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Biometric film images

A new mode of audiovisual records affecting reality?

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If *harraga* means burning the distance that generates a remove, a measurable interval, a metrical space, then this is – and particularly in light of deterritorialization and the digitization of borders – not simply a question of topography or geography, but of time and intensity. By setting out on the path of a future without a past, burning the narrative of identity and placing their body onto high sea, the *harraga* turn the body into a zone of indeterminacy, open for the virtual like a sail into which the wind blows. In the films they produce and circulate with phones the *harraga* offer themselves like attractors again and again to the machinic discursivity of the camera. It is an absolute deterritorialization that gets expressed from these small films: *harraga* means making oneself equally into a projectile and shooting. To be *harrag* is a question of absolute speed.[1]

Film is considered to be an imaging procedure that portrays something like a body, where in the course of this portrayal something like its gender gets constructed, which – in Teresa de Lauretis' words – involves both the product and the process of

representation. In contrast, biometrics is a procedure that makes a body readable for information technology apparatuses, biometrics extracts information from a body according to a determined pattern of detection. The biometrics identification technologies that are being used currently assume that apparatuses can provide a more truthful disclosure than a body-person, whose self-portrayal must be suspected of disingenuousness or at least lacking precision or simply – as with respect to the fingerprint rather than password-based solutions currently propagated for Android or laptops – inadequacy.

In times of intelligent archive searches and forensic audio and video analysis we are dealing with what perhaps initially appears to be a paradoxical 'return' of paradigms of contact and imprint ("image-empreinte," George Didi-Huberman).[2] With the proliferation of almost ubiquitous multi-function screens in science and in broad daylight (instead of for leisurely transmission in a dark projection box), and with more convertible, smaller mobile media made possible by the postmedia condition, which can quickly transport content in a generalized form, the digital audiovisual moving image is witnessing a revitalization of its power as witness: the image-technologically codified indexicality of audiovisual documents or "time objects" (Bernard Stiegler) is increasingly of juridical interest not only with respect to the explicitly biometrical image. It refers additionally to everyday worlds of an expanded cinema or post-cinema. Therefore, the question of what a biometric film image "is" or what it "means" seems much less controversial to me than the development of research perspectives that, on the basis of configurations, investigate how biometric film images function, how they come about and, possibly, what lines of flight they project.

Biometric images are calculating images. We do something different with them than look at them. Although they don't represent, but rather simulate, gender-based inferences are a central "operative" element (gender detection) in both voice biometrics and behavioral biometrics. – Does the biometric image therefore, despite its alleged neutrality and impartiality, correspond with a grave
re-ontologization of binary gender in administrative contexts? [3] Biometric images are mathematically captured and evaluated. In a subtractive procedure specific qualities are computationally segregated from film streams (stream instead of sequence!), which then, for example, count as an identity or deviant behavior. Can that which is subtracted from film also be re-inserted to these? And what is the excess of biometrics? Software solutions such as "3VR VisionPoint^{TM} VMS" use facial and object tracking as well as license plate and demographic analysis so that users can search through video data banks according to color, speed, direction, size, age and gender, a license plate number or a face.

Our spaces of everyday life and amusement are increasingly saturated by biometric film images, from the person recognition software that is built into amateur and hobby cameras to increasing video surveillance. – Maybe the boom of so-called reaction videos or a look like that of the BBC television series Sherlock, with its visualization of information extracted from visual evidence relevant to the case in question, reflects this kind of biometrical everyday aesthetic. As they aid less in creating an image of a certain thing, however, biometrical images verge on the post-aesthetic, they are operative images, as Harun Farocki observed in his cinematic grappling with the Gulf War, mathematic-technical operations that are completely absorbed in processual executions. – Can they, then, still be considered images at all?

Beyond the narrative treatment of biometric identification and verification in Hollywood cinema, it seems to me that the everyday cultural dimension of biometric film images remains insufficiently examined. In this sense it is important to analyze, on the one hand, how biometric images mediate and embody identities, and on the other, how they are interpreted, how their supposed accuracy, truthfulness and transparency are weighed against ambivalences and uncertainties. If we want to understand biometric film images, we need a precise analysis of both their emergence and manufacture, and of their experience and practice in use.

As in Allan Sekula's engagement with the history of photography and the emergence of a cultural order in the nineteenth century in which the social body was increasingly made secure through the identification of migrants and vagabonds (for example, in "The Body and the Archive," 1986), it is necessary to develop a history of the biometric film image. While Sekula fleshed out the juridical potential of photographic realism, that is, how the denotative unambiguousness of which an image is capable augments the quantitative paradigm, I assume that biometric "contact" can be taken up analytically, for one, as an anthropological constant of image production as a testimony of existence. In addition, I am interested in a genealogical investigation of the matrix – objectivistic and cased in technical neutrality – of the biometric body in reference to the racialized and binary-gendered body, as it was brought to bear, for example, in bodily moldings for colonial panoramas or in the *moulages* so typical in the history of medical anthropology, which were not understood as images precisely because they issued not from the distance of the gaze, but from the proximity of contact. With respect to the ontology of the body, which, in the terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, is the place where we see (others) (and how they see and

are seen) and where we are seen ourselves, (biometric) code as audiovisual imprint is simultaneously the distance that allows science to tamper with things without inhabiting them, as Merleau-Ponty comments in his critique of "operative" thinking, which he saw not least in the binary cycle of cybernetic (control) machines at work. – A genealogy of biometric film images thus involves considerations on phenomenology and the philosophy of cinema. – And it should not only take up the burning, but be thought with respect to the disappearance of something that Alexander Galloway characterized as "blackness," which he understands as the condition of possibility of cybernetic societies. [4]

