

Catastrophe Films On the Iconicity of Moving Signs

I.

A medium such as writing cannot be observed directly. It can be disclosed only by observing forms: we read not letters, but words. We see neither twenty-four nor forty-eight single frames per second, but a film. At the moment when the film being projected breaks, or we read a word like “rudgdgufuzrizr,” the formless, the medium, pops up – or seems to – although in turn, it is revealed as merely form. So it is revealed only briefly, at a moment of transition; a blurriness that can be understood as the *kairos* of the medium, “as a momentum in which the medium has its epiphany, its ecstasy.”¹

In this spirit, *Schriftfilme* can be understood as “catastrophe films,” as graphic ecstasies, since they dramatize writing as it is “outside itself.” Behind the “disruptive events” of the likes of Eduardo Kac (see archive, pp. XX–XX), we sense the medium that shows itself to us in the transition from one form to the next. The focus is not on what language says, but on language itself as the possibility of saying, and hence its function as a medium – the fact that something forms and reforms, that it *happens*. The entire field of written communication transforms into a state of affairs that can be perceived, but can no longer be put in order by means of critical reading.²

One can, of course, also talk about a *Schriftfilm* or about Eduardo Kac’s “holopoetry,” the liquefactions of meaning realized in them, and whose organic miniatures of letters can be problematized – and that is precisely what happens. Further communication can be stimulated in this way. Except that communication *about Schriftfilme* is not the same as communication *through* them. A *Schriftfilm* engages the viewer with feats of perception that avoid precisely the yes-no that is typical of language, and they do so by means of a choreography of moving letters, via words that step out of line, with which something collides, that surface and sink down, come and go, thus negating their own character as signs.

One can be touched in a positive or negative way when Kac’s holopoem *LILITH* (BR, 1987/1989) turns out to be a narrative about the patriarchy. But in the overall complex of the perception of his “fluid signs” – such as the constant transformations of HE, HELL, EL, ELLE – it is not about his intentions, about the clear distinction of acceptance or rejection (HE yes, HELL no), but about the visual event, about visibility and hence about the mediality of letters themselves. The highly stabile entities we know as words turn out to be unstable and mutable, transforming into events of very brief duration.



LILITH, hologram, realization: Eduardo Kac with Richard Kostelanetz, BR, 1987/1989

- 1 See Peter Fuchs, *Das Maß aller Dinge. Eine Abhandlung zur Metaphysik des Menschen*, Velbrück Wissenschaft, Weilerswist, 2007, p. 207; translated from the German by Steven Lindberg.
- 2 See Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, CA, 2000, p. 141.

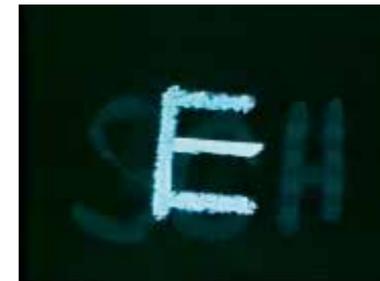
II

Whereas the image seen directs the gaze to the full complexity of what is being perceived (and hence to the present), the sentence read directs the gaze to the past (what has already been read) and to the future (what will be read).

Likewise, someone seeing a film – that is, directing her or his attention to the full complexity of what is being perceived – must understand what has already been processed in a new way, given what will come later: In a video, we follow how the word “taxi” rushes between tall buildings of letters, and adjust our vision accordingly. We *foresee* – and at the same moment, look back. But that happens largely unconsciously. Consciousness is too slow to keep up with perception,³ and *Schriftfilme* make use of this difference in time. The complexity and continuity of perception and the sharpness and discontinuity of the use of signs are at cross-purposes. Signs are conveyed directly by strong contrasts and striking forms.



Word Movie, director: Paul Shartis, US, 1966



Letter, director: Di(e)ter Rot(h), DK/IS, 1956/1961

The promotional film that Heike Sperling made for Gauloises cigarettes (see archive, pp. XX–XX) confronts viewers with several lines of scrolling texts, compelling them to choose among one of the three – and hence a sequence – or to look at the wealth of what is conveyed simultaneously: the image. One oscillates between seeing and reading, constantly switching between levels, until the gaze ultimately begins to flicker. In a *Schriftfilm*, the actual writing is not supposed to be observed the way it normally is. It is not about legibility. In the films of Paul Sharits (see archive, pp. XX–XX) or Dieter Roth (see archive, pp. XX–XX), the words fade in so quickly that our perception – to say nothing of our minds – cannot register them.

In contrast to a linguistic utterance, an image cannot be negated; it shows what it shows, and does so compactly. It can therefore be conceived as a condensation of perception. A written word, on the other hand, results from a process of subtraction; it takes something away – namely, nearly everything it connects with what it signifies. The connection is cut off.

