

# FILM AND VIDEO INTERMEDIALITY

THE QUESTION OF MEDIUM SPECIFICITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY MOVING IMAGES

JANNA HOUWEN



B L O O M S B U R Y

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*Janna Houwen*

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*To Erik, Midas and Anna*



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# INTRODUCTION

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## *Ten Thousand Waves*, two media, and *A Voyage on the North Sea*

The viewfinder of a surveillance video camera frantically scans the dark waving surface of the ocean. The images of dizzying, frantic camera movements over undulating stretches of grey, pixelated water are accompanied by alarming reports to the coastguard. First, a panicky woman's voice is telling how a group of Chinese cockle-fishers is stuck in Morecambe Bay. "Can you please, just please get something out there now," she begs. As the water has already risen above the waist of the young men (most of whom are unable to swim) the woman continues to plead: "They need a plane or something. They have got to get out!" A few minutes later, police officers report that they are arriving on scene. From their rescue helicopter, they search for the twenty-five Chinese immigrants who were caught by the rapidly rising tides in the so-called quicksand bay near Lancaster on the night of February 5, 2004.

In Isaac Julien's installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), the impressive archival video footage of the rescue operation is projected onto nine large screens. Together, seven of these screens form an oval, with two screens placed in the middle. As a consequence, the viewer of the installation is surrounded by nine stretches of moving, foaming water which can never be seen all at once. While the police officers report from their helicopter how they can only recover one person, and while the camera keeps scanning the rolling waves, the spectator is spurred to move, to turn from screen to screen, in order to join the search for signs of life in the dark blur of grainy water. Later on in *Ten Thousand Waves*, handheld images of Morecambe Bay by daylight show deserted sandbanks and vast expanses of water. The cockle-fishers are nowhere to be found. A short sample from a video documentary on the Morecambe Bay tragedy proves that the rescue operation was not completely successful. The scene focuses on a family member of one of the twenty-three drowned immigrants, who is going through the personal effects of a deceased loved one.

In between these instances of poignant, grainy video footage, the images of *Ten Thousand Waves* turn into something else. First, the pixelated grey ocean is replaced by smooth, sharp waves. Instead of blurred moving images, the installation's nine screens are now filled with bright images in which we can see each ripple on the ocean's surface. When the camera dips under the water's surface, it shows in medium close-up how three drowned Chinese fishermen sink slowly into the depth of the sea, their lifeless bodies swaying in the rocking ocean. Suddenly, a woman with long,

waving black hair and piercing dark eyes appears on the installation's screens. Dressed in a sumptuous white gown, she seems to float in midair. What is more, like the helicopter's surveillance camera, the woman is looking downwards from her airborne viewpoint, which suggests that she too is scanning the ocean's surface.

When both the flying woman and the drowning men reappear within a densely grown Chinese landscape instead of the North Sea as their backdrop later on in the installation, the mysterious woman can be identified as the goddess Mazu; the most revered female deity in China. The age-old "Tale of Yishan Island" tells how Mazu—savior and protector of ocean travelers, rescuer of the drowning—once saved a group of twenty fishermen from a sudden squall at sea. First, she leads them to an unknown, thickly wooded island. When the storm has subsided, the goddess shows them the way to their home port, where the fishermen all arrive safe and sound. This story is especially meaningful in relation to the Morecambe Bay tragedy because it originates from the Chinese province of Fujian, where Mazu has been worshipped since around CE 1000. Twenty of the twenty-three drowned cockle-fishers were impoverished farmers and workers from Fujian province—the home of most Chinese workers who emigrate to Europe.

The medium by which *Ten Thousand Waves* retells this age-old myth, however, is not as old as the "Tale of Yishan Island" itself. The installation narrates the story of Mazu through *filmic* means. First of all, the smooth and sharp images which depict Mazu's rescue of the cockle-fishers look like film images because of their contrast with the preceding low-quality video footage. As the difference between the media of film and video has long been marked particularly by the discrepancy between video's low resolution and low contrast ratio on the one hand, and film's high-quality images on the other hand, it seems obvious to understand the cut from blurred, pixelated footage to smooth and focused images as a switch from one medium to the other. In addition, the tale of Mazu is told by way of conventional cinematic narrative strategies which are absent from the video surveillance footage. The gaze of the goddess is for instance "sutured" to the images of boiling surges. This cinematic device—which connects shots to the viewpoint of onscreen characters—returns in the installation when Mazu flies through Pudong's high-rises (people are drowning in Shanghai's high-tech business hub, too).

When the goddess flies through the landscape of Yishan island, however, the images conform to well-known, yet quite disparate instances of contemporary Asian cinematic aesthetics. As Mark Nash has pointed out, the sumptuous images of Mazu suspended over a river, framed by the vertiginous limestone peaks, makes one think that one might be participating in the Taoist aesthetic of a fifth-generation Chinese filmmaker, such as Zhang Yimou. The zip pans through the bamboo forest, on the other hand, can rather be understood as an homage to the prestidigitations of Hong Kong popular cinema and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) (Nash 2010: 40). The installation's tie to cinema is consolidated all the more by the fact that Mazu is played by a famous film star, Maggie Cheung.

What is more, Julien's installation references Chinese cinema by telling yet another well-known story. For, in addition to the Morecambe Bay tragedy and the Mazu myth, *Ten Thousand Waves* revisits the classic Chinese film *The Goddess* (Wu, 1934). The woman who prostitutes herself in order to support herself and her son in Wu's film, is first depicted in a historic architectural setting in Julien's version of the story. Yet, this old Chinese city turns out to be an old Shanghai film studio. The female protagonist moves through this historic film décor, yet she also ends up in contemporary Chinese interiors. One of these interiors offers the woman of easy virtue a splendid view on Pudong's Jin Mao Tower, in front of which Mazu is suddenly flying by.

The latter's presence connects the fictional character of the prostitute to the drowned immigrants, for whom Mazu as well as the surveillance video camera were looking earlier on in the installation. Mazu's gaze upon the prostitute suggests that the latter is either lost and drowning, just like the cockle-fishers, or that she is somehow related to the victims of the Morecambe Bay tragedy. She might very well be missing her migrant son, like the woman in the installation's sample from the video documentary on Morecambe Bay. By being cinematically sutured to the gaze of a mythical deity, the fictional female character from a classical Chinese film story becomes a contemporary Chinese woman who seems to be affected by a real overseas tragedy in the present. *Ten Thousand Waves* manages to intricately relate as well as blur the boundaries between past and present, home and away, and reality and fiction, through a combination of filmed stories with video footage.

