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Haunted Temporality: The Loop as Semi-Narrative Engine

Loops are powerful invocations, abandoning linear narrative for the intensity of a continuous present, capable of establishing, disrupting and directing temporal relationships. Media theorist Lev Manovich suggests the loop is actually “a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age,” even as it occupies a liminal, anti-narrative space between story and instance (Manovich xxxiii).¹ The term 'loop' itself describes a complex range of repetitive gestures, from 3-second animated GIFs to middle-ground montage (establishing shots, action sequences in television) and the broader, or nearly imperceptible, cycles found in contemporary art (e.g. Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*²). Woven into longer segments, loops can even establish a haunting sense of repetition and reappearance, affecting the viewer's relationship to the viewed and the recalled. This flexibility allows loops to serve as an effective investigation into the conflated space of time and memory. In the case of my own video work, they allow access and reference to the uncanny familiarity of television and its rapid-fire montage experience. The video components of *The Cascade* incorporate loops to provide the kind of mosaic understanding of space-place that come from a de-centered, semi-narrative form. The loop provides critical

¹ Manovich also suggests it is “relevant to recall that the loop gave birth not only to cinema but also to computer programming,” thus tying loop logic to database execution—a fundamental 20th and 21st century interface (Xxxiii)Loops are found in proto cinema and at the beginning of cinema, then re-emerge in new media. (215).

² Gordon's installation incorporates two projection screens which simultaneously play an endless loop of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), one proceeding forward, the other backward. The loops move at only a few frames per second—so slowly that casual viewers may not even recognize change or directional progression at all. Longer consideration of the piece reveals the uncanny, unnerving and crystallized sense of frozen (yet endlessly progressing) cinematic time, as they loop in such long spans, few could sit through the entire motion—even as they are aware of the sweeping loop.

negotiation of the televisual structure and the ways we commit and recall memory-images,³ opening my artistic process to post-narrative methodology.

The contemporary loop recalls proto-cinema and early avant-garde film⁴—the active image repetition later supplanted by cinema's reliance on linear narrative (Manovich 315). Early cinematic devices like the zoetrope and zoopraxiscope animated short sequences—dancers whirling, a horse jumping a fence, and so on, by “mapping time onto two-dimensional space” using sequenced, discrete images spaced around a circle (Manovich 51). These analog devices used physical motion to speed through individual shots, simulating activity within a closed-circuit (Manovich 296-7). They were capable of expressing an instant in time, a suspended action, often with its own micro-narrative (the horse jumps, the dancers dance), but without reliance upon storyline. With the emergence of cinema proper, the language of film abandoned the 'artifice' of the loop, avoiding repetitious sequences to stress the illusion of realistic 'capture.'⁵ The more cinema embraced capture, the more it bound itself to the forward-moving act of storytelling (Manovich 300-01). Cinema thus behaved like novels and theater, with clear progression through a series of events.⁶ Since early television heavily mimicked film, it initially embraced the loop-free approach (Fiske 15), but as television developed its own language and

³ Theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Paul Sartre suggest the uncanny, layered experience of memory is a process part logic, part hallucinatory. Ricoeur applies some of Henri Bergson's memory theory, when interpreting Sartre's psychology of imagination by describing a kind of intermediary memory as a mixed state, where “the ‘memory-image’ [is] halfway between 'pure memory' and memory reinscribed in perception” (Farr 14). The memory-image, or mixed media we construct in our minds, is never wholly factual, or entirely reliable, instead a play between the imaginary and conscious, between the interpreted and the understood.

⁴ Dziga Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* re-enacts the proto-cinematic loop, embedded in longer experimental montage that remains relevant to new media considerations (Manovich xiv, 316).

⁵ Manovich suggests “narrative cinema avoids repetitions; like modern Western fictional forms in general, it puts forward a notion of human existence as a linear progression through numerous unique events” (315-316). Cinematic linearity is not just a storytelling structure, but an attribution of larger psychological ordering techniques in Modernity.

