

[Back to Issue 8](#)

# Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

## The Way We Loop Now: Eddying in the Flows of Media

by Jaimey Hamilton

© 2004



In 1974 Nam June Paik placed a statue of Buddha in front of a TV that displayed live feedback of the figure and titled it *TV Buddha* ([fig. 1](#)). The Buddha, an Eastern symbol of meditation and enlightenment, used in conjunction with the then-new technology of the closed-circuit loop, raises interesting questions about the relationship between subjectivity and media technology. Does the Buddha meditate upon itself or is it just another media effect, an eternal return of the simulated image of the self? Along with Paik's other experiments with the new medium of video in the 1970s, *TV Buddha* reflected an early understanding of the control that media potentially had over the intellectual life of its viewers, while at the same time expressing Paik's hope in its possibilities as an instrument of cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup> The tension of *TV Buddha* resides in the precarious balance between meditation and mediation, between the consciousness and the constructedness of the self.

Approaching the relationship between subjectivity and media from a background in minimalism and performance, Bruce Nauman began exploring ways to actively involve the viewer. In *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, 1970, Nauman used closed-circuit video as part of a larger installation involving a too-narrow corridor to confound the participant's spatial understanding. Mainly

by attempting to alienate or otherwise aggressively engage museumgoers, Nauman has continued to explore the spectatorial role.<sup>2</sup> With *Think* in 1993, (fig. 2) he created a piece in which a seemingly passive viewing state roughly akin to Paik's Buddha is prodded into contemplation. Placing two monitors together, one upside down and on top of the other, each playing a looped video disc displaying his head moving into the screen, yelling THINK, Nauman took an even more aggressive stab at the way in which TV dictates, through direct address, the thoughts of the viewer.

The circulating systems of these two loops (Paik's an indefinitely running live video feed, and Nauman's a continuously repeating video disc), in which media generates the self and the self affirms media, pose the question of how we actually begin to approach thought or contemplation inside of the seemingly circular logic of media culture. Though made almost twenty years apart, both loops offer a common ground on which to address these questions. Their answer lies not in the alteration and subversion of the image, but in the duration and iteration of representation itself. Paik and Nauman were fascinated by the technical novelty of feedback and looping as well as their psychological and phenomenological effect on viewers. They both use the loop to mimic the temporal logic of repetition in the media, injecting humor and absurdity as a way to point to and potentially disrupt this condition from within.

This is not a new tactic. Minimalists exposed the myth of the museum as white cube by reproducing white cubes within its spaces. Conceptual artists exposed the capitalist operating logic of the museum by simply making its business activity visible as part of the exhibition. One of the complications that video art presents in this context is its ambition to bring a phenomenological and critical awareness to both the gallery space and the media system. Indeed, part of the aim of video art has been to explore the extent to which the museum or gallery is yet another site for a spectacularized experience (think movie theater, but also block-buster impressionist exhibition). While video artists

readily acknowledge that the space of the museum or gallery is as penetrable by the media spectacle as any other space in our culture, I would argue that their work conveys an understanding that the gallery space is just as good as any other, including the movie theater and the living room couch, as a site for engaging with mass media. Some video artists embrace the gallery, not because it is a neutral space (we come to it with just as many cultural habits as we do a movie theater), but because it implies different rules than the movie theater or a living room couch. In a gallery, we are relatively unbounded by the box office start times and the rows of seats of the Cineplex. Neither does it offer the creature comforts of home - no refrigerator in which to get snacks at the commercial break. While the gallery enforces other spectatorial habits, such as walking around the room in a line behind other visitors, pausing momentarily in front of a picture before moving on, time-based media shown in the gallery, primarily because, unlike painting, sculpture and drawing, it is still relatively new in that context and because it has an explicit time length (whether looped or not), forces us to become aware of our own volition. Do we stay and watch more or move on?<sup>3</sup> In that time between indecision and decision, we have to ask ourselves whether, and then why, what we are watching is interesting or important to us.