## Two media

This combination of cinematic features with forms of video complicates the definition of *Ten Thousand Waves* in terms of its medial character. As the work's images—including the cinematic ones—are stored and projected in high-definition digital video format, the piece is a video installation in technological terms. Yet, should a video installation which so overtly foregrounds cinematic devices, and which moreover includes so many references to film, primarily be defined in terms of video? On the other hand, it seems inaccurate to understand Julien's piece—which is not only video in a technological sense, but which also looks like video in so many formal respects—as principally film(ic).

Most discussions of *Ten Thousand Waves* circumvent the relation between film and video in the installation by ignoring one of the two media. Notably, institutions of contemporary visual art which exhibit the installation emphasize the medium which operates most prevalently within the field of art, that is, video. In press releases from the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) and the Brandhorst Museum in Munich, to name but two, Julien's piece was referred to as a nine-screen *video* installation. However, when the installation is shown or discussed in institutions, exhibitions or articles concerned with film, the medium of video is often left

unmentioned. In 2012, *Ten Thousand Waves* was, for instance, shown in an exhibition entitled *Expanded Cinema* at Amsterdam's Filmmuseum EYE. The museum's exhibition leaflets and captions referred to Julien's piece as a *film* installation. To give one more example here: in an article which aims to outline the installation's cinematic predecessors, Nash refers to *Ten Thousand Waves* as a multi-channel film, or even more simply, as a film.

These definitions of *Ten Thousand Waves* in terms of one single medium are limiting, because the complexity of the installation cannot be fully seen, appreciated, analyzed, or understood without acknowledging the fact that the piece contains both cinematic and "videomatic" elements. The meanings, effects, and affects that are generated by the installation largely depend on the difference between video forms and film features within the piece, as well as on the interplay between the features of these different media. In Julien's installation, the two media for example offer the viewer different, yet complementary ways of relating to the problems of China's impoverished working class.

Although definitions which group *Ten Thousand Waves* under expanded cinema or classify it as video installation art are both justifiable, the installation's psychological and physical effects, as well as the critical reflections on (among other things) migration which the artwork gives rise to, can be grasped more fully when the difference between video and film is not overlooked or ignored. This not only goes for *Ten Thousand Waves*. Many contemporary moving image objects are, on the one hand, ruled by (a group of) elements which derive in the first place from the field of film, and, on the other hand, by features which are more typical of the video medium. This mixture of the cinematic and the videomatic is most prevalent in museum pieces such as Julien's, yet it is also common in contemporary narrative fiction films—both mainstream and so called art-house films. In addition, the combination of film and video forms functions in the ubiquitous moving images which surround us outside of the museum, art gallery, or film theater today. It infuses home movies, videos on the Internet, commercials on TV, and clips on cellphones.

### ***Medium specificity revisited***

In order to study the combinations of film and video within contemporary cultural objects, an analysis of their intermedial relationship may seem an obvious starting point. When it comes to *Ten Thousand Waves*, definitions of the piece as a "multi-media work" or "post-cinematic video installation" (Julien's own description) appear to be suitable onsets to such analyses, as they take the medial plurality of the installation into account. Moreover, the above-mentioned definitions are only two instances in a wide range of possibilities. For, in spite of the fact that the multi-medial character of installations like Julien's is often left unmentioned, contemporary (new) media theory offers a wide range of terms by which interrelations between media can be defined and conceptualized.

In addition to prefixes and adjectives such as inter-, mixed, multi-, or hybrid media, (new) media scholars such as Noel Carroll (1996), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), Steven Maras and David Sutton (2000), Lars Elleström (2010), and Jens Schröter (2011) have conceptualized the relationship between media in terms such as aping, imitation, convergence, remediation, hyper-mediation, repurposing, re-forming and refashioning, transition, bundling, absorption, combination, integration, transformation, and so on. Most of these notions are applied in concord with the theoretical conclusion that it is no longer possible to detect pure media in the contemporary digital age. Today, all media are entangled in processes of remediating or repurposing another's forms, which leaves us with nothing but intermedial cultural objects. The once dominant, modernist idea that artistic media have their own, autonomous, unique essence, is highly problematized by these objects in which media are so overtly involved in imitating and refashioning each other. Any claims at medium specificity are impeded by the ubiquitous intermedial and mixed media artworks.

Although I do not disagree with such a characterization of today's situation, and take the wide variety of notions such as remediation and hypermediacy as helpful tools in analyzing the relationships between media, I argue that the starting point of an investigation into intermedial interactions should be the concept of medium specificity instead of the many notions which define forms of intermediality. The problem is, as Elleström also remarks, that intermediality has tended to be discussed without clarification of what a medium actually is (2010: 11). Nevertheless, an investigation into relationships between or even convergence of, different media still starts out with the presupposition of different, distinguishable media. Steven Maras and David Sutton rightly point out in their article entitled "Medium Specificity Re-visited" (2000) that theorists who deal with intermedial relationships often critique and problematize essentialist notions of the medium through concepts such as refashioning and remediation. Yet this method often merely delays and defers the question of essentialism. In their critical discussion of Bolter and Grusin's medium theory, Maras and Sutton aptly remark on the former's methodology that: "Their approach is based around acts of refashioning that ultimately problematise the essence of a medium, but at the outset of each act the predecessors of that medium [...] stand more or less fully formed" (2000: 108). Thus, models of intermediality which supposedly demonstrate the end of medium specificity, are often implicitly based on an originary ground on which media do have essences, are fixed, and achieve a final form.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that many influential theories of intermediality are unable to circumvent the essentialist notions of medium specificity which they wish to defy, does not mean, of course, that we should return to these seemingly inescapable, persistent essentialist ideas on medium specificity. Yet, it is nevertheless imperative to ask what mediality means when we discuss intermediality. In order to investigate what happens between media, it first needs to be clear how these media are (to be) understood. The rightful

conclusion that essentialist ideas on medium specificity are rendered untenable by today's mixed, multi-, and intermedia, too often overshadows the question of *what* is being mixed, expanded, remediated, refashioned, converged or combined. Maras and Sutton are right to state that, when faced, for example, with a definition of multimedia that incorporates "video, text and graphics" it is simply a useful question to ask: "what do you mean by video?" (2000: 112).

