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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**

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Pass This On! How to Copy the Pandemic with Alex Gerbaulet

Ulrike Bergermann

In May 2020, filmmaker Alex Gerbaulet delivered a short film to a festival asking if one could and should make films in pandemic times. The answer assembles a very special use of various media, and a very special choice of quotes, conceiving visuals for a contagion through being touched.

"If anyone speaks, it gets light" (Freud 2001 [1905], 223). The famous quote of a child passed on by Sigmund Freud renders the double meaning of the German word both in terms of the opposite of darkness (like in German "*hell*") and of weight (like in "hard times," or "times of a pandemic"). As long as there is light, we are alive, and talking is even able to replace the light. This holds true both for cinematic projection, for digital screens, and for writing and reading words.

Coming together in a dark place, though, is one of the attractions and unique experiences a film festival used to offer. Lars Henrik Gass, director of the 66th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2020,[1] has warned convincingly

1   The festival took place online between the 13th and 18th of May 2020, showing 350 films; instead of the expected 1,000 tickets, 2,500 were sold in 60 countries, and more than 1,000 special visitors from 70 countries joined online too. The symbolic price of 9.99 Euros came with a wink to the streaming portal's fees, raising 23,000 Euros as a donation to the social foundation of VG Bild, the association for the rights of creators of visual art. About half of the audience from the previous year was considered "lost," and new audiences "came" (overseas viewers, schools, self-organized groups, etc.)

that the praise of the "real experience," along with a (digital) media pessimism and a bit of elitism, lacks complexity in addressing the multi-layered task of transferring a festival into an online format.[2] Referring to Walter Benjamin's concept of film and the public, where dispersion, not melting gives way to a radical collective experience, and to Deleuze's attack on bourgeois cinema, Gass rejected a call for "false proximity" (2020).

Gass passed the question "Can and should we make films now?" on to the filmmakers he had been cooperating with, and asked them for contributions made in less than one hour's time.[3] Filmmaker Brenda Lien let us know that the fee offered was 100 euros. "The eleven contributions," said Gass, "were 'rewarded with the fee usually paid in Germany for a psychotherapeutic setting,'" observed film critic Philipp Stadelmaier: "In times of COVID-19, the festival becomes the patient, who lets himself be cured by filmmakers he needs to continue existing" (2020). The transmission chain of *talking cures* and *filming cures* does not break.[4] What is the talking mode of German filmmaker Alex Gerbaulet?

Her short film, like the others, does not have a title of its own; there are no opening or end credits, just an announcement at the festival's website, giving its own question in quotation marks like a film title: "Can and should we make films now?" (https://vimeo.com/422485870). Gerbaulet's answer of two minutes and ten seconds is quick and bare, featuring white letters on a black setting, no sound. Immediately, we fenter into the beginning of a story, while we read: "A / picture. / Two girls lay on the bed. / Eyes closed. / Holding hands. / Fingers folded into each other. / Their fingertips / tap / messages / on the back / of each other's hands. / Speaking / of / everything." The words blink like tapping on the eyes. The scene can unfold in the mind, and it represents people not seeing images themselves, but talking in the tactile mode about

See www.kurzfilmtage.de/en and Gass 2020. See also New York film curator Jared Rapfogel's report on the labor around and the great success of the festival as well as the "bittersweet" viewing experience, and some beautiful film reviews of Vika Kirchenbauer's or Thirza Cuthand's contributions, among others (Rapfogel 2020).

2   Gass gives a sensible and nuanced elaboration on the temporal and fragile nature of online festival formats, responsibilities towards the filmmakers, the festival staff, and the audience, as well as on collective learning and doing, or on possibilities (democratizing access) and pitfalls (commercialization, lack of live events, etc.) (the climate crisis applies to both sides). He criticizes the media pessimism in Bachmann et al. 2020, Heide Schlüpmann 2020, and others.

3   Contributers to this short film slot included Korpys/Löffler, Jens Pecho, Franz Müller, Andreas Reihse/Zaza Rusadze, Max Linz with his film class at the University of the Arts Berlin UdK, Jovana Reisinger, Kerstin Honeit, Kristina Kilian, Dietrich Brüggemann, Brenda Lien, and Alex Gerbaulet (see http://www.alexgerbaulet.de).

4   Other critics would have preferred a halting of the transmission, like Jonas Nestroy, who perceived all films as subjected to the theme of COVID-19, but at the same time wanted to get away from the never-ending contamination of politics and the art of film (Nestroy 2020).

