

THE CAMERA'S PERFORMATIVITY AS AN EMANCIPATORY GESTURE¹

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Abstract: This article focuses on the history of the performativity of cinema, a technical medium that, by definition, excludes traditionally understood forms of performativity. Central to this inquiry – drawing on Dieter Mersch's and Vilém Flusser's theories – is the identification of moments when filmmakers employ technology *non-technically*, against its prescribed use. Such camera gestures can be understood in relation to the original meaning of *technē*, which does not signify mere making, fabrication, or utilization of tools, but rather the revealing or uncovering of the truth of things. The core of the article is the camera in the hands of feminist filmmakers, whose performative camera use attempts to discover a feminine handwriting and an autonomous expressive mode. The classical, male-dominated cinematic narrative can be disrupted through long takes, unconventional axes of movement, unusual distances and angles, panoramic rotation of the camera, and recording with atypical devices, techniques, and technologies. The camera is no longer hidden and concealed; on the contrary, it is made visible, emphasized, and presented to viewers as a means of demonstrating alternative possibilities. Such a camera may be used for thinking *differently* – subversively, expressively, experimentally, and, crucially for this study, performatively. The camera comes to the foreground, interrupting and unsettling. This article shows how this performative camera has been realized in the work of selected women filmmakers and asks what role it might serve today, how it might reveal other perspectives and offer new modes of negotiation with the technology that continuously surrounds us.

Keywords: performativity, cinema, operativity, feminism, *l'écriture féminine*, women filmmakers, motion picture camera

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[...] the less the image can express the sensation in a more immediate manner; it must deny it with regard to form as well as to subject matter; the subject matter must be a more daring and foreign parable and example of it; the form must bear more the character of the opposition and separation.

Friedrich Hölderlin²

This article reflects on how to conceptualize the performativity of cinema – understood as a technical image, fixed by technology on film stock or digitally programmed as code, and thus eluding traditional conceptions of performativity. According to the German media philosopher Dieter Mersch, unlike artistic practices commonly associated with performativity, technical apparatuses – paradigmatic among which are film, the film camera, and the film projector – are bound to operations, or more precisely to operativity.³ Operativity is defined above all by procedures and rules connected with the handling of machines and bound to programmes. In the case of film, the camera operator records an object or scene so that the resulting image is clearly legible and easily decipherable, selects apertures and lens sizes appropriately, works with post-production programmes to enhance highlights and emphasize contrasts, influences the tonality of the image, and finally projects the completed film on a standardized projector. Operativity is always grounded in flawless functioning – just as in the projection of a film, without which its illusory movement would not be smooth and the credibility of the fictional world would be difficult to sustain. Yet even work with film, seemingly resistant towards the performative gesture, can at times approach it, thereby disrupting various norms, stereotypes, and illusions, and, by way of experimentation, drawing attention to the manipulation that film conventionally entails. Attending to the performativity of cinema can also have a more general significance: it can point to the fact that technology and technological systems need not always overwhelm or absorb us through their operations, but that it is possible to negotiate with them in ways that, for all their problematic

² Friedrich Hölderlin, "The Ground for Empedocles" (Grund zum Empedokles, 1799), in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 51.

³ Kateřina Krtilová, "Performativní reflexe: Rozhovor s Dietrem Merschem" [Performative Reflection: An Interview with Dieter Mersch], in *Medienwissenschaft: Východiska a aktuální pozice německé filosofie a teorie médií* [Media Studies: Departures and Present Positions of the German Philosophy and Theory of Media], ed. Kateřina Krtilová and Kateřina Svatoňová (Prague: Academia 2016), 314. See also Dieter Mersch, "Operation / Operativität," in *Mensch-Maschine-Interaktion: Handbuch zu Geschichte – Kultur – Ethik*, ed. Kevin Liggieri and Oliver Müller (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2019), 287-90.

aspects, they may help us to seek paths towards being present in the world we inhabit, caring for and understanding it. In this sense, the article is also a reflection on the possibilities for acting and thinking available to us today, at a time when our interaction with technology is constant and a matter of the everyday.

We shall be working with various perspectives on narrativity and performativity, focusing in particular on different forms of interaction between medium and human being, between form and its presentation or formative enactment, and between the repeated situation of the film and the singular situatedness of the viewer in the event of watching a film. Inevitably, this requires engaging with diverse conceptions of performativity. The original meaning of the word *performance* refers to equipping and completion – the fulfilment or accomplishment of what is necessary, required, or desired. The second, now commonly used meaning concerns presentation and execution, which are linked to presence, processuality, and temporality.⁴ Finally, we also draw on theories based on the concept of the performative within J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts,⁵ which his critics and successors – including Jacques Derrida⁶ and the feminist philosophers Judith Butler⁷ and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – expanded into a broader conception of the performativity of language (and of other sign systems). In these approaches, the political dimension of performativity is also crucial, as it holds a fundamental capacity to transform stereotypes, futures, and the workings of power in society. For this reason, we wish to consider the radical potential of the performativity of cinema, which allows for a bolder and more vital mode of expression, or, in Sedgwick's terms, a transformative one – one that promises and produces change or enables new, hitherto unimagined performances, different from those to which we have become accustomed and which merely repeat our everyday habits and illusions.⁸ Most crucial for us,

⁴ See, e.g., Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Ästhetik der Performativen, 2004), trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 80-111.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

⁸ For an outline of this concept, see *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-18. This view of performativity is further developed in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 93-152.

however, is the theoretical understanding of performativity proposed by Dieter Mersch, which makes it possible to cross the boundary between performance and representation, between the mobile and elusive image and the stable, fixed image.