In this study I ask the questions "what is meant by video?" and "what is meant by film?" How are these two media (to be) understood? Can film and video be defined as distinct, specific media, and if so, how? I argue that in this era of mixed moving media, it is vital to ask such questions precisely and especially on the media of video and film.

From a technological point of view, however, it no longer makes sense to differentiate between film and video. Upon its arrival in the 1960s, video started out as an analogue electronic medium which clearly differed from film. In its initial phase, it was only able to produce grainy black-and-white footage. Its magnetic tape, moreover, could not easily be edited and was prone to electronic distortion. In addition, video footage could only be watched on a TV monitor. Hence, the early low-quality video images did not look like film, and could, moreover, not be looked at in the same viewing set-up as back-lit film projections. However, the formal and technological properties and abilities of the video medium evolved rapidly. The differences between film and video became less distinct with the arrival of video projectors, the development of video editing equipment, as well as the improvement in video image quality.

One could even argue that my objects of research—the media of film and video—disappeared while I was preparing and writing this book. When I initiated my first research on the two media in 2006, the difference between the media of film and video was still a noticeable technological fact. Although both media had already been taken up in the process of digitalization, and hence came to share important aspects of their technological support, neither analogue nor digital video images were able to meet the high image quality of analogue film footage. When narrative fiction films were screened in digital video formats, members of the audience would often complain that the images didn't look as good, as bright, as sharp or as smooth as "real" film. Today, such a perceptible difference between film and video images is no longer a technological necessity.

Yet, in spite of the fact that technological differences between the two media have largely been bridged, distinctions between film and video are still ubiquitously perceptible—for instance in works like *Ten Thousand Waves*. This demonstrates that the difference between video and film is made rather than given; it is repeatedly shown, (re-)produced and applied by visual objects and artworks. In addition, the distinction is made by spectators, who (sometimes only subconsciously) recognize and thereby respond to the difference between film and video features in the process of viewing and reading moving images. As opposed to the idea that intermediality is to be understood as a bridge between medial differences (Elleström 2010: 12), the

films and videos I study demonstrate that in many cases, the distinction between two media can form a persistent yet productive gap in intermedial objects.

Defining video and film as two distinct media first of all begs for a definition of medium specificity which does not solely rely on the given technological, material components of a medium. How can the constantly mixing, merging, and rapidly evolving media of film and video be defined as distinct media when the technological differences between them have become almost superfluous? What is more, how can film and video be defined as distinct, specific media without reverting to essentialist notions of medium specificity?

## A Voyage on the North Sea

My search for a nonessentialist definition of medium specificity starts with *A Voyage on the North Sea* (1999). In this pamphlet-sized book, art historian Rosalind Krauss aims to distance the notion of the specific medium from its unfortunately loaded meaning. From the 1960s onwards, Krauss explains, a definition of the medium as mere physical object, in all its reductiveness and drive towards reification, has become common currency in the art world. The word “medium” has been pervasively “Greenbergized,” as Krauss rightly states. The ideas of the late art historian on the relationship between the history of art and medium specificity have been highly influential.

In his well-known essay “Modernist Painting” (1961), Clement Greenberg depicts the history of art as a continuous development in which the different arts—such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature—gradually sought to discover their own unique, exclusive qualities. Within this process, which reached its highpoint in the period of modernism, it became perfectly clear that “the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium,” according to Greenberg (102). During modernism, he claims, works of art approached the boundaries of their own medium in order to determine each medium’s unchanging essence. According to Greenberg, this fixed and autonomous essence of every medium could eventually be reduced to a single, unique property of its material, technical support.

In line with many of the aforementioned new media theorists such as Bolter and Grusin, Krauss argues that Greenberg’s essentialist ideas have first and foremost been superseded by the fact that intermediality is now ubiquitous. According to Krauss, contemporary art exists in the era of the “post-medium condition.” For, since the 1970s, it has become especially difficult to divide the visual arts into specific media. In contrast to the modernist arts described by Clement Greenberg, recent artistic practices do not set great store by the distinction between media. The traditional media into which art was long subdivided are made subordinate to a whole range of expressive means that artists have at their disposal. Since the 1970s, all kinds of techniques are mixed within artworks, with no possibility left to define them as pure



## Film and Video Intermediality

media. Medium purity is no longer a goal, and in many works of art it is even determinedly undermined. Through this, the concept of medium specificity seems to have become superfluous.

In addition to her observations on contemporary artistic practices, Krauss argues that the concept of medium specificity is no longer tenable in theoretical terms either. Poststructuralist ideas in particular have contributed to the fact that the idea of a pure, autonomous medium has become a mere fiction:

From the theory of grammatology to that of the paragon, Jacques Derrida built demonstration after demonstration to show that the idea of an interior set apart from, or uncontaminated by, an exterior was a chimera, a metaphysical fiction. [...] That nothing could be constituted as pure interiority or self-identity, that this purity was always already invaded by an outside, indeed, could itself only be constituted through the very introjection of that outside, was the argument to scuttle the supposed autonomy of the aesthetic experience, or the possible purity of an artistic medium. The self-identical was revealed to us, and thus dissolved to, the self-different.

Krauss 1999: 32

After the poststructuralist deconstruction of the self-contained medium, the opinion that media have a specific essence can no longer be sustained.

Nevertheless, the notion of medium in itself is retained by Krauss. After explicitly distancing herself from Greenberg's views, she replaces his essentialist ideas with another definition of medium specificity: "the specificity of mediums, even modernist ones, must be understood as differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support" (1999: 53). According to Krauss, a medium is to be seen as a layered structure that is constantly being repeated. This structure is not given; it is made and composed out of the physical support plus a set of rules and conventions. These conventions determine how the expressive possibilities offered by the technical support of a medium are delimited or applied.