⁶ At least mainstream/dominant cinema. Avant-garde cinema plays by different rules.

aesthetic system, it integrated (even centralized) loops for defining program elements, story structure, and all manner of serialized and episodic development—even systems of re-run, re-make, programs, commercials,⁷ and consumption.⁸ Loops also resurfaced in video games, animation and the internet, reincarnated as short videos, animated GIFs and the like, carrying a renewed sense of the immediate present (Manovich 315). In current pop culture, loops are critically, even playfully integrated into the fiber of daily life, popping up in Facebook feeds, apps, games and television, expressing emotion, advertising products, making political statements, and so on.⁹

Thus, loop forms are an alternative to cinematic narrative. Repetitive structure prevents a clear understanding of beginning, middle and end, erasing our reliance on static waypoints while expanding a single moment into a potentially infinite, self-spiraling universe. This allows contemporary artists to manipulate the viewer's relationship to time and memory (even to place and event), just as the use of repeated sequencing in television programs reinforces the viewer's sense of flow, place and character by offering a mosaic¹⁰ of recorded experiences the viewer

⁷ Television theorist Richard Dienst claims television endlessly cuts away from program moments to return to the “traffic of images and sounds, to all the messages carried by all the messengers crossing through the world” (129). This creates a loop of program-commercial-program-commercial.

⁸ Artist Nam June Paik echoes television theorists when he suggests “the fundamental concept of TV is time...” (Dienst 159). Television is recorded, produced, cut and offered in terms of time, so time is not only a fundamental concept, but also the fundamental *shape* of television. The familiar loops we encounter in viewing owe much to the backbone of the medium. Thus, “time is the substance of television's visuality, the ground of its ontology and the currency of its economy” (Dienst 159).

⁹ Their ubiquitous culture-wide return can be attributed to larger postmodern and 'digimodern' cultural shifts, not expounded here.

¹⁰ Which more closely resembles oral tradition than novels or theater, where characters repeat, refrains establish elastic structure and context, but in which stories exhibit a kind of fluidity not found in directional cinema. Television has been likened to oral tradition by more than one theorist (Fiske 125). Viewers gain an understanding of characters and events by viewing, digesting and cross-referencing visual information. We get a sense of who Jack Bauer is, not because of lengthy cinematic development, but because we cross-patch, experience and unite threads from 9 seasons of *24*. This is similar to the way in which audiences might come to understand the epic poetry or folktales of Odysseus or Coyote.

must link by viewing.¹¹ Where cinema unfolds an elaborate story system, loops invite focus, even frustration, functioning as discrete, contained occurrences or as open-circuit systems that manipulate the audience expectation set by visual media (Fiske 62).

The loop in a broader sense can also describe the progress of televisual language (and structure) itself. Most programs rely on formula, such that viewers gain a sense of familiarity with series they have never personally watched, simply by participating in televisual exchange (Fiske 17).¹² Unlike the linear drive of cinema, television reveals the nature of its ideas, characters and events as cross-referenced mosaics that may even span years of development (Fiske 125)(Footnote 9). In TV, literal looping segments become intertextual references, suggesting the repetitive structure of the programming and a GIF-like condensation of proto-cinema, while establishing rhythm, expository information and aesthetic value. The re-use of stock footage loops, for example, provides a punctuating rhythm that can link multiple seasons and ideas across, and through, the visual mosaic.

Looping stock footage is an established television practice and though the loop may contribute to the story, it is actually a collapsed, or excised, unit of time, without narrative—used repeatedly to transition the primary material.¹³ Driving sequences from *Emergency!* and *Adam 12*

¹¹ Cinema and radio are considered 'hot' media because they extend and deliver a focused sensation; the viewer or listener watches, listens and receives to gain understanding. Television is considered a 'cool' medium because the viewer must do most of the work; "the screen supplies mere metonyms, we make them meaningful" (Reading 123). Because information about characters, events and plotlines are stretched across multiple episodes, even multiple seasons and years, and TV occupies living space, rather than the black box of the focused theater, television asks the audience to perform and engage. Episodes do not even need to be viewed 'in order' to garner a sense of the program's reality. Thus, it is "only at the moment when the semiotic codes interlock with the cultural awareness supplied by the viewer, whose own context will play a part in shaping that cultural awareness" (Fiske 123).

¹² We may catch an advertisement for a new detective show or medical drama and already have a sense of the kind of language, pacing and aesthetics that are likely to be offered, related in part to past viewing experiences, or to general cultural understanding of genres. We know how sitcoms are meant to behave, etc.