"everything." Gerbaulet questions the making of images as well as of sound.[5] Maybe this is a hint to the invisibility of the pandemic, to a lack of imagery regarding the virus or the act of contagion. No pictorial metaphors, no graphic abstractions of a virus, no charts of dissemination transfers are given as a supplement. Can and should we make films now? Or just tap on each other's hands? But what if we got infected? For Gerbaulet, "feeling contagious is a fundamental queer experience."[6]

"A / code / that / gets / under / the / skin. / Contamination / means / pollution, / but also contact. / Pollution through contact," the film continues. The queer twist gives the formal experiment a special spin. Reminiscent of vampire stories' homoerotic streak, its lesbian *Carmilla*s, Catherine Deneuve eating Susan Sarandon in Tony Scott's lesbian vampire classic *The Hunger* (UK 1983), or Keanu Reeves getting weak from the bite of Gary Oldman's brides in *Dracula* (USA 1992), this contagion is imagined as one between two girls lying on a bed. Relations between the COVID-19 and the HIV pandemics may be scarce, as the first is not transmitted sexually or through shared use of needles, did not start with gay men, etc., but topics like *invisibility*, *globality*, or the contested *research for a cure* come to mind. The code gets under the skin and infects somebody (while being touched in cinema remains a metaphor); since the HIV pandemic, the association between contagion and contamination or pollution is, as they say, virulent. In just one step between textual "shots," the line "under the skin" mutated from love to illness, like in Neneh Cherry's song *I've Got You Under My Skin*. In 1990, this music video superimposed the song text in typeface near the singer and denounced, in a rap about HIV and AIDS, a society without empathy, stigmatizing contagion as a marker of a "false love."[7]

Alex Gerbaulet invites us to join the chain of proliferation. The white letters on black background remain the same in size and position,[8] shown in mostly constant speed—with the exception of one line, which not only points to the acoustic side of language, but is a gesture out of the screen or monitor: "Hello,

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5   Brigitta Kuster's short film *Erase them! The image as it is falling apart into looks* (D 2012, 8:50 min.) also gives only the written words of the demands of refugees occupying a church in Vienna white on black (while we hear their voices) in order to protect the protestors—and to problematize visuality as a policing method of European border management; Kuster inserts still images with printed hands on walls as a reference to Marguerite Duras's film *Les mains négatifs*—leaving human traces and leaving finger-prints as highly ambivalent operations of touch.

6   Personal message, June 30, 2020.

7   Remakes or quotes from older media also could be considered as a passing on of something contagious, like the song entitled *I've Got You Under My Skin*, recorded by Cole Porter in 1936, then taken up by Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra.

8   Florian Krautkrämer lists various examples of *Schriftfilm* in experimental films and their various functions of letters, words, and textual images, especially Michael Snow's *So Is This* (Canada 1983, 45 min.), showing words white-on-black, which add up to sentences and encompass multiple media reflective elements. See Krautkrämer 2013, 229–71, esp. 244f.; see Scheffer et al. 2014.

hello, hello, how low?" highlights one word after the other in pink instead of white, like on a karaoke machine playing Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, the famous anthem of 1991[9]—a request to sing the words out loud, echoing the call. What kind of contagion would that be—would we be touched by the arbitrary code, the written words, in a queer manner, at a time of social distancing, while we cannot gather in dark halls like the cinema auditorium or concert halls to dive into moving images or sound together? Touched, if the story was transmitted digitally into single computers and households, read and sung aloud?

Close up. The following words address different elements of the medium film, including the depiction of a scene, stage directions for the camera man, and filmic materialities. The film reads: "Close up. / Skin. / A scratch / on / the cell / u / loit. / Self / inflammable / light. / Translated / into / ones and zeros. / Lightning. / A close up face. / The eyelids flutter. / Red. / Red. / White." Even after digitization (from celluloid film to digital numbers), and with a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the importance of the acoustic to combine the letters to make sense, it is all about the visual, about light. Because the lines "Red. / Red. / White." depict an opening of the eyes from the perspective of the person who conceives the light through closed eyelids (maybe it's blood vessels) as red first, then as white light after opening the eyes. "This / is / a scene / from / a film / life / dream / film/ life / dream," chants the next line, rhythmically switching from closing to opening, from light to dark, and in between stages of consciousness like being awake, asleep, or immersed in a film. And then, at the very end at min. 2:05, a radical change of the film mode happens. For less than one second each, three pictures are inserted, at first a part of a black-and-white photograph, enlarged, grainy, probably showing a person seeing through a looking glass; then a photograph of a person in a rumpled bed (the site of dreaming/sleeping/dreaming) hugging a pillow, without the head being seen; and finally a printed graphic representation of a person with a gas mask and a bottle carrying a nuclear radiation label. The speed and rhythm of the images echo the speed and rhythm of the last three words, "film / life / dream," so that we are tempted to read the images in correspondence to the script (like: the first being a *film* still blown up, like in Michelangelo Antonioni's sequence of black-and-white photos of a hidden deadly threat in *Blow up*[10]; the second a photorealistic picture, *life*; the third, the most "unrealistic," stylized, but colored *dream* picture). As has been said about the video recorder's impact on film analysis and film studies, it is now also groundbreaking for film

9   This song also contains the motifs of light and contagion: "With the lights out, It's less dangerous / Here we are now, entertain us / I feel stupid and contagious / Here we are now, entertain us."