One of the most important benefits of Krauss' definition is that it opposes the temporal fixity of Greenberg's notion of the medium. In Krauss' model, a medium's specificity is never complete; media are always caught up in the process of differing from themselves. Instead of understanding media as static entities, Krauss defines them as changeable and differing structures. Secondly, she rewrites the concept's meaning by adding a layer to the medium's technological or physical base in her definition. Whereas Greenberg located a medium's specificity purely in the materiality of its support, Krauss argues that the specificity of media is built out of conventions, too. The word "built" in the previous sentence already points to the third way in which Krauss' definition differs from Greenberg's. Krauss emphasizes that a medium's specificity is a construction, which disables an understanding of medium specificity as an autonomous, given essence.

Since Krauss stresses that media are not given units, but that they are built and made, the medium specificity of which she speaks depends on medium specification. The difference between the terms “medium specificity” and “medium specification” is important. Medium specification indicates that media *are being* specified, while medium specificity rather indicates what *is* specific about media. In contrast to Greenberg, Krauss holds the opinion that media do not have absolute and fixed specificities, but that their specificities are made, and hence, that medium specificity is established through specification.

When it comes to medium specification, Krauss mostly focuses on the production of conventions. A technology or material becomes a specific medium as soon as it is repeatedly being used according to a specific set of conventions. The structure of conventions defines how and which possibilities of a certain physical support are applied. Such a conventional structure is a kind of grammar; a coherent set of rules which is iterated each time a technology is used. In her writings on medium specificity, Krauss particularly discusses how artists invent sets of conventions, and consequently produce specific media.<sup>2</sup> Hence, she pays most attention to the senders; to the ones who apply a certain technology or material according to a specific set of conventions in order to (re)produce something—information, sound, image, text, art.

However, Krauss’ definition of the medium implicitly implicates another party. Like grammar, the rules of the medium are not mainly applied (and hence produced) by those who utter messages or produce objects with a certain technological or physical support. Conventions are also to be understood by the audience, by the receivers of medial objects, if a medium (or language, for that matter) is to be recognized as such. Often, recognition is something of an understatement, for the conventions which specify a medium are equally *produced* by the spectators of media. It is illuminating, in this regard, to speak of multiple layers rather than one layer of conventions. For, quite apart (but not entirely so) from the actual conventionalized applications of a technology, medium specificity comes into being by sets of conventions which determine how a medium is *seen*. The specification or definition of a medium depends on conventional notions/ideas on what a medium “is.” The governing opinions or expectations about the possibilities of a medium are just as important for a medium’s specification as the way in which these possibilities are used in practice. A canvas painted totally ultramarine would for instance not have been considered as a painting two hundred years ago. Nowadays, such a canvas meets our expectations of what painting is and what it can do.

My investigation into the media of film and video relies heavily on the idea that historically and socially relative conventional opinions on what a medium “is” shape medium specification. Although I will focus on some of the (ever-changing) technological differences between film and video, and moreover aim to map out the most distinct conventions which shape the specific dominant applications of each medium’s technology, my study also comprises comparisons and analyses of the most dominant reflections on film and video. I hold that the distinct specific features of

film and video can only be defined by also studying definitions of the media. Reflections on the two media do not only describe, but also (co- and re)produce the specificity of film and video. Following art historian David Green (2005), I take the view that media are to a large extent simply what we think they are. And what we think they are, moreover, very much depends on dominant reflections on what they are. The reflections I study are mostly theoretical texts. However, the distinction between reflections and applications is not always clear cut; many of the visual objects I analyze can be understood as self-reflexive reflections on the specificity of their medium or media. Such objects specify and produce the media with which they are produced in more than one way.

This brings me to yet another way in which medium specificity is produced according to Krauss' definition of the concept. The art historian defines a medium's specificity as differential, indicating that a medium's specificity is in part determined by differences from other media. Remarkably, this idea of differential specificity was not unknown to Clement Greenberg, who claimed that the specificity of a medium can be determined by comparison to other media. The unique essence of a medium, Greenberg argued, lies in that characteristic by which it differs from all other media. However, Greenberg basically undermines his own idea of autonomous media by acknowledging the importance of difference to a medium's specificity. This was also noted by Schröter, who wrote that: "the definition of the 'specific character' of a medium requires the differential demarcation from other media; the terms for other media are paradoxically absolutely necessary for every 'purist' and 'essentialist' definition [...]" (2011: 5).<sup>3</sup> In other words, if medium specificity is dependent on differences with other media, a medium cannot be regarded as an autonomous, isolated unit. It is specified by other media.

The differences between media can be considered of importance without adopting Greenberg's opinion that the unchanging essence of media can be determined on the basis of this difference. A medium can, among other things, be specified because it can do things other media cannot. However, such unique qualities are temporary. As soon as the unique possibilities of a medium are equaled or imitated by means of technological development or an alteration of medial conventions, the specification of the existing medium changes.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, medium specification doesn't necessarily imply the demarcation or recovering of a medium's unique essence. Although media can only be distinguished by way of the differences between them, these differences do not always point to unique properties or capabilities. Analogue film, for instance, shares its photochemical base with the medium of photography. Yet, it distinguishes itself from photography by producing moving instead of still images. This capacity to produce moving images, however, is not unique to film: it is also a capability of the video medium. The latter medium, however, doesn't rely on a photochemical process for the production of its images. Within this web of differences and similarities between lens-based media, no single property is unique to film. Yet the latter medium's position within the web of

intermedial relations, the precise ways in which it differs from as well as resembles other media, *is* unique, *is* specific. Hence, I argue that media are specified by mutual differences from as well as specific similarities with other media. I take the differentiality in Krauss' definition of medium specificity as a term which suggests or refers to the comparison of different media, rather than a notion which solely focuses on differences. Following this train of thought, the act of defining a medium's specificity can in part be understood as a process of mapping the differences and similarities between media, rather than the disclosure of a medium's single, unique essence.

The idea of differential specificity indicates the direction of my investigation into the media of film and video. By way of comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities between the two media, I aim to map out the layers of their related and similar, yet specific structures; that is, parts and sections of their specific structure. It is not possible to outline all media which constitute the specificity of film and video by way of differences and similarities, or to provide a historical overview of all forms and functions, specifications, and applications of film and video over the past decades in one study. However, it is possible to locate times and places where film and video met, crossed paths, altered each other's course. In spite of a wide array of existing terms for all kinds and forms of intermediality to choose from, this book does not set out to classify or name all the different intermedial interactions between film and video. Instead, it highlights those discourses, contexts, functions, forms, and objects in which the two media have specified, or still specify each other most strongly—and studies these processes of specification. It points out which—often already changed or neutralized—differences and similarities between the media have led to the forms of film and video which we have and see today. As I will demonstrate, the two media have thoroughly altered and influenced each other's specificity over the last decades. This strong mutual influence is not so much the result of differences, but is mostly caused by the fact that in many ways they are so alike.