What Paik and Nauman's video loops allow us to do then, if not to achieve some impossible transcendence from the material world either through meditation or creative philosophizing (THINK!) within the fictional sanctum of the white cube, is to see ourselves attempting to think. As we stand longer in front of Nauman's mirrored heads coming together, telling us what to do, we ask, what should we think? How do we think? And why should we listen to him anyway? We might even extend our questions to Nauman's own activity. Can he think while he jumps and yells? Is he trying to get himself to think by doubling his heads and then butting them against each other? After a while, we might stop paying attention to the mediated image of Nauman (because after all, we know what he's going to do already) and start paying attention to the rhythm of his potentially eternal return. In

the extreme repetition that forces us to attend to the loop's presentation and representation in actual time, there exists the possibility of thinking about the media and our relationship to it through its looped time.

Art video loops are by no means the only opportunity in which the phenomenological effects of repeated spectacle can affect our understanding of our mediated self. But they do offer concrete examples of how that experience can be created within the flow of the ostensibly endless media stream. In the repetition provided by the video loop there is a continual oscillation, perhaps best visualized as a tiny eddy, in which the images circle from easily-read, culturally-embedded symbols, to meaningful instigators of thought outside the media, to utterly meaningless but mesmerizing images, and back again. Looped time abets the already continual motion of the eddying of our thought in which it is possible to both acknowledge the force of media in our lives, and to witness (and perhaps take) the opportunity of thinking through it differently.



I've been quoted a lot as saying, 'I like boring things.' Of course, what I think is boring must not be the same as what other people think is, since I could never stand to watch all the most popular action shows on TV, because they're essentially the same plots and the same shots and the same cuts over and over again. If I'm going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don't want it to be essentially the same. I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.

- Andy Warhol<sup>4</sup>

When Andy Warhol claimed emptiness in repetition and boredom at the height of the television age, he did it, like all his claims, with such extreme sincerity that we question whether he really *meant* it. Who would claim (except Warhol, in his slyly deliberate, performative, flat tone) that they like boring things? And what's more, who would claim to like to watch, not the average boring thing, but some stultifyingly dull thing (like a man sleeping) over and over and over again. Setting aside for a moment the issue of what Warhol meant by boredom and emptiness, what is interesting about his observation is that he distinguishes between what he calls essential repetition (a general reproduction in which one kind of thing replaces a similar kind of thing) and exact repetition (not really even a reproduction, but something that repeats itself, like the loop). Essential, or pseudo, repetition of the media captures our interest and staves off our boredom by substituting new actors, different sets, and maybe a few small details and variations. The monotony of most TV shows and films today demonstrates how proficient the media industry has become at recycling in order to keep the media (and the capital it generates) flowing.

Warhol's prescient remark also hints at the importance of narrative repetition in perpetuating standard behavioral roles. For decades, film theorists have explored the ways in which the media functions as an apparatus of capitalism by constantly interpellating its subjects through the same narratives of success (especially those of wealth and family).<sup>5</sup> The conventions of cinematic or television narrative (crisis and resolution) and its continuity editing (point-of-view shots, shot/reverse shots, integrated flashbacks) enable strong identifications with the characters and ideologies of mass media. The way we anticipate, hold out for, and are satisfied with the same old story, presented in a flow of constant action and reaction, naturalizes these narratives and potentially immobilizes thought outside these standard plotlines. Why, for instance, do we get so upset when the heroine of a film is in dire straits, and why are we so elated, *every time*, when she finally wins her man? Capitalist media has developed a way to tap into

our obvious human inclinations for finding satisfaction in the repetition of simulated desire, fear, anticipation and closure. The power of these reiterating narratives, I would argue, lies in their ability to present a new face each time, promising its difference, its uniqueness, its spontaneity and naturalness, but also promising a sense of security in their foregone conclusions. Consequently, subjectification has become ever more enforced by the linear and predictable cause and effect structure of the media. In this way, mass media uses time to create habitual patterns.[6](#)