An acquaintance of mine, a fisher in the urban periphery of Dakar, who had traveled by boat to the Canaries and been re-deported multiple times, described to me how ships are made to disappear on the Frontex radar with *grisgris*: "when you go there you have no ring, no watch, no phone, everything is made clean, everything is left behind. This is how you set out. There is no light, no light... When you visit one, he makes you – these are seers, or, they tell you what will happen tomorrow or in five years. [...] Or a mara [marabout] tells you that you should not leave today or you won't have anything and will only lose everything, but starting tomorrow you would catch many fish. But you have to make this and that offering, and pay this and that much. They have something, it is called... a gift of God. For the pirogue they give you the *grisgris*, with which one tricks Frontex. Frontex, they are the controllers, but they won't see you at all. No, the *grisgris* will skew their machine. The machine will indeed show the noise, they will see that there is a motor there, but they will not be able to make a connection to it. So, they will be sure that in this area there is a boat with a running motor, but they will not know if it is here or

there. And since the sea is large, they will not localize the boat. But as soon as the *grisgris* are removed, as soon as you arrive, they will see you, they will see the boat. But as long as the *grisgris* are fastened to the pirogue, they will not see the pirogue. The *grisgris* are made from a black cat, one like the one that was lying there [points to the spot]. [...] The marabouts make *grisgris* from the skin of black cats or goats and lay the victims inside [...] That's how it is."

On January 10, 2017 the official D. Joos of the organizational unit SB 33 of the Federal Police Directorate Stuttgart registered a so-called public service of process (*öffentliche Zustellung*) under the reference number 33 – 13 02 06 – 761500106008/Harrag for a person who had documented themselves under the name HARRAG, El Mahfoud, with the rationale that a service of process was not possible or did not promise success.

How can the potentialities and ontologies of the migrant "ana-cinematic" practice (Fred Moten) of escape be scrutinized with attention to their constitutive part in the development of biometric post-cinematic constellations. By ana-cinematographic practices I mean film practices that have already long existed as a kind of "sub-meaning" and disturbance of the cinematographic apparatus or as its excess, practices that come from the margins and are directed against the primacy of narrative film and literally issue from border-crossing ("harraga") or transit situations. Migration makes another kind of cinema possible.[5] As a space of conversation, as "in-act" (Erin Manning), which does not necessarily aim for a cinematographic object, it follows a performative mode of film or in other words, cinematographic processes, which are not concerned with a surveilling, observing attentiveness. Rather, these processes consist in creating an expressive audiovisual form for an affect that is to a certain extent

indecipherable and which, by being sent and shared and circulated, produces a mobility that crosses boundaries and borders. This is what I understand by "mobile undercommons of migration." Within the paradigm of the biometric film image, which deals with a dystopic control of global mobility, the haptic of ana-cinematographic migrant practices is fleeting/fugitive, between code and decoding as a cultural logic and machinic operation.

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[1] Editor's note: On the meaning of *harraga* as a characterization for fleeing over the Mediterranian Sea as well as on their audiovisual forms of expression see Brigitta Kuster, *Grenze Filmen. Eine kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse audiovisueller Produktionen an den Grenzen Europas* [*Filming Borders. A Cultural Studies Analysis of Audiovisual Production on the Borders of Europe*], Bielefeld: Transcript 2018.

[2] The extent to which the paradigm of imprint applies, even in changed form, to the biometrics procedures developed at present, which are as non-invasive as possible and therefore contact-less, would need to be more precisely argued.

[3] On this see also Dean Spade, *Normal Life. Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics & the Limits of Law,* Duke University Press 2015.

[4] Alexander R. Galloway, "The Black Universe," in: Ibid., *Laruelle. Against the Digital.* University of Minnesota Press 2014, 1320150; Alexander R. Galloway, "Black Box, Black Bloc." A lecture given at the New School in New York City on April 12,

2010. http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/pdf/Galloway,%20Black%20Box%20Black%20Bloc,%20New%20School.pdf.

[5] The movements of migration have long been accompanied by moving images. And more, the cinematographic practices of migration can be understood as a specific formation of an expanded cinema: improvised, precarious cinematic manifestations in community centers, diasporic cinema spaces, clubs or private houses of urban immigrant communities, or today more and more as part of online video and media activism. The images of migration include copies, quotations from along the way, neo-exoticisms and urban subcultures. They emerge as appropriations, cut-and-paste strategies, remakes of powerful narratives and stereotypes and as home-movies of spaces of the diaspora and of migrant social networks or as deregulated oppositional pieces to larger cinematic economies, such as the bootleg digital copies and their analog predecessors. Thus, the histories of migration always also tell histories of technology. The newest accessory for the spread, technological inventions in conjunction with makeshift constructs, repairs ("bricolage"), downloads, satellite dishes and cheap television channels – they are all part of a distribution of cinema through and with migration, which functions both as a source of image production and a place of image consumption. Migration simultaneously creates images, a new cinema and a public. It thus plays an important role for what Sean Cubitt called "cinema effect."