The above shows that, although the primary aim of this research is to gain understanding in contemporary intermedial objects which combine film and video features, it necessarily comprises media-archaeological components. Yet, in some ways, these media-archaeological passages should rather be defined as media-theory archaeological analyses; for, as media specificity depends on medium specification, the related histories of film and video are histories of related medium specifications. As explained previously, media are specified both in practice and by theory. When it comes to the media of film and video, there has been much cross-over between medial practices and theoretical specifications. As I will demonstrate, the medium of video has not only influenced the specificity of film through video practices which, for instance, have taken over some of film's dominant applications, but also via the medium specifications which film theory forms. The arrival of video made film theorists sensitive to some of the abilities of cinema. Abilities, that is, which had not yet been widely noted before video images brought them fully into sight. In this way, video managed to shed a new light on film, which was consequently viewed differently.

On the other hand, film theory can provide insight into the specificity of video. Film-theoretical concepts have proven to be either elucidating or useless in the analysis of video works. Either way, in the absence of a coherent field of video studies, film-theoretical ideas have guided, and still guide, the specification of video as a medium. Therefore, the notion of differential specificity which forms the basis of this study goes hand in hand with differential specification—the latter involving both visual objects and theoretical texts. How do theoretical specifications of film relate to specifications of video? In what way do reflections on video differ from thoughts about film? How do ideas on film affect the use and understanding of the video medium? How have video works influenced film theory, and hence film?

What is more, interestingly, the idea of differential specificity shows that the answer to my initial questions (How can film and video be defined as distinct, specific media? How are these two media to be understood?) can be sought in the intermedial objects of which I aim to gain a better understanding by way of investigating those questions on the specificity, or rather, the specification of film and video. If media are fundamentally specified by their mutual differences and similarities, then this process of specification can be presumed to be visible and active in visual objects in which film and video images are placed in, over, or after one another. All in all, analyses of the intermedial relations in mixed film/video objects require insight into general specifications of the two media. Yet, the intermedial objects which I study in this book each constitute contributions to these specifications of film and video as well, and therefore need to be approached with the question of how film and video are specified by and within the specific intermedial piece.

### *Traveling forward, expanding the voyage*

It is remarkable that Krauss does not embrace intermedial artworks in her writings on differential medium specificity, of which *A Voyage of the North Sea* is the most comprehensive. As film and video scholar Ji-Hoon Kim has noted, there is no reason why intermedial artworks contradict Krauss' medium theory. Yet, in contrast to her predilection for obsolete media, she excludes intermedia or mixed media from the outset (Kim 2009: 121). In fact, Krauss condemns the international fashion for installation and intermedial work with the argument that, in this trend, "art finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital" (Krauss 1999: 56). However, Krauss' idea of differential specificity is sustained and carried out precisely by the intermedia works which she despises. As Kim puts it, Krauss' criticism on intermedial artworks "brackets out any potential for investigating the relationship that makes the 'differential specificity' of a medium, such as film, become dramatized and altered by other new media [...]" (2009: 121).

Kim rightly concludes that the fact that differential specificity is not intrinsic to Krauss' privileged artworks makes clear that her thesis on medium specificity is still anchored in a belief in the uniqueness and singularity of the means of expression that

is part of the modernist argument on medium specificity that she intends to renew (Kim 2009: 121). Such implicit, unintended recourses to essentialism can be discovered in more than one way in Krauss' medium-theoretical work. Thus, although her definition of medium specificity forms the starting point of my research, I will discuss the problems and shortcomings of Krauss' thesis throughout this study. In each of the following four parts, I propose a supplement to her definition which can obviate the recurrent "pull" of essentialism. These supplements will be provided in the form of existing concepts (e.g., the field, discourse) with which Krauss' definition is compared and expanded.

My expansion of the notion of the medium partly follows theorists such as Lars Elleström and Maras and Sutton, who have proposed valuable categories (called modalities and nodes, respectively) by which many features and aspects of media can be mapped, hence leading to outlines of the medium as a more complex configuration than Krauss' two-layered structure. However, instead of pinpointing "the essential cornerstones of all media," as Elleström (2010: 15) sets out to do, I propose a comparative approach to the concept that questions both essential cores and cornerstones. In a sense, my examination of the concept of the medium resembles my differential investigation of film's and video's specificity: by mapping the differences and similarities between concepts, and studying the (possible) interrelation between them, the different sides and boundaries of the concept of the medium will be probed.

The first supplement to Krauss' definition can already be found in the common denominator of the four parts of this book, each of which is structured around an effect of the two media on their users. Krauss diverts attention from the essentialist question of what a medium is by focusing on the question of how a medium is produced. To Krauss' question of how a medium is made and specified, I add the question of what a medium does. What are the (distinct and/or similar) performative effects of film and video? How do the two media affect their viewers? How do they relate their users? Which positions do they enable, preclude or create for the subject? The four parts of this book are organized around four effects which surface most pervasively in specifications of film and video. Those four effects, moreover, form a suitable ground for comparison, as the most notable differences and similarities between film and video are tied to them.

In Part I, I compare the way in which film and video each produce reality effects, yet in different ways. Some of the most famous discussions of film's specificity circle around the medium's inherent realism. Video has, however, altered the way in which the relation between film and reality can be understood, as the technology of the video medium relates video images differently to referents in reality than film does. What is more, although film and video both produce a reality effect, their impression on the viewer is slightly different. In addition, the conventional devices by which film and video produce their respective reality effects are disparate. Intermedial video artworks and films often combine the reality effect producing devices of both film and video. What is the effect of such double, yet different, reality effects in one visual

object? In two close readings of *Benny's Video* (Haneke 1992) and *Family Viewing* (Egoyan 1987), I analyze how the videomatic reality effect enhances the cinematic one, while the two films in turn constantly specify the video images they show as "real." In addition, the specific (yet conventional) relation between video images and reality turns out to offer new narrative possibilities to fiction films.