Performativity of the Film Apparatus

As has already been noted, traditional conceptions view cinema, by virtue of its technical and mechanical foundations, as tending towards operativity, while performativity is seen as undesirable. Nevertheless, performativity remains possible and proves conceptually productive in reflections on technology and on the nature of the medium itself. Early cinema, for instance – described by film historians as the *cinema of attractions* – was strongly associated with performativity.⁹ For approximately the first fifteen years following the invention of the cinematograph, film programmes consisted of short, highly heterogeneous numbers of different genres which, rather than telling stories, primarily *showed*: various sensations, surprises, and gags. At times, these numbers were supplemented by vaudeville or variety performances.¹⁰ Their attractiveness lay not only in their attempt to surprise, ideally to shock, the audience, but also in the fact that they invited the spectator's participation.

Early cinema did not seek a viewer who passively sat in the auditorium and 'dreamed' of entering a fictional world, experiencing a narrative on the screen and shedding everyday concerns, as would later become characteristic of so-called narrative integration or classical (Hollywood) cinema.¹¹ On the contrary, the viewer was directly assaulted by the image, called upon to (re)act (often loudly) and interact with the film, stepping outside of a precisely defined, apparatus-

⁹ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Cinema and the (In)credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* 34 (1989): 31-45.

¹⁰ On the early film screenings, see Ivan Klimeš, "Člověk a stroj v biografu: Filmové představení v rané éře" [Humans and Machines in the Cinema: Film Screening in Early Days], in *Kinematograf! Věvec studií o raném filmu* [Cinematograph! A Garland of Studies on Early Cinema] (Prague: NFA – Casablanca, 2013), 40-62.

¹¹ This article uses the term "film" in its many varieties: a classic Hollywood film, art film, film of any genre and of diverse types of storytelling. These films might be called "standard" and characterized by a clear depiction of a fictional world. Their common feature is the subordination of the camera (in the mode of operability) to the depiction and narrative. Importantly, our focus is on a different type of films in which the camera proceeds against the rules and techniques typical of those mentioned above, and its gesture is made visible. These films are also greatly varied and appear in different periods. There is no single established term for them either.

governed role. This interaction was further intensified by the often-present commentator who accompanied the screening – explaining the projected images, translating foreign-language intertitles, moderating the performance in the manner of other entertainment venues, and establishing contact with the audience.¹² The screening itself was therefore always unique, unrepeatable, present, variable, and processual, even though its centre was a fixed film image.

For a relatively long time, cinema's status remained unclear (nor was it evident that it might belong to the realm of artistic production). Consequently, it was not only the filmed image that was presented, but also the technical apparatus that functioned as both a tool of production and reproduction, at once as a camera and a projector. This apparatus was not concealed from the audience, as is the case in contemporary cinemas, but rather exposed, observed in operation, and displayed in terms of its capabilities. Neither the speed nor the direction of projection were standardized, both depended on the projectionist. Early screenings crucially foregrounded the possibility of manipulating the image, emphasizing how the projector can (or must) accelerate slow actions, slow down rapid ones, or reverse the direction of the film strip's movement. Early film stock had a different perforation,¹³ which caused vertical and horizontal image tremors, and its photographic quality was unstable, as a result of which the image would disappear and reappear unevenly. In projection, the jittery movement of the film strip thus drew attention both to itself and to the act of presentation as such.

From today's perspective, these imprecise and irregular projections brought the machine itself to the fore. Rather than acting as a tool operated according to a standardized manual, its production was marked by gaps, stumbles, and uncertainties. Film had not yet developed clear rules, norms, let alone programmes, and its performativity – and reflection upon it – could thus emerge. In this sense, cinema may be understood as an unruly, subversive medium, whose very 'foreignness' enabled it to become a more vital expression of human conflictuality as such.

"When we speak of performativity and practice," points out Dieter Mersch,

we mean action that simultaneously involves *actio* and *passio*; we mean the problem of mode we have discussed—that is, the way in which action unfolds and what kinds of "folds" it creates in different forms of repre-

¹² Klimeš, "Člověk a stroj v biografu," 45-46.

¹³ Jeanne Pommeau, "Digitalizace filmů Jana Kříženeckého" [Digitalizing Jan Kříženecký's Films], *Filmový přehled*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/digitalizace-filmu-jana-krizeneckeho>.

sentation, expression, and meaning. This also includes moments of chance, discontinuity, and friction.¹⁴

Early film screenings were indeed replete with such ruptures – from production to presentation, affecting the entire cinematic dispositif.¹⁵ The recording on film stock was marked by various contingent factors, projection was precarious, screenings were always unique, both in terms of technical execution and depending on the personality of the commentator, while audience reactions were unrestrained, situated, and wholly unpredictable.

With the improvement of film cameras and projectors, the development of more stable film material and chemical processing techniques, the extension of the film strip and thus of the duration of the projected image, narrative came to dominate. The auditorium darkened and 'disciplined' the viewer, calming them in the darkness. The aim was no longer a reaction to an image that seemed to 'leap out' of the screen, but the passive observation of a seemingly real world 'behind' it. This moment of narrative dominance also entailed the establishment of a film language we are no longer consciously aware of: the 'invisible' style defines shot and reverse shot as markers of dialogue, the long shot as an establishing shot, the close-up as a means of tracking emotions, and so forth. Film thus became firmly bound to operativity, to technical rules and norms, regardless of what was filmed, how it was filmed, what was narrated, or for whom. It may therefore be said that cinema thus concealed its potential performativity.

