TAKING TIME

A hypothetical series of tableaux-vivants to be exhibited in a small theatre, in response to Adad Hannah's Reversing. *Each text is to be read aloud as its tableau is performed, and each tableau lasts for the duration of the reading of its text.*

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Tableau I:

A woman sits facing the audience, gazing towards the back of the theatre, as though startled. She wears a nightgown and holds a brush in her long hair, but away from her head. The slightest movement causes individual hairs to fall from the brush. Her other hand hovers under her hair, resting against her temple.

For this brief moment in history, we appear (as a culture, or possibly even as a species) to be fascinated with images that almost move or are not quite still. Like the neon green and pink, effect-laden video art of the 1980s, this epoch in the history of lens-based media may be regarded in hindsight as having such a consistent mode of constituting visual experience that its academic study is in need of a coining term. Classicists of the future might therefore choose something like "the antekinetic" to describe and define the period.

"The antekinetic," they are likely to note, "emerged as a trope of visual media in the 1990s and continued well into the twenty-first century. It is characterized by the fusion of static and moving images into a barely-moving image recorded by a non-moving or slowly-moving video camera."

The moving image of a static scene is not at all like the moving image of a moving scene (cinema), nor is it like the static image of a static scene (a photograph). The viewer of cinema understands that a linear narrative is playing out, and that one thing follows another in a continuous thread, and therefore that to view *the work* is to watch the cinematic composition from beginning to end. The viewer of photography, on the other hand, understands that although details of the image may unfold themselves over time as the image is observed—and as the viewer takes the needed time to explore the image—these details are inherent to the image and do not emerge or recede temporally in any objective sense.

Practiced in both the cinematic and the photographic, the viewer of the antekinetic image is therefore caught between two conditioned responses, staring at an image that changes only minutely, perhaps hoping that a narrative arc will reveal itself, and eventually discovering that the faintly moving image is what teaches us how to look—really look—at the static. The antekinetic image, therefore, occupies the space *before* something happens —being "before motion," it is what we experience on the way to the event. It begs to be extended, to be allowed to continue to its conclusion and to have us continue to gaze upon it, and the longer it lasts the more fervent its wish to have us wait a little longer.

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Tableau II:

Two men are on either side of a wheeled plinth. One is leaning against it, and the other is in the midst of pulling it by means of a rope. On the plinth stands a third man in off-white chiton *and covered in off-white body paint. He stands with a shield in front of his face and a sword at his side, facing forward.*

The antekinetic image says, "I want more life, fucker."

After uttering this same phrase, the replicant Roy Batty gouged out the eyes of his designer, Doctor Tyrell. Eyes in particular, or sight and vision more broadly, are the leitmotif of *Blade Runner*—it's a filmmaker's film, relying on vision while insisting that visual perception is the very thing that betrays us most consistently and painfully. *Blade Runner*'s antagonists (it essentially has no protagonist) have visual memories they cannot trust; they have seen things which may never have happened; their memories have come from somewhere else.

Mark B.N. Hansen takes this aspect of *Blade Runner* as his starting point for a discussion of virtual space and its refusal to privilege one perspective over another. Hansen claims that once an image is made digital, whether sourced from a photograph or not, it has ceased to be spatial and tied to a particular point of view. Therefore the transmutation of the literal image into the virtual image data-soup of digital computation is irreversible; once the potential of other viewpoints has been introduced, any grand myth of the "original" viewpoint becomes groundless.

Mirrors almost accomplish this. A mirror suggests a not-quite-virtual space

because it allows us to occupy a point of view without entering the requisite point in space. When we gaze into a mirror, we see objects, scenes, or vistas which are not there… or at least, are not *exactly* there, are not where they appear. When we pass our vision through mirrors—or rather allow mirrors to deflect it—we see from angles we don't inhabit or own. Mirrors show us views behind or around other objects—they obstruct one perspective to provide another. The mirror is therefore the ultimate device of alterity, for through the mirror we inhabit the gaze of another (or *an other*) body.