The comparison of the reality effects of film and video leads to some questions on the concept of medium specificity. Krauss' definition proves to have its shortcomings, as it cannot account for the fact that film and video each have many, sometimes even opposing abilities and characteristics at the same time. In Part I, I therefore suggest expanding Krauss' definition with a term which spatializes Krauss' predominantly temporal term, namely, George Baker's notion of the "field".

In Part II, I study the ways in which film and video each affect the viewer's sense of being a physical body in time and space. Why is the medium of film usually theorized as a medium which produces a disembodied viewer; a viewer who forgets her own bodily presence in time and space? Why has video, on the other hand, been defined as a haptic, embodying medium? In order to answer these questions, I turn to Jean-Louis Baudry's influential film-theoretical concept of the *dispositif*. Not only has this concept formed the basis of the discourses of so-called apparatus theorists, who more than anyone have produced the dominant view that the film spectator is a disembodied one, it is also a very useful concept in explaining why video often functions as an embodying rather than a disembodiment medium. What is more, the intermedial cinematic video installations by David Claerbout and Douglas Gordon which I will discuss in this part combine some of the most typical disembodiment and embodying qualities of film and video, most of which concern features of the media's *dispositifs*; features such as the spatial viewing set-up of their technologies, the spatial and architectural features of the viewing room, (institutional) viewing conventions, as well as the position of the spectator.

In Part III, I frame film and video within society. In addition to the fact that the concept of the medium in general necessitates attention to the social field, this field is especially important to an investigation of film and video. First of all, video came into being in a decade in which medium theory (as formulated by, most prominently, Marshall McLuhan) centered on the idea that media produce social structures. Many early video practices relate to this dominant, influential idea. The technological determinism which is expressed by these theoretical texts and objects gives rise to new questions on Krauss' definition of medium specificity. The concept will be redefined in this part by way of Raymond Williams' ideas on so-called soft determination.

Out of all the domains within which the two media operate (culture, politics, art, etc.) the social field can be said to point out the internal differentiation of the two media the most. When film and video are framed by their operation within the social field, the specificity of the two media turns out to be fraught with contradictions. In addition to these internal contradictions, film and video overlap, differ, and oppose each other in the social field. Besides theoretical texts which specify the social effects



of film and video, I analyze how the different social meanings, functions and effects of the two media are (further) exposed as well as applied in intermedial artworks by video artists Lynn Hershman and Sadie Benning.

The positive and sometimes even utopian specifications of film and video which are discussed in Part III have dominant negative counterparts. In addition to texts and objects which emphasize the specific ability of film and video to produce stable subject positions within (democratic, emancipated, utopian) social structures, many practical and theoretical works specify the two lens-based media as cold, objectifying media which hurt and obstruct, rather than aid or create the subject. Although some of the dystopian views of film and video are discussed in Part III, I zoom in on these other sides of film's and video's respective "Janus heads" in Part IV, which deals with the violent features of the two media. As the violent impact of film and video can hardly be considered separately from harmful social discourses, I investigate how the concept of the medium relates to Foucault's notion of "discourse."<sup>5</sup>

What is more, the violent features of film and video cannot be understood without taking the common ancestor of the lens-based media into account, that is, photography. A triangulation with photography will provide insight into the specific ways in which film and video are each able to hurt their users, most notably the subjects in front of the lens. Such triangulation with another medium is not unique to Part IV; mapping the differential specificity of the two media vis-à-vis each other necessarily involves comparing the ways in which the two media relate similarly or differently to other, closely related media. In the first part, literature and literary theory will bring out some of the specific qualities of film and video. In Part II, art-historical ideas on painting, theater, and sculpture are brought to bear on film and video. The medium of television will mostly play an important part in Part III. The influence of the computer, finally, runs through all four parts. The question of how digitalization has (or hasn't) altered the applications and possibilities which are specific to analogue film and video will be addressed throughout this study.

Near the end of Part IV, the Janus heads of film and video are turned again—by films and videos themselves. In the final chapter of Part IV, I will compare the different ways in which feminist films and videos work to oppose the misogynist traits of traditional narrative cinema. Whereas feminist films radically disengage themselves from classical film conventions, intermedial video works such as *Phoenix Tapes* (1999) by artist duo Matthias Müller and Christoph Girardet, and *Approximations* (2000–2001) by Johanna Householder and b.h. Yael form critical reflections on misogynist film conventions by mimicking or sampling scenes from classical narrative films. These videomatic strategies of mimicking and sampling will bring me back to *Ten Thousand Waves* in the conclusion, where I will demonstrate how my differential mapping of film and video can form a guide through the blurry, swirling waves of intermedial film/video works.





PART I  
THE REALITY EFFECT

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## INTRODUCTION: FROM REAL TO REEL IN *BENNY'S VIDEO*

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Did you film that?

*Mm-hmm.*

What was it like, with the pig? I mean, have you ever seen a corpse before, for real?

*No. You?*

No.

*It was only a pig. I once saw a program on TV about the special effects they use in actions films. All ketchup and plastic. Looks real though.*<sup>1</sup>

Michael Haneke's narrative fiction film *Benny's Video* (1992) starts with moving video images. It is mainly because of their poor quality that the medium of these images can be discerned. Their texture is marked by the square grain which is typical of video images. The graininess of the surface is especially visible in dark areas of the images, where pixels have dropped out and have left small white squares and lines. Primary colors within the images, especially reds, look pale and unsaturated. Skin tones are covered with an unnatural faint blue shimmer.

Besides the fact that the image quality of the footage is low, it is rather poorly recorded as well. Clearly recorded with a handheld camera, the images shudder and shake. All camera movements in the unedited material are fast and abrupt, as are the zoom movements. The disorienting effect of these amateurish traits diminishes, though, when the camera zooms in on a pig that was first dragged out of a dark sty by a couple of people. Surrounded by a small crowd and a barking dog, the squealing animal is pushed to the ground. First its large bluish pink body fills the image frame, then the camera zooms in on the pig's head, through which a bullet is shot with a gun for slaughtering cattle. Pale red blood starts to flow, while the pig starts to spasm.

These movements stop, however. The image of the dying pig is brought to a standstill, then partially rewound, and subsequently replayed in slow-motion. The scene ends with an abrupt change into "snow"—the noise of an untuned television. On the one hand, these actions affirm that the medium of the shown footage is video. They bring out typical formal features and technical possibilities of the medium, such as the possibility of pausing or rewinding a videotape on a VCR, and the characteristic horizontal flickering scan lines which cross the video image when those possibilities are used.