10   … or James Stewart's looking glass in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, another icon of immobilized watching and possible unseen death, 1954… the split of a second opens up multiple concatenations through one flash of a picture.

reception in a digital manner that we are able to rewind, to halt, and to play again, so that these tiny bits and pieces can be contemplated.

The sudden change of media formats conjures up another famous one, which was in Gerbaulet's mind from the very beginning: The opening words, "a / picture," already alluded to Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (F 1962), because its protagonist was capable of time travel only because he had a picture of the desired woman in his mind.[11] In between the series of hundreds of black-and-white photographs that make up *La Jetée*, for three seconds we see a sequence where the beloved woman, sleeping, looking like (in) a photograph, opens her eyes and looks into the camera, into the eyes of the viewer, thus proving the image to be always potentially moving, the linchpin for Marker's philosophy of love and time in 1962. *La Jetée* did not display writing on or between the photographs (the film calls itself a "photo-roman," a photo-novel), narrating with a voice-over the story of a future loop in time, where a dreaming time traveler is sent back before World War III in order to call for help in the future afterwards. But Gerbaulet's short film and *La Jetée* do have some motifs in common: no moving images try to catch what is invisible (neither a world war nor a pandemic); the love of a woman is a focal point; the stories hint at the relations of the individual and the collective, maybe to humanity and survival, and to filmmaking as such.[12]

Marker's film oftentimes has been read as a parable of cinema. Reinhold Görling reminded us that the time traveler is the cinemagoer, that the researchers in the film act like cameramen, and that like in cinema, the protagonist has no attachment in time. Language is always image, Görling continues with regard to Marker, insofar as there is no meaning attached to words without memories (Görling 2014, 99)—and this holds true for Gerbaulet's film as well. But Marker's film insert stages awakening and animation (like in the history of film, where "Bio-Skope" is translated as "living pictures"), while the inserts in a time of pandemic show images of sleep and life-threats. The old media analogues between light and animation and life give way to those between the digital code, video platforms, and the pandemic. The virus has no life of its own, but copies its code into living beings in order to reproduce, so that the host's cells are programmed to pass on a code that was not theirs. In order to reproduce, this being does not need two sexes.

11   Gerbaulet, personal communication, June 30, 2020.
12   Chris Marker called *La Jetée* a remake of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; and he had been an assis-
       tant in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), which combined archival footage of Nazi
       concentration camps with color film... all of which opens up new paths of transfers (like
       one picture passing on "contagions" along a line of transmissions). Marker stated that
       he would have discovered the Cinéma vérité more or less unconsciously when strolling
       through Paris on a day off from shooting a picture about the colonial war in Algeria (a
       suppressed, traumatic memory) and intuitively photographing what came to be the
       story of *La Jetée*. Lipton 2008; see also Harbord 2009. The film is a daydream of the
       filmmaker.

The first century of homosexuality in the movies has been called "a century of *sin*ema" (Griffiths 2006, 1). There is quite a history of interlocking queer love and death, or of "Lethal Lesbians: The Cinematic Inscription of Murderous Desire," as B. Ruby Rich put it (2013, 103). A bit later, in most cases, the New Queer Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s was also HIV/AIDS cinema. And more recently, the concept of trans cinema has also been related to light and life. Reflecting not only on the picturing of (maybe queer) bodies, but even more so on the film modality of visualization, Eliza Steinbock refers to the animation of images and the blackness in between as a connection of life and death:

> Our attachment to the (non)human life of a film—neither dead nor alive, both dead and alive, confounding all either/or –isms—ruptures the proper hierarchies of intimacy. Film's shimmering pulses, flickering from dark to image to dark, death to life to death, bring us to the affective core of ontological enquiry. If film operates as an apparatus for the animation of the body, cinema itself seems inversely to be animated by the morphing qualities of bodies. For trans subjectivities, film's challenge to bodily autonomy and affective sovereignty has special valence. The ability to animate and become reanimated lies at the heart of transition narratives that follow a trajectory of dying and being reborn… (2019, 15)

Interestingly, the topic of "light" changes from the "shining," "reflecting," or "projecting" characteristics formerly addressed in film writing to "shimmering pulses." This is not about the full image, a bright or colorful screen, but about the effects of difference, a gentle staccato, reminiscent of the rhythm of fingers tapping a code, favoring the tactile senses of finger and eye, (contagious) proximity over (safer) distance. Queer and trans cinema share these figures with film festivals in pandemic times. We, the audience of the film festival, might not be in the cinematic cave together, but we connect through shimmers, and maybe touchscreens. This does not make cis people trans. Not "everything non-normative" is queer, and not every "transition" equals a trans life. But who knows, if your vampire is not waiting around the corner. Read: Black. White. Black (fig. 1).

Two girls lay on the bed.

[Figure 1] Filmstill (Source: Alex Gerbaulet, untitled, 2020)

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

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