Performativity Negotiating with Operativity

By virtue of its machinic nature and its tight entanglement with technology, the cinematic medium is defined by principles that are fundamentally opposed to those in which Dieter Mersch locates the possibilities of performativity. Yet the example of early cinema demonstrates that the same medium can still contain a certain potential for performativity, and this on multiple levels. This suspected non-proper performativity is often articulated, for instance in moments when film encounters other media. Its uneasy oscillation between stasis (the film frame) and (illusory) movement, or between permanence (the apparatus) and continual change (the image), allows for various readings from non-cinematic positions.

¹⁴ Krtilová, "Performativní reflexe," 314.

¹⁵ The cinematic dispositif encompasses the technological apparatus, the institutional framework, and spectators' habits. It thus comprises the entire framework surrounding film and shaping the viewer's perception and interpretation.

Let us consider film from the perspective of theatre, specifically in situations where both media share the same stage. At the moment moving images get projected into theatrical space, they may be understood as a marginal zone in which space, time, and represented figures are unstable – something uncustomary for the theatrical stage. The stable theatrical space and time are thus disrupted and expanded by the uncertain, heterogeneous space and time of film projection, which refers elsewhere and multiplies itself. Projection can dismantle and dislocate the supposed “presented unity of presence at a site,” as Bettine Menke puts it, as well as chronological unity. The theatrical here-and-now is abolished.¹⁶ At the same time, the actor-performer enters the stage. Their action unfolds singularly, without any fixed procedure. In contrast to the performative action on stage, film – despite its dynamically changing image – appears stable. In conventional theatre, the abstracted performance carries the spectator into a fictional, illusory, non-represented, abstract space, whereas film introduces a high degree of concreteness into the theatrical space, along with technical and technological immutability – a certain measure of stability and stasis within its permanent elusiveness. Film becomes a constant, repeating backdrop to a living, unrepeatable action. The performative theatrical event is thus framed by a non-performative film that merely supplements the illusion in which the singular action takes place.

If, however, film is viewed from a different angle, namely from the perspective of exhibition practice, entirely different values are attributed to it. In the 1980s, with the advent of digitalization, the notion of the so-called late-capitalist museum emerged, associated with the demand for entertainment and the deployment of special effects,¹⁷ or with the spectacularization of museums. This entertainment, spectacularization and reliance on special effects, were secured by the modern museum or gallery through a turn towards performativity – something that is not intrinsic to static, stabilized visual art (leaving aside performative conceptual art practices). Paradoxically, this ‘live’ performance was understood to be the projected film itself, which then started leaving the cinema and entering the gallery (even though the gallery offers conditions of presentation fundamentally opposed to those established by nearly a century of cinematic practice¹⁸). What

¹⁶ Bettine Menke, “Ve vystupování (a mizení): Na jevišti a mimo něj” [Appearing and Disappearing: On- and Offstage] in *Mizení: Fenomény, mediální praktiky a techniky na prahu zjevného* [Disappearance: Media Practices and Techniques on the Threshold of the Apparent], ed. Kateřina Krtilová and Kateřina Svatoňová (Prague: Karolinum, 2017), 149.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 3-17.

¹⁸ Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

came to be regarded as performative was the site of projection (rather than the medium itself), including the light emitted from the film projector and falling onto the screen, often positioned so as to be visible from both sides and frequently reaching monumental dimensions. Alongside this, the analogue projector itself entered the gallery space, visible and audible. Its oftentimes sculptural placement within the exhibition space, frequently intersecting the visitor-viewer's trajectory, becomes a 'living' agent disrupting the static configuration of the exhibition. One began to speak of a cinephilic turn in the visual arts, and, conversely, of the musealization of film history¹⁹ and the significance of cinema's entry into the gallery. Erika Balsom writes that film in the gallery longs for immutability, while art longs for the entertainment and mass accessibility that film can provide.²⁰ This fusion thus enabled a shift in perspective on film as a static, stable, and permanently elusive medium in favour of its performativity.

This view of cinematic performativity, arising primarily from comparison with other media, stands in opposition to the performativity of early film. It is tied more closely to the original meaning of the term – the “supplementation” of space – than to the ‘unruly’ performativity grounded in the singular presentation of the medium itself, whose foreignness may contribute to a radical transformation of perspective, even though the visual narrative is fixed on film stock. The attractiveness of this form of performativity is therefore more illusory than alienating; it does not estrange or transform our view of the world or of the technical foundations of the medium under consideration.