On the other hand, the operations of pausing, rewinding, and playing the videotape in slow motion indicate the fact that the videotape is actually embedded in another

medium, namely film. The actions direct the spectator's attention to the diegesis of Haneke's narrative fiction film because they imply another spectator; someone who is looking at and controlling the movement of the video images at the same time. In other words, the manipulations and interruptions of the moving video point to a viewer who is using the remote control. This active spectator turns out to exist inside the world created by the narrative film which follows the video. The film's fourteen-year-old protagonist named Benny is shown to repeatedly scrutinize the images of the dying pig by operating the remote control.

Because Benny's actions with the remote control are both visible within the video scene and in the subsequent narrative film, they function as the most important link between the two parts—the video and the film. Moreover, as the pausing, rewinding, and slowing down of the moving video images already implicitly refer to a viewer/actor which the film will make explicit later on, they motivate and soften the abrupt transition between the shaky, coarse-grained, unedited video material and the filmed part which consists of steady shots and the smooth, well-edited images of a high-quality film production. Another aspect which relates the video segment to the narrative film is the fact that two of the people in the small crowd around the suffering pig are introduced later on in the film as Benny's parents. What is more, Benny is not only shown to be the diegetic viewer of the video, he also turns out to be the producer of it. All in all, the bond between the video clip and the narrative film is tightened in many ways as the film proceeds. As it turns out, the moving images of the dying pig do not simply precede the cinematic narrative; they are embedded in the film's diegesis.

However, although the transition from video images to film images is quite smooth because the relationship between the shown video material and the film story soon becomes clear, the switch from video to film does not come about entirely without a hitch. The transition remains complicated because the video recording and the narrative film each produce a reality effect, yet in a different way. In other words, the video and the film both evoke the impression that what they represent is reality, but the characteristics or strategies by which this impression is evoked are dissimilar. Put briefly, the video images produce the impression of showing reality through features which can best be characterized as flaws or imperfections, such as blurriness and color distortion. The reality effect of the film scenes, on the other hand, depends entirely on the flawlessness and seeming transparency of the material. What is more, the reality effects produced by the video and those of the film images give rise to a different sort and extent of belief. The viewer's belief in the world shown by the video is, for instance, likely to be more profound than the viewer's belief in the filmed world. In this part, I will further pinpoint the reality effects of film and video by looking into films and videos in which the two media are combined. Alongside *Benny's Video*, the main corpus of investigation includes the film *Family Viewing* (Atom Egoyan 1987) and *Battles of Troy* (2005), a video documentary by Krassimir Terziev.

The apparent recurrence of the same two reality effects of video and film in a large number of works makes it reasonable to assume that the effects are related to the

specificity of video and film. But how can an effect such as the reality effect exactly relate to a medium's specificity, which I defined in the introduction as a layered structure which consists of a physical support and a number of conventions? How do the typical reality effects of film and video which recur in films and videos relate to specific technological possibilities and conventional applications of the two media? As will become clear below, answering this question will not only further delineate the specificity of film and video, but will also lead to a redefinition of the concept of medium specificity itself.



# CHAPTER 1

## REALITY EFFECTS: LITERATURE, FILM, AND VIDEO

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In “The Reality Effect” (1982), Roland Barthes attempts to discover the significance of seemingly insignificant parts in realist novels; the useless details and superfluous descriptions to which structural analysis—“occupied as it is with separating out and systematizing the main articulations of narrative” (135)—can assign no functional value within the narrative. The detailed descriptions are insignificant in that they seem to be detached from the semiotic structure of the narrative. They do not, for instance, constitute an indication of characterization or atmosphere. Nor can they be said to have a classical rhetorical function, for the realist descriptions do not comply with the demands of plausibility and possibility which governed classical discourse.

To rush to the conclusion of Barthes’ text before discussing the argument leading up to it, the detailed descriptions produce a reality effect. These “residues of functional analyses” seem to “denote what is commonly called ‘concrete reality’ (casual movements, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words)” (1982: 38). Instead of depicting the plausible, possible, and general (i.e. the *vraisemblable*), detailed descriptions in realist texts appear to give a naked account of what is or was. The apparent interest of realist narratives in referential reality—including all its particularities—seems to resist being given a meaning. First, the detailed descriptions do not *mean* anything; they do not stand for anything other than themselves, they just *are*. Secondly, they seem to resist meaning because, as Barthes explains, reference to concrete reality is brandished as a weapon against meaning by the ideology of our time, “as if there were some indisputable law that what is truly alive could not signify—and vice versa” (139).

In order to further examine the seeming resistance of realist texts to meaning, Barthes turns to Ferdinand de Saussure’s ideas on the sign. According to de Saussure, the category of the referent is not indispensable for the functioning of language; communication can occur through signifiers and signifieds alone. If language is to be studied effectively, de Saussure argues, the referents of signs can best be placed in brackets. With this idea in mind, Barthes notes that realist texts do not place such brackets at all. Instead, they seem to attempt to draw in the referent. As concrete details and descriptions in realist novels do not have a clear meaning or function within the structure of the narrative, they seem to be pure encounters between signifiers and referents. With that, the signified appears to be bypassed, or rather, to be expelled from the sign. *Seem*, that is, because such an encounter between signifier and referent at the expense of the signified would imply an impossible alteration of the



sign. It is rather an illusion which is evoked by realist texts—the referential illusion, as Barthes calls it. The fact is that the details do not really denote reality directly, they rather signify reality by connotation. As Barthes explains:

The truth behind this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist utterance as a signified of denotation, the “real” slips back in as a signified of connotation; at the very moment these details are supposed to denote reality directly, all they do, tacitly, is signify it. Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door, say, in the last analysis, only this: we are the real. It is this category of the real, and not its various contents, which is being signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent, standing alone, becomes the true signifier of realism. A reality effect is produced, which is the basis for that unavowed “vraisemblance” which forms the aesthetic of all standard works of modernity.