- 3 Gerhard Roth, *Fühlen, Denken, Handeln. Wie das Gehirn unser Verhalten steuert*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, p. 301.

But what about when the word “taxi” rushes between tall buildings of letters? When the name suddenly behaves like the thing it signifies? When the word “dog” starts to bark, or the word “kiss” kisses itself? The words become images again, reading turns into perception, and suddenly the signifier and the signified are once again comparable.

III

If a communication is to have effects, every “how” has to be transformed into a “what.” Science focuses on the what, the information conveyed, while art emphasizes how it is conveyed, the imparting of information. Science produces a world of rational subjects that communicate with one another, either via *Schriftfilme* or via the antithesis of perception and consciousness. On the contrary, art (and its distinct form of communication) focuses on the form of communication –, treating it as information, – and pointing towards an understanding of inner psychological processes.⁴

Script films communicate more than information that is conveyed with the help of writing. They sabotage their own informativeness, which they use as an excuse to emphasize the imparting of communication. In the video *The Child* (FR, 1999, director: Antoine Bardou-Jacquet, Ludovic Houplain (H5)) (see archive, pp. XX–XX), the meaning of “veryverylongcadillac” is not attributed to the word’s significance, but to the way it is depicted: the very, very long Cadillac word drives through an imaginary city made up of letters. It neither emphasizes the reference to a brand of car, nor the communication of something else, but serves, instead, to stress a reference to itself.

What exactly a *Schriftfilm* states can scarcely be stated. And yet one is familiar, more or less, with what its subject is: the symbolic power of certain car brands, feelings, phallogocentrism, the medium of writing – and not least: a failed intention to communicate that succeeds through failure.

Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg.



The Child (artist: Alex Gopher), director: Antoine Bardou-Jacquet, Ludovic Houplain (H5), FR, 1999

⁴ Peter Fuchs, *Moderne Kommunikation. Zur Theorie des operativen Displacements*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1993, pp. 157ff.

Frantic Starring. On Intermediality in Schriftfilm

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Writing as “autonomously visual”, as “character-intertwining, -dissolution, -layering”, is “not only a vehicle of information, but is itself, the vehicle itself, also emits signals, structural information.”¹

A *Schriftfilm* is in the first place a film whose central part is the highly self-referential medium of writing (or the act of writing) in all its formal and medially-varied materializations and presentational forms. *Schriftfilme* display the mediality of writing and play with the receptive perceptual modi of reading, watching, staring, deciphering, etc., of understanding and of its deconstruction, thus may be considered models of the aesthetic dissolution of cognitive activity. As models of perception, *Schriftfilme* affect the viewer’s (irritated) self-observation.

“Intermediality” in (experimental) *Schriftfilme* refers to intermedial mediating strategies of writing or writing as image in experimental *Schriftfilme*, and (inner) semiotic transactions between media, forms and contexts. Strictly speaking, this involves questions of perceptual psychology and perceptual theory, so we should refer to (experimental) *Schriftfilme* rather than experiments in visual or audiovisual irritation.

Commensurate with the scope of its definition, the concept “intermedial” is limited to the Romantic origins of the artistic concept of innovative media transformation and integration. At the beginning of the 1960s, North American Fluxus artist and writer Dick Higgins traced the concept back to the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For Higgins, the idea of methodic fusion and innovation of the introduced media is decisive. According to Jürgen E. Müller, a medial product “[...] only then becomes intermedial when transferring the multimedial juxtaposition of medial citations and elements into a conceptual fusion, the (aesthetic) fractures and upheavals of which open up new dimensions of both lived and reflected experience.”²

The *Schriftfilme* treated here demonstrate this “conceptual fusion.” However, Friedrich W. Block contends that, in terms of systems theory, a more abstract and dynamic model of intermediality could be fruitful. Intermediality results, above all, in “marking medial differences, as the observation of forms of mediality.”³

Type as Writing – as Image – as Film

Type in experimental *Schriftfilme* is writing in all its guises: (individual) handwriting, (standardized) typewriter and computer font, alphabetic script, graphic characters, as well as “writing of no language at all” (Henri Michaux), name-

- ¹ Carlfriedrich Claus, in: Klaus Ramm, *Die Stimme ist ganz Ohr*, Sendemanuskript, Bayerischer Rundfunk (B2), Sept. 17, 1993, pp. 6–7; translated from the German by Justin Morris.
- ² Jürgen E. Müller, “Intermedialität und Medienwissenschaft: Thesen zum State of the Art,” in: *montage/av*, No. 3, 1994, pp. 119–138, here, p. 127f.; translated from the German by Justin Morris.
- ³ Friedrich W. Block, *Beobachtungen des “Ich.” Zum Zusammenhang von Subjektivität und Medien am Beispiel experimenteller Poesie*, Aisthesis, Bielefeld, 1999, p. 186; translated from the German by Justin Morris.