However, film's non-proper performativity may also manifest, under certain conditions and in specific contexts, in relation to itself – to its own mediality, materiality, and form. Performativity understood in this way is never neutral, but always reflexive. It always reveals what is meant to remain concealed and therein lies its subversive potential. It is always, to some degree, a reflection on operativity, which likewise remains invisible when the machine functions correctly, operating as a set of rules that usually become visible only when the mechanism fails. It is precisely this reflexive moment that appears far more significant for an understanding of cinematic performativity than tracing performativity from the standpoint of other media. We seek to examine it from within, in relation to film's own conditions – to consider performativity in relation

¹⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

²⁰ Erika Balsom, “Between Art and Film: Revisiting the Exhibition, ‘Passages de l’image,’” *Mousse Magazine*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/between-art-and-film-revisiting-the-exhibition-passages-de-limage-erika-balsom-2022/>.

to the specificity of this medium, regardless of where it is presented or into which media contexts it enters. Whether film is more standardized, stable, repeatable, static or mobile is not decisive. Far more fundamental is the fact that film is a moving *technical* image – an image for which technology is an indispensable condition, even though the final image conceals it.

We thus return once more to Dieter Mersch and his insistence that technical apparatuses are primarily associated with procedures and rules – that is, with operativity. Yet Mersch also emphasizes that apparatuses can be “turned” against their function, that technology can be used non-technically: in his terms, performatively. As he puts it:

If [...] we focus on the category of the performative, it is rather a matter of what Flusser called the reversed movement – outwitting the apparatus, that is, linking it to practices that are not practices of functioning, but rather practices of dysfunction, or inversion; to what I have termed contrariness – a certain counter-actionality or the inscription of para-practical interventions.²¹

An apparatus may be outwitted in many ways; however, as long as we focus on the visible dimension of the disruption of cinematic form, this ruse becomes most apparent in work with the film camera, the originator of the cinematic image. The ruse may consist in the camera operating against habitual rules and automatic processes, seemingly against itself, against its ‘manual.’ This gesture of the camera may also be understood in accordance with the original meaning of technology, grounded in *technē*, which does not signify making, fabrication, or the use of means and tools – the way technology is predominantly understood (even though it often escapes this “instrumental” role) – but rather the “revealing” or “uncovering” of the truth of things that remains concealed.²² The reversed movement of the camera may thus be subversive, expressive, or experimental, approaching what Mersch describes as the potential of media paradoxes, which encompass “interventions, disturbances, obstacles, the reversal of structures, the extreme slowing or acceleration of time, the doubling or iteration of signs, amplification exploited to obscenity, and much more [...].”²³ According to Mersch, such

²¹ Krtilová, “Performativní reflexe,” 314.

²² See especially Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” (Die Frage nach der Technik, 1954), in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 5-6, 11-19, 24-28, 33-35.

²³ Dieter Mersch, “Tertium datur: Introduction to a Negative Media Theory,” *Matrizes* 7, no. 1 (2013): 216.

paradoxes are constituted by film images disrupted by errors, grooves, traces, and fissures. The camera can no longer be ignored, it is no longer transparent – as is the case of most film productions – but instead emerges from the image itself.²⁴

Performativity as a Principle of *Ostranenie* (Defamiliarization, Estrangement)

Just as the artists of the interwar avant-garde – who sought to link art as closely as possible with live action, or more generally with life itself – attempted to performativize the visual arts and literature, thereby consolidating the understanding of theatre as a performative art grounded in a specific, ever-tense relationship between performativity and textuality,²⁵ so did they likewise disrupt, or at least intensively explore, the technical dimension of film. Avant-garde artists sought to exploit to the greatest possible extent the full range of possibilities offered by the modern technical apparatus, which at that time had not yet developed fully stabilized norms or a standardized cinematic language. On the one hand, films were created with a strong ideological and conceptual framework, serving the construction of a new world – as can be seen, e.g., in the work of the Russian avant-garde, the so-called montage school, led by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein. This fundamentally modern medium enabled these filmmakers to break with older art forms: at the same time, its technical essence, which surpassed the 'imperfect' human nature,²⁶ allowed glimpses of machinic vision capable of rearticulating the human body, its identity, or its subjectivity. Yet in order to generate new perspectives, these filmmakers still employed various counter-technical strategies: slowing down or accelerating motion, using extreme camera angles to abandon the human perspective, and deploying multiple exposure or extreme shot scales.

²⁴ Kateřina Svatoňová, "A Life in Images and the Dislocation Vision: Reflections on the Mediality of Moving Images from the Perspective of German Media Studies or *Medienwissenschaft*," in *The Reader: The First Ten Years of Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones 2007-2017*, Prague: AVU, (2019), 357-82. Unlike the quoted article discussing the uses of this subversion by contemporary visual artists working with film and video, the present article focuses on an entirely different aspect of this "non-technological" work.

²⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Für eine Ästhetik des Performativen," in *Kultur – Analysen*, ed. Jörg Huber (Zürich: Institut für Theorie der Gestaltung und Kunst, 2001), 27.

²⁶ Dziga Vertov, *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); David Thomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision & The Posthuman* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

Similar approaches can be found among figures associated primarily with the French, and partly with the German and Czech avant-gardes, such as Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and Alexander Hackenschmied, however much their aims may have differed. Through often abstract films, they sought to reveal what is easily overlooked or invisible, to achieve so-called *photogénie*. In contrast to the rapid editing and alternation of extremes favoured by Russian montage filmmakers, they focused on fluid tracking shots, backlighting, large close-ups, geometric forms, light, shadow, and contrast. In both cases, we can observe a practice akin to Flusser's reversed movement: behind proclamations of medium specificity we can discern a self-reflexive, non-technical use of the apparatus, involving the violation of rules and the bending of an emerging cinematic language.