We understand this as trickery, but we trust it; like faithful viewers of the magician's spectacle, we know it's done with mirrors but we don't care.

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Tableau III:

A young man's back is turned to us as he peers into a camera. His right hand is on the camera's focal ring and his left arm is outstretched, mid-gesture, as though directing an absent body. Stage lights are to his right and left, pointing away from the audience and spilling light onto the man, faintly.

To adopt a technohistorical view of the antekinetic would be to recognize that the electronic eye brings with it certain ways of seeing. While extending our human vision across time and space—allowing us to see streamed feeds, or memories stuck on a VHS tape—the camera also defines the contours of what we can see. Like a sloppy translator without a grasp of the vernacular, the camera records only that which sits within the limits of its own vocabulary. It simultaneously extends and dampens the eye, and does so depending on its own characteristics.

Most video cameras are currently driven by complementary metal-oxide-semiconductor (CMOS) sensors, a particularity of which is their increased vulnerability to "rolling shutter" and their reliance on inexpensive flash memory as storage device… there are complex technical explanations of these but suffice it to say that rolling shutter and high levels of digital compression mean that quickly moving subjects, whip pans, and handheld camerawork can cause the image to dissolve itself into a gelatinous mess of blocky artifacts and wobbly lines. Like the vibratory interlacing and warm tones that mark analogue television (a medium that never for a moment sits still), rolling shutter and compression mark the footage from digital cameras… like birthmarks that identify a corpse.

Of course, a camera in the hands of an individual producer may be put to any number of purposes, styles, or mandates. It's not a straitjacket, after all, but an instrument, and the virtuoso is one who stretches an instrument past its limits while exploiting its blessings. But the factors above do make contemporary video lend itself to contemplative patience, requesting that both producing and consuming such footage be practices of attention and duration.

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Tableau IV:

Two men stand facing away from each other, six meters apart; they are mid-stride. Both are dressed in period costume and each holds a pistol in his right hand.

Plato believed that light travelled out in a straight line from the eye; that the origin not just of vision but of the medium that makes vision possible issued from inside the head of the observer. Descartes, while recognizing light as essential to vision, proposed instead that light descended from a single source ("the heavens") and struck objects which we could then see.

This is not a minor difference, it is a metaphysical one. It marks the shift from a pagan cosmology, in which each individual could see the world uniquely, subjectively, and through the vehicle of a particular member of the pantheon, to an abrahamic one, in which all knowledge must come from a single, higher source.

That both theories saw light as moving in a straight line (Descartes described it as a stick) merely proves that they had more in common with each other than they do with us. We now understand oscillation, and that light dips and weaves and bounces and bends... it speeds up and slows down. Light, like a bird, moves in patterns according to the environment through which it is moving; its flight path is responsive.

Gravity sets in, and we can still see the sun for several minutes after it has actually gone down.

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Tableau V:

A woman sits far downstage with opera glasses to her eyes, casting her gaze to the left. Far upstage, facing forward, an elderly man with white hair and moustache stares at her through opera glasses of his own.

Like light, the flightpath of the gaze is dependent on its context. Moreover, its ability to reward or punish, to entice or distract, is contingent on that context; the gaze is a social construction rather than a purely geometric one. We tend to view the gaze as forming a straight line from the eye of the subjective observer to the object observed, and the directionality of the gaze carries meaning. The gaze can decline, in submission; it can ride the horizon in observation or visual consumption; it can even lash out at us, queering—in its directional sense—the picture plane by drawing an invisible line perpendicular to it.

And what, then, happens to us as viewers, looking at a prerecorded, still person who is "looking" (staring) at "us" (the collective of potential viewers embodied by the camera)? What relationship might we strike with ghosts that know we will one day arrive to observe them, but who cannot know anything else about us?

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Further Reading:

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