1982: 16

Precisely because the insignificant details in realist texts evoke the referential illusion—the illusion that the signified is expelled from the sign and that signifiers collide with their referent—they signify the category of the real: “the absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent [...] becomes the true signifier of realism” (1982: 16). In other words, the insignificance of details becomes a signifier whose signified is the category of the real. This process is, however, marked by Barthes as the truth *behind* the referential illusion. The connotations “we are the real” or “this is reality” are not recognizable as signifieds, nor is the category of the real. Instead, realist texts seems to have hauled in the referent; to refer to referential reality directly. Reality thus seems to be denoted directly by realist texts while it is in fact signified.

### Expanding “The Reality Effect”

In “The Reality Effect,” Roland Barthes focuses solely on literary texts. In order to gain understanding of the reality effects in—among others—Haneke’s film *Benny’s Video* with the help of Barthes’ ideas, it is necessary to consider how these ideas would function outside of the scope of literary texts alone. More specifically, how does Barthes’ theory apply to the media of film and video?<sup>1</sup> Can the reality effect Barthes identifies in literary texts be produced in a similar fashion by film(s) and video(s)? Can the device of detailed descriptions, which Barthes points out as being responsible for the reality effect of literary texts, also function in films and videos?

The differences between detailed representations by literature on the one hand and film on the other, have been explored by theorists studying the adaptation from novel to film, such as Seymour Chatman and Robert Stam. One of the lessons that can be drawn from adaptation studies is that detailed depictions by film and video cannot

simply be regarded as the visual equivalent of detailed descriptions in literary texts. The first reason for this is that, whereas many aspects can still remain undetermined in detailed literary descriptions, the details shown in film and video images are inevitably specific. Films and videos possess an “excessive particularity, a plenitude of visual details aptly called [...] ‘over-specification’” (Chatman 1980: 126). Moreover, whereas the selection among the number of details evoked is determined and limited in a literary text, the number of details in a film or video representation is indeterminate (125).<sup>2</sup> Comparative studies such as Chatman’s therefore define film images as over-detailed, over-specified, and excessively particular.

Another reason for which the detailed depictions by film and video cannot be regarded as the visual equivalent of detailed descriptions in literary texts is that the depictions are less likely to halt the narrative timeline of a film or video. For although film and video mostly possess a plenitude of visual details, the movement of the images does not always allow the viewer time to dwell on this plenitude, and to notice each and every detail. Films can place some emphasis on certain details through techniques such as framing, zooming or focusing—techniques which can signify that certain details are significant. Yet a large measure of superfluous detail is an inevitable characteristic of film and video images. Although the details depicted by film and video do not hold the temporal progress of the narrative (if any), they have an important thing in common with the details in realist literature: they are largely insignificant.

Overflowing with superfluous detail, film and video might be expected to outshine literature in creating reality effects. Yet, although the excess detail certainly contributes to the strong reality effects that film and video are able to produce, it is not the most important source of these effects. Rather, one of the most important sources of the reality effects of the two lens-based media lies in the source of the excess detail itself: the technological and chemical ways in which analogue film and video images are produced.

Both film and video images are brought about by rays of light that pass through the lens of a camera; rays of light, moreover, which are generated or reflected into the camera by objects that are present in front of the recording device. In film cameras, the light is projected onto the light-sensitive celluloid filmstrip which passes by the shutter. The light beam imprints discrete, rectangular images onto the transparent filmstrip, which only become visible (and projectable) as positive images after a chemical development process. In video cameras, the visual information which the rays of light contain is transformed into an electronic signal by a cathode ray tube or by a light-sensitive CCD-chip. This electronic signal can subsequently be sent through wires and be broadcast immediately by devices which are able to translate the electronic signal back into a luminous image (e.g., a TV or the video camera itself). The electronic signal can however also be stored on magnetic videotape, on which magnetic particles can be magnetized by and in proportion to the electronic signal.<sup>3</sup> Unlike film stock, magnetic tape doesn’t show discrete images; the visual information is stored continuously on the length of the tape.

As these processes of image production are to a large degree automatic, the registration of details can hardly be prevented. All objects which appear in front of the lens of a film or video camera will leave their imprint on the resulting images. However, the reality effect of film and video does not so much depend on the detail itself. It rather lies in the fact that the images are caused by what they show; they are traces of objects which were once present in front of the lens. Both film and video images can be understood as indexes; signs which refer to something on the basis of contiguity or continuity. Film and video images in the first place work as an index by contiguity: they are physically caused by their referents, indicating physical proximity, even touch. Yet the temporal aspect of continuity is not entirely absent from this, for although the cause of the image (its referent) can lie in the past, image and object must once have been in the same moment. Roland Barthes argues that photographs (indexical images which come into being by the same photochemical process as film images) prove that something was once there, at that place, at that time, in front of the photo camera. Hence his famous claim that the essence of photographs, their *noeme*, is the “that has been” (2000: 77).

One of the remarkable things of indexical signs is that they are able to provide the past objects of which they are a trace with physical presence. “The object is made present to the addressee,” Mary-Ann Doane explains in one of her discussions of indexicality (2007: 133). In her “Notes on the Index,” Krauss defines indexes as “marks or traces of a particular cause, and this cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify” (1986: 198). The intriguing effect of the index, Krauss explains, is caused by time, which provides the past (by definition transient and ungraspable) with an existential and physical presence. In Krauss’ account, the indexical sign appears to carry physical traces of its physically and temporally absent cause with itself in the present. This idea points to a remarkable similarity between the effect of superfluous literary descriptions and the index: the referent seems to be “hailed into” the sign. For although Krauss writes that indexes signify objects, the objects she refers to are not so much the signifieds, but the referents of the index. The close alliance of the indexical sign with the physical world seems to bypass signification. Like descriptive realist texts, indexes seem to be pure encounters between signifiers and referents. With that, the signified appears to be expelled from the sign. It is telling in this regard that Barthes has argued that a photograph “is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent. [...] It is as if the photograph carries the referent with itself” (2000: 5, emphasis in original).

The ability of the index to make its past cause and referent present is sustained by the movement of film and video images. Although film images, like photographs, necessarily show something that actually was in front of the lens at the time of shooting, the pastness of their referent is overruled by the movement of the filmed images. Both photographs and film images signal “there it is” as well as “that has been” at the same time; yet, the “there it is” tends to dominate in film. Christian Metz has argued that the essence of film should indeed be defined as “there it is,” because film