As a later example of this mode of thinking, combined with a performatively conceived camera, the films of Maya Deren (for instance her 1943 *Meshes of the Afternoon*, co-created with Alexander Hackenschmied) may be mentioned. Deren sought through film to create an entirely new reality. Departing from the standard speed of the film strip, she employed slow motion. The image would freeze rather than progress continuously, the film was projected in negative, she used a rotating camera and disrupted order through a variety of discontinuities. The testing of various atypical and proto-typical means, which negated film's own technical procedures, also served as a way of achieving *ostranenie*²⁷ – a shift in perspective whereby foreign elements enter existing art forms, transforming meanings, modes of understanding, and the artwork's relation to the world.

Crucially, however, these procedures were primarily responses to other media. To a large extent, radical creators were searching for ways to break free from established linguistic, literary, or theatrical norms and to find the 'proper' expression appropriate to a new medium. They therefore related film to different artistic practices and procedures. Cinematic formal devices could thus detach themselves from the technical apparatus – the machine – and integrate into other art forms. Literature of this period, for example, drew on cinematic qualities (particularly their technical and technicist operativity) to disrupt traditional narrative structures: the result, however, was a cinematic form stripped of technology and thus performing within a new medium.

In literature, film thus generated "'folds', different versions of that 'how,'" giving rise to a "pl[ay] of modalities that is in principle infinite and that, together

²⁷ For more about this notion, see Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová "Ostranenie Does Not Equal *Ozolaštñění*: An Issue of a Term Transferred and Misunderstood," *Slovo a smysl / Word and Sense* 12, no. 24 (2015): 50-58.

with a given form, also contains its opposite,"²⁸ as Dieter Mersch defines further characteristics of performativity. For avant-garde poets led by Vítězslav Nezval, film production – more precisely, modern cinematic means associated with the cinematograph – became a new poetic formula and a new structure. Cinematic language proved useful for de-literarizing texts and objectifying verbal expression. They worked with editing and drew, in their search for new poetic figures and alternative metaphors, inspiration from rapid-montage, extreme recursion, and multiple exposure; the image supplemented and transformed the text. Under the banner of Devětsil, new poems emerged: hybrid, intermedial, or multimedia artistic forms such as visual poems or film librettos, which were perhaps never meant to be filmed and may have been intended to remain solely within the realm of imagination.²⁹ Poetry thus acquired a new, non-proper reflexive layer that caused fissures in its integrity; machinic logic and new modes of representation became performative, multisensory contact zones with another medium, but also with the reader.

As an example of a similar practice on the level of narrative, we may point to how the Czech Jewish writer and journalist Karel Poláček employed the new cinematic language in one of the most popular books of the first half of the twentieth century, *Muži v offsidu* (Men Offside, 1931), which was adapted into one of the first Czech sound films. Here, cinematic language evokes a popular expression of the modern city – in this case, football. This transfer was one of the key strategies through which Poláček created a sportingly dynamic, 'light-footed' narrative, designed not only to entertain a rapidly growing football audience, but also to capture the city and its periphery, depicting with gentle irony and clear visual acuity the elusiveness of everyday life, including its contradictions. He interwove linearity with the temporality of a football match – interrupted, frequently dislocated (by a scored goal or the referee's whistle), or accelerated (during an attack) – and with the temporality of football fans (shouts and outbursts from the stands, distracted attention during tedious defensive play), using avant-garde cinematic techniques such as montage, zoom, visual synecdoche, and similar devices.

Literature thus integrated cinematic procedures and transformed them for its own purposes: over time, these techniques became literarized and invisible to the

²⁸ Krtilová, "Performativní reflexe," 317.

²⁹ For the literary projects and scripts, see Viktoria Hradská, ed., *Česká avantgarda a film* [The Czech Avant-garde and Film] (Prague: ČSFÚ, 1976). See also Jakub Felcman, "Kino v psacím stroji. Fenomén fiktivního scénáře v českém prostředí" [Movie in a Typewriter: Fictitious Script in Czech Culture] (MA thesis, Charles University, Prague, 2006).

reader. Montage entails the fragmentation of time and the disruption of linearity; zoom fractures unified space; panoramic views, close-ups, and long shots are deployed. The incorporation of cinematic devices into literary practice weakened their original performativity, an effect identical to that of the 'normalization' of early cinema. The testing of medium specificity was likewise gradually diminished or standardized; individual violations of cinematic language remained as part of experimental film, while dominant cinematic trends increasingly subordinated themselves to the capacities of technical apparatuses, to the extent that we can observe how technological development itself determines cinematic style.

Performativity as a Path to Subversion

While the interwar avant-garde employed cinematic performativity to struggle against the 'old' arts and to invigorate its own stylistic possibilities, post-war avant-garde practitioners began to deploy it in opposition to film's own means.³⁰ In the 1970s, theorists and filmmakers spoke of the need to find a cinematic language different from the one established by the dominant order represented by the Hollywood system, and of the search for another cinema – the so-called counter-cinema.³¹ Inspired by the writings of Louis Althusser and by ideological critique as programmatically articulated by the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* after 1968, filmmakers sought forms of cinema capable of laying bare the mechanisms of the capitalist ruling system that shaped film production. This unveiling of the workings of the film industry could take the form of films about films – about shooting, production, and the industrial background of filmmaking. Another possibility was to reveal what film usually conceals: the illusory nature of smooth

³⁰ And it is no coincidence that it was precisely in the post-war period that the concepts of "performativity" and "performance" emerged as subversive and revelatory terms, so much so that the humanities began to speak of a performative turn. See Alice Koubová and Eliška Kubartová, "(S)jednat performanci knihou" [Negotiating Performance in a Book], in *Terény performance* [Terrains of Performance], ed. Alice Koubová and Eliška Kubartová (Prague: NAMU, 2021), 14. See also Alice Koubová, *Myslet z druhého místa: K otázce performativní filosofie* [Thinking from the Second Place: The Question of Performative Philosophy] (Prague: Filosofia, 2019).