While Warhol himself was famous for excessively performing the habitual patterns of the spectacular age, his contemporary, Guy Debord was not so enamored with mediated time and its effects on subjectivity. First published in French in 1967, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* offered one of the first, and still one of the most relevant, diagnoses of the media age's transformation of time.[7](#) Time, Debord argued, is not so much something we experience anymore, but something we *consume*. Watching the same old stories disengages us from historical cause and effect, alienating us from the idea of initiating change in the course of our history or our lives. Time in the mass media age is broken into discrete, enjoyable, abstracted fragments of consumable entertainment. We pay ten dollars to sit in a theater and watch the hero prevail. We pay our monthly cable so that each night we can watch our favorite sports players shoot it out. We tune in weekly, or perhaps daily, to find out what trials our favorite television actors will face. We turn on the Playstation and before we know it, we have been immersed in the world of Doom for hours.

Our lives are now not only measured by seasonal change or daily cycles, but also by the manufacturing of predictable behavior and economic cycles. Through the consumption of artificially distinct moments, we have become so used to our experience of media and capitalist time that we have forgotten that other kinds of time (from geological to phenomenological, to nano-time) exist, let alone how to appreciate them and take



advantage of them.<sup>8</sup> As other philosophers of media culture have taken up these questions, the phenomenological experience of time has become increasingly important to the discussion. Gilles Deleuze, on occasion hopelessly utopic, on others remarkably practical in his attention to incremental change and the subtle power of even the smallest forces, has proposed, if not solutions to the powerful force of the media flow, than certainly what we could call tactics to exist within it.

Specifically Deleuze's theory of repetition offers a way to recognize opportunity and change inside our phenomenological or material experience of media culture.<sup>9</sup> This type of experiencing of time, though it may be rooted in the way our whole body, not just our subjectivity (which has become a curiously disembodied entity), engages in time, is not any more *authentic* than media time. Phenomenological time is just as mediated (by our interpretive organs, if not television screens) as media or capital time. It is hard to really try to distinguish the two, since our bodily engagement with the world always seems to be entangled within cultural forces. But what I take from Deleuze (while attempting, precariously, not to fall into the trap of authenticity) is an understanding that a phenomenological experience of time is not so much a *natural* time, if there is such a thing, but a way of attempting, and sometimes failing, to experience time, including media time, in additive, supplemental, and infinite terms.<sup>10</sup> To put it another way, phenomenological time, while existing within the media flow, calls attention to the way our interpretive organs process cultural information *in time*. It simply places the emphasis of understanding the way in which the media interpellates us, not on the symbolic or the visual, but also on the action, the force, or process of that interpellation, which can be interrupted or transformed at any moment by any other sensory information that our mind is filtering simultaneously.

Even the spectacular, habitual, pseudo-cyclical time that capitalism tends to perpetuate, we learn from Deleuze, has a materiality and temporality in which our experience

in the continually shifting present, the ever changing now, can be accessed and used to disrupt the narratives of capitalist time.<sup>11</sup> Debord himself conducted some of the first film experiments that expressly used the materiality of film to *détourn* the time of the cinematic spectacle.<sup>12</sup> Collaging together found footage of everything from newsreels to narrative cinema, and then applying incongruous sound (often his own manifestos) on top of these fragments, he completely disrupted the audience's expectations, occasionally causing riots in the movie theater. Materialist or structuralist cinema practitioners of the sixties and seventies, like Warhol, also broke capitalist narrative's grip by focusing on very minimal subjects with no dramatic action and no climax. Warhol's own *Sleep* (1963) or Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) focus on the real-time duration of non-events, possibly as a way to bore the viewer out of their habitual movie-going mindset. In Gilles Deleuze's own discussions of time and the media, he acknowledges these ways of disrupting or counteracting the linear narratives of media images and sounds, but he also offers up the notion of pure repetition as another effective tool. The temporal rhythm of the loop, whether produced by artists such as Nauman and Paik or already present in the media flow, provides another kind of micro-level intensity of time that eddies the fetishized, continuous, homogenized time of capitalism, before letting it flow onward.