¹³ Thought it may contain the kind of micro-narrative present in the spinning zoetrope: the vehicles turn a corner, the firemen jump into the engine and leave, etc.

are excellent examples of this kind of punctuating loop. Each episode contains pre-recorded, circular footage of emergency vehicles or police cars leaving the station, hurtling through city streets or returning to the garage. The loops are not immediately apparent, but reveal ticks over time: the same cross traffic, pedestrians and clouds populate the time-frozen cycle. Repetition also suggests the endless, grueling process of rescue and law enforcement, so the loops also have conceptual meaning for characterization, but there is a composite relationship here, where action sequences and establishing shots form a kind of nonlinear temporality (135), resurfacing across multiple episodes to mark infinite spiraling points, yet the “narrative does not proceed as simple causality” (Birnbaum 137). Though the story moves forward because the police rush to the scene, the *act* of rushing is divorced and looped, intertwined with the “indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual...” creating double images, or looping engagements (Farr 23).

In contemporary art, loops can provide overall structure, as in Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, Cory Arcangel's *Clouds* (2002) or Stan Douglas' *Overture* (1986).¹⁴ Punctuating longer works, or used in variation, the loop encourages viewers to consider the nature of time and the relationship between the reinvented continuous and the discrete, to see multiple potentialities simultaneously and to establish formal rhythm, as in Claudia X. Valdes' *In the Dream of the Planet* (2002).

Valdes employs intense cycles and 'reincarnated' excerpts, in order to direct viewer interpretation

14 Arcangel's *Clouds* is a new media projection piece, endlessly rebuilt in real time from a modified Super Nintendo game cartridge. The background clouds from *Super Mario Brothers* provide an infinite, fabricated loop.

In *Stan Douglas'* piece, a 16mm Edison Company promotional film is looped under a narration from Proust. In the cycle, a train curves through a British Columbian landscape in an infinite circle (Boyd)(Culley). The voice-over is contemplates the transition from waking to sleeping, echoed in the uncanny monotony of the endless train ride. Here, the loop is at first uncertain. The film lasts 6 minutes—enough time to seem discrete, yet the viewer realizes the train is passing through the same terrain, just as our minds do (especially during the process of recollection). Here, the loop offhandedly illustrates the philosophy of Proust's memory-grooves (Boyd).

and to reinforce Cold War conditions. In *The Dream of the Planet* (2002)(Fig. 1), Valdes appropriates made-for-TV-movie *The Day After* (1983), compressing the two-hour film into a 56-second loop. The loop is repeated six times in rapid succession, with each incarnation skewed to emphasize a different aspect of Cold War anxiety: the military complex, social upheaval, survival, detonation, media, etc.... The original film grapples with a fictional nuclear escalation between the United States and the Soviet Union, culminating in a full-scale nuclear war. In the condensation, images hurtle past, allowing only a frantic glimpse of each person, each situation. The cycle slows with terrifying agony as missiles launch, buildings collapse and the media responds—distilling the doom of the original into a frenetic, semi-narrative commentary. The painfully recognizable, yet ultimately unreliable loop incites a state of hyper-arousal that parallels nuclear paranoia. Valdes' ability to distill the made-for-TV movie, its subtexts and anxiety, with her own queries, is an excellent example of the haunted loop, which refers to, and reenacts, its own apparitional forms—making it incredibly relevant to the distillation of action and interaction in *The Cascade*.¹⁵

My video work considers the way loops are capable of suggesting the *space* of spatial memory and whether repetition provides a condensed sense of the mosaic found in televisual language.¹⁶ Embedded, unstable grooves offer the viewer contextual déjà vu—where they begin to identify recognizable sequences, but are confronted by uncertain, semi-narrative that haunts itself with its own re-visitation. This perpetual re-enactment suggests the denial of traditional story, while establishing a dream-like state where characters engage and re-engage, running over

¹⁵ *The Cascade* is my three-part, interdisciplinary thesis, which includes painting, video and interactive elements. The interactive component also makes use of loops, though it is not discussed here.

¹⁶ A number of television theorists describe cinema as 'linear' and television as 'mosaic.' Viewers gain a sense of who the characters are, the world they inhabit and t, mosaic, oral tradition(reading television 125)

a tight temporality that flirts with story.