³¹ On "Counter-cinema" see, e.g., Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d'Est," *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn 1972): 6-17; Claire Johnston, "Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 24-31, B. Ruby Rich, "The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 19 (December 1978), <https://ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC19folder/RichCrisisOfNaming.html>.

motion, as exemplified by structural film – cinema that radically minimizes or omits content and instead refers to the very substance of the film strip, composed of individual frames, gaps, and darkness. Such motion pictures redirect attention to the perception of film itself, demonstrating that the experience of continuous movement is possible only thanks to the capacities of human perception, while film itself remains a sequence of discrete, static ‘photographs.’ Another aim was the exposure and denudation of the manipulative structure of cinematic narration.³² Filmmakers attempted to show the many stereotypes carried by classical Hollywood storytelling,³³ employing to this end the deconstruction of cinematic language by means of disrupting the surface of the film strip, working with the negative and inverted images, and seeking out errors in relation to the established procedures of the so-called invisible style. They rejected all forms of illusionism and concealment and thus – as noted above – their camerawork was non-technical. During projection, the film strip and its movement began to draw attention to themselves rather than persuading us that we were watching a coherent fictional world. The materiality of the image and the technical dimension of the apparatus gained tangibility and visibility; operativity was transformed into performativity.

Crucial for our purposes, however, is how this ideological critique was carried further by feminist theorists and filmmakers. They began to recognize that the established procedures of classical Hollywood cinema are ideological not only because they clearly delineate good and evil, present black-and-white characters, and persuade us of ‘correct’ models of behaviour and of bodies, but also because they install the patriarchal model as the only possible one. The prominent British feminist theorist and experimental filmmaker Laura Mulvey argued that the film spectator can – or should – always identify with the male character (the hero), who is active and mirrors the stance of the male director. No less importantly, the spectator also adopts his gaze – the male gaze – directed at wholly passive female figures who exist in film merely to be looked at and to secure pleasure for the male

³² On various forms of the avant-garde and experimental cinema, see Martin Čihák, *Ponorná řeka kinematografie* [A Subterranean River of Cinematography] (Prague: AMU, 2013).

³³ Classical Hollywood cinema is invariably structured around the story of a (male) protagonist who simultaneously pursues a professional trajectory (typically a struggle against evil) and a personal one (most often a romantic plotline). The protagonist gradually overcomes obstacles and ultimately triumphs in both spheres, which culminates in a happy ending. The primary aim of cinematic form is therefore to support the protagonist’s goals and to facilitate the viewer’s identification with him: for this reason, the form itself must remain as invisible as possible. See David Bordwell, Janet Steiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985).

protagonist. Mulvey's work was followed by the now classic book by Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*.³⁴ De Lauretis analyzes familiar narratives to demonstrate how deeply women are embedded in the stories we habitually consume from childhood onwards, whether in the form of myths or fairy tales.³⁵

Together with other theorists, such as Claire Johnston,³⁶ and with women filmmakers, Mulvey sought to disrupt this simple cinematic dichotomy of gazes and genders. This was done, first, by exposing stereotypical representations of women as the consequence of a sexist, masculine ideological discourse, and second, by advocating the necessity of making a different kind of cinema³⁷ – like their male avant-garde counterparts – a *counter-cinema*, alternative to the mainstream, which for them also became the only possible designation for “women's cinema.” In 1973, the collection edited by Johnston, *Notes on Women's Cinema*, was published with the telling description: “The image of women in the cinema has been an image created by men. The emergent women's cinema has begun the transformation of that image. These notes explore ideas and strategies developed in women's films.”³⁸ This polemically charged publication demonstrates how film – especially commercial cinema – is manipulative, particularly in the ways it presents women as sexual objects.

Feminist theorists and practitioners emphasize that “the tools and techniques of cinema themselves, as part of reality [that reflects ideology], are an expression of the prevailing ideology: they are not neutral, as many ‘revolutionary’ filmmakers appear to believe.”³⁹ Because form is inseparable from content and simultaneously bound to hegemonic, masculine classical Hollywood narration,

³⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, and London: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially the chapter “Desire in Narrative,” 103-57.

³⁵ Remarkably, the fairy-tale narrative was already being disrupted in the seventeenth century by Madame d'Aulnoy, through what might be described as her “counter-narratives” in the collection *Les Contes des Fées*. Written almost contemporaneously with *Tales of Mother Goose* by Charles Perrault, her fairy tales position themselves in opposition to the dominant French fairy-tale tradition. To a certain extent, they also partake in a specifically French aristocratic game of social and erotic intrigue, akin to that familiar from de Laclous's *Dangerous Liaisons*.

³⁶ Johnston, “Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” 25.

³⁷ At the same time, Johnston does not criticise cinematic language as such – she understands its stereotyping as a necessary stage in the development of the film medium, since it is precisely what enables the spectator to comprehend the narrative and easily decode the images seen on the screen.

