a throughway cutting through the countryside provides the poetic condensation and crystallization of the unspeakable and nearly unendurable suffering that rends the temporalities and narratives of subaltern life. The temporal, experiential and aesthetic are all engaged for the low-intensity but nonetheless fatal warfare that is global post-colonial class struggle.

These films, exemplary in their efforts to intervene in, retransmit and de-/recode social process and thus geopolitics are programs – in every sense of that word – whether or not their makers recognize the fact. In this they are also exemplary modes of search, retrieval, storage and data visualization. They are, in short, platforms for the instrumental organization of information, platforms that are also algorithms with regard to information processing. Arguably, and this is the argument here, what they are as texts and methods only makes sense in the context of a world of ambient programs.

What is implied by this claim? First, that on the surface at least representation is everything it has always been (there is no obvious reduction in the capacities of words, images, symbols or signs) and more. All the experiences of cinema, the aesthetic highs, the horror, abjection, desire, identification, egoism, psychopathology, sublimity, what-have-you are still more or less available; however, these affects have become more thoroughly instrumentalized as both ideological and economic vectors. This instrumentalization of “representation” by cinema, as I have argued elsewhere (“cinema brings the industrial revolution to the eye”), is not just an incidental feature of the emergence of cinema as means of representation in relation to its investors, banks and states; it is almost paradigmatic.

I say almost, because the real media paradigm now is “social-media” (necessarily written with a hyphen), but, this emergent “interface” that sublates “the image” and “the sign” must be understood as itself an evolution of what was cinema – an importation and slight but critical reorganization of the logistics of attention, celebrity, desire, power, feedback, informatics and capitalization, made possible by the coupling of the techniques cultured by capitalized cinema

to digital technologies. If cinema marks the industrialization of the senses, and the conversion of attentional capacities into value productive labor, then the ever more precise calculus and refined granularity of the digitized sensory input (and output) marks the full cybernetic incorporation of the nervous system and its body/ies. Meaning to say, there is no postfordism without the value-extractive programs developed by and as media forms over the long twentieth century. Means of representation becoming means of production is its *sine qua non*.

Second (and leaving aside here the metaphysical implications regarding being, presence, writing and the like) programs function ambiently, as organizational engines mediating among the various apparatuses functioning in a capitalist media ecology. Vilem Flusser tells us that the essential feature of the apparatus is to make some aspects of thought automatic. The apparatus is the extension of concepts into materials with the purpose of embodying a calculating function. Ultimately, there are no firm distinctions between the apparatuses and their programs. The fact that homo sapiens have given over whatever sovereignty the species once believed it had to the integrated system of apparatus of which said species has now become a mere component, means only that the sedimentation of thought and practice in the built environment –what was once known as “culture” -- as “machines” and “infrastructure” has achieved a new order of managerial autonomy and fate-determining power. “Human” consciousness, to say nothing of “humans” were never separate from their *techné*, but rather were the product of a co-development of ideality and materialization that dates back to the origins of fire, tools, images, architecture, and writing. If for a few short centuries it seemed that “we” had autonomy, this idealization is no longer logically tenable and of only marginal utility. Until at least, we understand that we are (also) the machines.

If representation persists in its first function of sense-making while also being sublated as a means of cybernetic incorporation, if, in short, we have traversed a divide between image and interface (page and screen, photograph and cellphone), such that all that was mobilized by and as cinema has melted into computation and the distinction between humanism and informatics has collapsed, then the role of the film user, whether director, actor, spectator or critic, has become one of two things: functionary or programmer. Readers of Flusser here will recognize a slight modification of the categories functionary and photographer along with an admittedly polemical disambiguation of the lines dividing the two categories. The functionary would accept the terms of the computational apparatus, in short, allow themselves to be brute-force programmed, while the programmer would seek to encode anti-totalitarian agency in a now fully programmed and programmable socius.

The significant difference here, and the reason I chose the three films mentioned above, lies not only in their programmers encoding of anti-totalitarianism, but in their deviation from the very forms or modalities of agency already encoded in the bio-mechanical infrastructure to the extent that these latter codifications (as genre, ideology, etc.) overcode most expressive iterations. To be more specific, among the things I am talking about here are normative frameworks of race, gender, sexuality, nation, desire, temporality, history, subjectivity, nature, creativity, etc., outmoded “concepts,” as Benjamin so presciently told us with respect to some of these, whose unrestricted deployment leads to a processing of data in the fascist sense. Postmodern sublimity and fetishism are among the outputs of such data processing as are numerous scripts for essentializing performances.

Let us make no mistake, these normative “concepts” are in fact encoded (and recoded through feedback) in the historically worked up materiality and its endemic practices of our geopolitical conjuncture. These concepts (which, for example, script performances of whiteness or masculinity) are in our programs and our machines, which if you follow me here, clearly also means in our “images” and in “us.” If as Godard once quipped a thirty-second advertisement understands montage better than Eisenstein, today the equivalent advert understands the aesthetics of fascism better than Leni Riefenstahl. Just as “culture” or “education” once structured concrete individuals and their identifications and capacities, the world-media system of programmatic images and signals with which we constantly interface in the media-environment, organizes interiority, the imagination, linguistic capacity and thus thought. So much of what appears to be within or endemic, is actually the result of mediation, and crucially, of capitalist mediation. Thus that which feels to be unmarked, value-neutral, factual, universal or “the self,” is inseparable from both globalization and the globalization of dispossession. This is correct, with certain qualifications, at every wealth-indexed level of technical integration in the global economy as can be easily understood by clearly recognizing that the specific relation one has to the instruments of planetary life largely overdetermine one’s potential.

There is not much a writer can do in an essay of this length to prevent its wholesale conversion into easily digestible information. We have all been taught how to read and remember, and very often, such media pedagogy does not function in accord with the general interest but rather secures the newspeakful liquidation of contrarian ideas. *Norte, Citizenfour, Through a Lens Darkly* subtly reconfigure some of the spatio-temporal, technical, and archival logistics of capitalist violence, and in doing so dissent from the regulatory programs of capital – at least at

one level. Their programs distribute themselves across various networks, altering the mechanics of sense-making, converting sense into non-sense and vice-versa, clearly resolving what passes for normal as forms of violence.

Such films enable forms of information processing that are part of the multi-authored, long-enduring struggle to break the program of inequality that is still probably most accurately denominated by the word “Capital.” Capitalism, with its massive conversion of qualities into quantities was always already digital, computational culture. The generalized digitization of the environment -- by capital’s commodity-form and now by capitalized computation on digital computers running in the background of every aspect of life -- would realize the seemingly unlimited expansion and penetration of its program. It is this appearing to be without limits, that demands the critical attention of today’s programs and programmers, be it by means of cinema or by any means available.

Jonathan Beller