So I Asked... (2014)(Fig. 2) establishes this kind of haunted, repetitious cycle via deeply interlocked, repetitious passages. Opening with two firefighter-paramedics caught mid-conversation (then interrupted by an emergency call), the tumbling, heavily altered stream collides with a rotating sequence of loops (a landing helicopter, a high speed gunfight, rescue vehicles en route, etc.). The loops continually intertwine, ghosted, as intensity builds. The increasingly anxious, overlapping dialogue suggests “something happens, is happening, goes on happening...” (Drucker 23), though sequenced temporality ruptures: the ‘goes on happening’ may actually occur before the initial ‘something’ that sets off the chain. The paramedics seem to be responding to a gunfight, yet the rescuers themselves are caught in a disruptive loop that leaves the title question unasked and the rescue unresolved, though viewers can rely on their knowledge of televisual language to determine that a rescue has been, or will be, attempted. We are unable to rely on linearity, yet the hurtle of loops describe the events most likely to have occurred, though order is unclear—rather like catching episodes out of sequence, leaving us to infer connections.¹⁷

I also take into consideration the telescoping stages of video itself: the time of the original filming, editorial time in appropriate postproduction, the immediate present of the watching viewer, the viewer's present-into-past transition and the after-processing (and any subsequent recollection). The intensity of repetition is meant to reinforce the experience of an immediate, unyielding present, both in terms of ‘story’ progression and reception. The moments-after

¹⁷ Due to my schedule, I was unable to watch the first four seasons of *The Office* in real time, or in ‘proper’ order. Instead, I watched their non-sequential re-broadcast in syndication, which made no attempt to present the series in linearity. Instead, I saw snippets of the before and after of several relationships and dramatic story arcs, piecing together the total experience by seeing events out of turn. The overall mosaic offered a smattering of details that came into focus only after viewing each puzzle piece separately. I thought of this as a critical motive when constructing my videos, as this is often the case with shows in re-rerun, or for viewers who miss a week’s installment. We understand television as mosaic, and we know how to complete the metonymic role of television (Fiske 123). We are the connotative agents (Fiske 41).

transition through what has immediately passed suggests: “time flows and each present fades but doesn't disappear” (Birnbaum 139), amplifying the sense of déjà vu as almost-identical snippets continually resurface. This holds true in Valdes’ work, as well as in the stock footage loops I reference in my own work. *So I Asked...* (and other *Cascade* videos) may even behave as fragmentary, fragile archives—bound by our desire to sort out the phenomena of “haunting,” and the activation of memory that occurs with reappearance (Farr 12). Are we seeing the same event as an instant replay? Are we remembering an earlier incarnation, or is a similar event happening repeatedly in the same space, over time? The embedded loops thus recall the instant-moment introspection of proto-cinema, or the characterizing, time-independent stock footage of the appropriated programs.¹⁸ The semi-narrative is stitched, overlaid and underwritten by time. Loops possess a kind of visual déjà vu adapted from proto-cinematic experiments, re-contextualized by digital culture, manipulated by television and increasingly fundamental to contemporary art. They are versatile vehicles of conceptual delivery, raw enough to link and characterize television and capable of leading to surprising engagements with the haunting re-enactment of contemporary life. Loops can be semi-narrative, providing time-introspective context for larger stories, or they can perform as narrative-defying moments of their own, operating outside traditional viewer expectation. They fundamentally speak of time, memory and reflective space, especially when divorced from big-picture enslavement, becoming a postproduction, anti-narrative engine, disruptive and interstitial. Repetition changes our engagement with the ‘place’ of moving image, making loop investigations a relevant, even vital, expression of our time—a way of zeroing in on the atoms of information flow.

¹⁸ My videos intentionally reference the looping stock footage of the appropriated television programs. Loops invoke re-enactment, whether suggesting repeat activities or behaving as discrete repetitions in themselves. Thus, the overall atmosphere recalls previous stories and future adventures, while flirting with narrative, but not offering closure. By overturning cultural expectations of narrative progress, the videos undermine the process of viewing that we are most familiar with (Boyd).

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Figure 1. *In the Dream of the Planet* (2012). Claudia X. Valdes. Video (Installation View).



Figure 2. *So I Asked...* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.