³⁸ Johnston, “Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” 24-31.

³⁹ Johnston, “Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” 28.

it must first be transformed, disrupted, made visible, and connected to female desire. Only in this way, a non-stereotypical and non-dominant image of woman can be articulated. Johnston shows that it is above all necessary to create gaps within the realist image that follows the dominant masculine order.⁴⁰ This requires working against the producer of that realist image – the camera itself – so that ruptures may emerge, drawing attention both to the medium and to its power. As Mulvey wrote: “The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience onto dialectics, passionate detachment.”⁴¹ Mulvey argues that the camera and cinematic language must be liberated from established patterns, which are deeply imperative precisely because they prescribe what constitutes the ‘correct’ model – not only in film, but subsequently in life. The ways of doing so are described by B. Ruby Rich in her essay “The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism,” where she outlines the various strategies for making women’s cinema.⁴²

With regard to the topic at hand, these theories reveal how film may be used against its own principles, how one may conceive of turning technology against itself – what emerges when the invisible style, established from the 1910s onwards, is disrupted and when the camera is employed performatively. E. Ann Kaplan shows that feminist films are characterized precisely by making the usually hidden apparatus visible, exposing it within the film so that it becomes part of the performance itself; the performing apparatus then stands alongside the performing image. Another defining feature of feminist cinema is the disruption of spectator passivity. Just like the early cinema of attractions, it refuses to allow viewers to succumb to (false) illusion or to be “sutured into” a fictional world; instead, it seeks to activate them, to awaken them, and to prompt them to think. Such an invitation to thinking is intended to counter emotional manipulation and to strengthen critical reflection.

⁴⁰ Claire Johnston draws on the writings of Louis Althusser and on the studies of Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, which relate ideology to systems of representation. In this view, the resulting representations permeate society, reflecting, reproducing, and reinforcing the dominant order of power, while simultaneously presenting themselves as realistic, “natural,” and transparent. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971); Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

⁴¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 18.

⁴² Rich, “The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism.”

The Performativity of Film: Movement in Circles and the Disintegration of the Whole

There are many ways of disrupting the cinematic form by employing performativity instead of operativity; in this text, however, we focus on only three examples: the panoramic view, fragmentation in space and fragmentation in time, the last mentioned resulting in the dissolution of temporal unity. The panoramic shot is, of course, part of cinematic language; in classical narrative cinema it is always partial, most often functioning as an establishing shot intended to provide the viewer with contextual information about the narrated story and to show what takes place beyond the limits of the frame and at its edges, thereby producing a sense of omniscience. It can, however, also be used 'in reverse,' subversively, as in the case of Laura Mulvey's film *Riddles of the Sphinx*. According to Teresa de Lauretis, the Sphinx – together with Medusa – is an example of the female monster who stands as an obstacle on the path of the male hero. These monsters are moreover endowed with a gaze of their own, with their own vision, and yet they remain beings *for* the gaze.⁴³ Feminist filmmakers and theorists have therefore asked what happens if we do not view their myths from the position of the male hero, but rather from the perspective of these figures themselves: if we ask what *they* see at the moment of encounter with the male figure. The title of Mulvey's film is thus not merely a reference to these reflections, to the foundational European myth of Oedipus and its subsequent cultural life, including its psychoanalytic interpretation. It also recalls one of the earliest feminist 'counter' texts by the American writer and journalist Djuna Barnes, who reversed the myth of the Sphinx in her short prose. In Barnes's story, the Sphinx is questioned by the now-blind Oedipus as to why everything turned out so badly, given that he had once answered her riddle correctly. The Sphinx replies that he understood nothing when he answered only with the word "man." The absence of the "wo-" becomes a provocation for a new feminist narrative that began to take shape at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and which returned in the 1970s as an urgent necessity: the foundation of a feminist critical gesture.

Riddles of the Sphinx showcases many procedures that run counter to conventional cinematic narration. The long panoramic shot entirely disregards narrative principles; it maps the everyday life of the female protagonist, her domestic labour and care for a child. In a continuous movement, the camera displays various objects that testify to the stereotypical demarcation of feminine space. A full panorama is employed, yet the gaze is constrained by a horizontal

⁴³ de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, 103-57.

frame to such an extent that the viewer cannot grasp the whole. The sense of open space disappears, instead the viewer becomes acutely aware of the constriction of vision and its strict, linear guidance. The spectator's viewpoint merges with the movement of the camera, examining the panoramic surface at close range, or rather following the camera that examines it. Vision thus follows the technical medium, which draws attention to itself instead of concealing itself in accordance with the rules of the apparatus (here, the panorama). As the camera's gesture is revealed and emphasized, cinematic illusion gradually collapses, giving rise to more general theses concerning the dominance of the masculine gaze and order, entrapment within stereotypes, power, surveillance and manipulation – alongside reflections on the stereotypes of cinematic language and the rigid narrative structure that does not allow for a different (female) 'handwriting.'

It becomes thus possible to return to the beginning, to the phase of the 'unruly' film, to grant performativity free rein in order for it once again to approach *technē*, exposing its lack of anchorage. In this sense, Mulvey's work resonates with the radicalization of language and the performativization of literature in French deconstructive theory, conceptualized as *l'écriture féminine*. Its key figures – Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray – focused on the movement of language, the corporeality of narrative, and the concealed determination of stories by sexual economy and the economy of reading, in order to 'blast open' fixed conceptions of womanhood, disrupt the stereotypes attached to them and allow female corporeality – including maternity – to emerge as a source of performativity. It is no coincidence that this turn begins, in Kristeva's work, with a close analysis of transformations of language in the poetry of modern French poets, above all Stéphane Mallarmé, where the poetic word is exposed precisely in its *technē*. Here she demonstrates what form itself is capable of doing. One of the most overtly manifesto-like texts in this tradition is Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," a nearly carnivalesque, political, and cruel manifesto of women's writing, deliberately charged with castratory symbolism. Cixous unties entrenched dichotomies and proposes to disrupt some of the expected, repetitive statements about the world through deadly mockery.⁴⁴ She thus promises women their own story, articulated through a new form, and promises the unrepeatable as a possible future situation.

Other modes of performative, subversive uses of the cinematic medium can be found, for example, in the films of Věra Chytilová and Ester Krumbachová, *Daisies* and *Fruit of Paradise*. In these works, we can trace the subversive, deconstructive

⁴⁴ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 888.

power of humour that mocks – including the mockery of male fantasies.⁴⁵ This laughter (that of Medusa) is not merely a thematic element of the films or their dialogue: it is also visible in form, in the subversive handling of camerawork, editing, and post-production. Both films deliberately disrupt seamless narration and the unity of the fictional world, through fragmentation in space as well as in time.

Daisies narrates destruction while working with collage across all levels of the film. What matters for our purposes is how this principle penetrates the camerawork and reinforces the film's feminist articulation. The direct intrusion of collage into the image occurs in, e.g., the editing sequence of the scene in which the girls argue in a room: the collage-like wallpaper gradually seeps into the foreground of the image. During their argument, the characters take scissors and begin cutting each other into separate parts, which they go on to reassemble into an entirely new mosaic overlaying the original one. The disintegration of a unified image and of a whole body into a mosaic results in the emancipation of those parts of the female body which would previously have been exposed to the male gaze. They detach themselves from the bodies and move freely within the image. Along with them, the male gaze disintegrates: its targets vanish and multiply. As with the panoramic shot, the technical apparatus here again draws attention to itself and assumes a central role.

Jaroslav Kučera,⁴⁶ the cinematographer of these films, deconstructs the movement of the film strip, which normally remains invisible, as individual frames are projected at such speed that the eye and brain do not register ruptures and transitions. Kučera, however, re-copies identical frames in succession using an optical printer and omitting others. The result is a jerky, nervous, neurotic movement corresponding to the restless and active curiosity of the female protagonists. The film thus foregrounds its own materiality and the principles by which it is concealed. In surface ornamentation it may reveal secrets: meanings disappear and reappear within it (they are not hidden behind the image, but exist within it), allowing an approach to truth in accordance with the repeatedly invoked notion of *techně*.

⁴⁵ Within the various strategies of women's cinema described by B. Ruby Rich, one finds what she terms so-called "Medusan films": subversive and deconstructive works grounded in "Medusan" laughter. Using the phrase, Rich alludes to Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Daisies* is explicitly cited by Rich as belonging to this category. Rich, "The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism."

⁴⁶ See more in Kateřina Svatoňová, *Mezi-obrazy: Mediální praktiky kameramana Jaroslava Kučery* [Inter-images: Medial Practices of the Cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera] (Prague: NFA – Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy – Masterfilm, 2016).

When we consider the performativity of cinema, it becomes clear that when working against its own rules and norms, film can generate effects that negate its long-established position, saturated with stereotypes and manipulations. It can assist in the search for new ways of seeing and also support various forms of emancipation.

Performativity as an Escape from a Technicist World

Performativity emerges from singularity, unrepeatability, and experience. When considered in relation to non-technical media, it may appear relatively straightforward. By contrast, technical media often seem incompatible with it. This article has sought, in a condensed form, to demonstrate when and how it is possible for technology to suppress those properties dictated by the apparatus or machine, why and in what ways one may work directly against them, and how profoundly subversive the performative use of technology can be, destabilizing unequivocal conceptions of reality as well as clearly demarcated boundaries between media and art and their established formal means. It has also asked how one might extract from a given artwork the promise of an event and uncover the transformative force of performance, as understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The performative gesture of the camera may thus be seen as one possible way of thinking – particularly today – about otherness and about the ways of weakening manipulation and the dominance of the machine. Technology (filmmaking) may be understood as an extremely rationalized desire for completion, wholeness, perfection and functionality, from which the reflection on that very desire has been largely effaced. Performativity restores the possibility of reflection: it allows us to see through the illusion, to dismantle it, and to replace it with a potential understanding of technology (and technologies) as such, of our interaction with them, and of their capacities that are not merely functions of averaged and rehearsed algorithms. Through several examples of performativity and non-technical uses of the camera, ways begin to emerge of negotiating with the all-encompassing technology that surrounds us, so that it does not assume unconditional power over us.⁴⁷ Alongside this, we may glimpse new perspectives, unforeseen meanings, and new attitudes towards ourselves and the surrounding world. This radicality and subversion conceal a political and social potential exceeding purely aesthetic categories.

⁴⁷ And this is so despite – or precisely because of – the fact we recognize that the concept of performativity can simultaneously point to a decentralized position of the human subject in the world. See Koubová and Kubartová, “(S)jednat performanci knihou,” 15.

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