A seemingly self-enclosed circle that might ostensibly represent the vacuity of the age of simulacra, the loop also represents the potential of infinity, the expression of the inclusion of all possibilities through the act of recycling. This is what Warhol slyly indicated when he said that the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel. Emptiness in repetition, especially in the kind of meditative way that Warhol implies (and perhaps Paik in *TV Buddha* as well), opens itself to experiencing the materiality of time beyond representation and narration. While the pseudo-cyclical flow of capitalist media provides essentially the same thing as a way to contain the subject, the potential of the



loop, as an exact repetition, opens the emptiness of meaning (in its infinite proliferation) in a way that directs our attention to new terms of thought while watching the same exact thing.



Aided by technology that can copy or capture media images with increasing quality and ease, something that was not available to Warhol and Debord in the sixties nor to Paik and Nauman in the seventies, and immersed in a re-run culture, projected-image artists of the last ten years or so have become more and more attentive to the potential of the loop to eddy the capitalist narrative flow. Perhaps more attuned to the increasing spectacularization and pervasiveness of film and television and therefore more comfortable with or more invested in the power of popular culture, these artists are increasingly interested in playing with narrative time as a way to disrupt our subjective ties with its characters and ideologies. Paul Pfeiffer and Douglas Gordon perhaps best represent, for the purposes of this essay, a generation of artists since the nineties that have been interested in exploring this territory.<sup>13</sup> Both use the loop consistently in their work to accentuate and focus our attention upon the mechanism of repetition in capitalist media. They do not try to reproduce variations on the same old story, but rather appropriate those stories and literalize media repetition by playing them over and over and over again.

Through their use of the loop, we are invited to relate to the media, not only through our identification with the characters and our habitual internalization of capitalist narratives (i.e. through representation or visualization), but also in the way we actively experience its iteration and reiteration in time (i.e. through temporality). Perhaps the most extreme example of this is Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993 ([fig. 3](#)). Employing typical Warholian strategies of showing extremely long-running films and decelerating the projection speed, Gordon slows down

Hitchcock's *Psycho* so that each still of the film is visible for approximately twelve times longer than it would in the normal projection, expanding its running time to a single daily cycle.<sup>14</sup> Like many current video installations, *24 Hour Psycho* is looped so that there is always something playing in the gallery. It is probably stopped at closing (a condition of capitalist time), but theoretically it could just keep running through the night. Because of the extended length of the loop, we are frustrated by always catching the movie in the middle of its projection and never being able to sit through the whole thing. We cannot watch *24 Hour Psycho* in the consumable, discrete time of the movie theater or the late night movie. What the gallery setting of *24 Hour Psycho* does allow us to do though, if not camp out over night to see the entire thing, is to offer a different kind of time for the display of films, spinning what could be taken as a manifestation of an extreme movie-going experience, into a circadian rhythm.<sup>15</sup> Even though we come and go as we please, the film will ostensibly always be playing, as sure as the sun rises and sets.

By extending the running time of *Psycho*, excessively performing the narrative time of the film, but leaving it otherwise unaltered, Douglas doesn't aggressively subvert the symbolic content of the original film but rather accentuates the idiosyncratic temporality and sequence of shots, thus recapturing the effectiveness of Hitchcock's originally provocative filmic structure. As Gordon proves, it doesn't take much to disrupt the narrative flow of *Psycho* because it was already astonishingly anti-narrative, providing weak motivations for Marion's (the heroine) actions and killing her off half-way through the film (and then substituting a psycho in her place). Sometimes more attentive to the aesthetic of his frames than to his narratives, Hitchcock incorporated aesthetically mesmerizing, but non-essential, frames into *Psycho*, what Gilles Deleuze calls time-images.<sup>16</sup> The most notable is the shot sequence of Marion's eye in the shower scene, which, even at the original film speed, seems interminable. Time-images, Deleuze argued, whether the still-lives inserted into Yasujiro Ozu's already

notoriously long takes, the deliberately jolting jump cut of Jean-Luc Godard, or Hitchcock's display of technical virtuosity, tend to disrupt spectacularized time by reaffirming the present time of the viewer experiencing the film.

The extreme slowness of the actions in Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, even more than in Warhol's films, provides an opportunity for us to pay attention to both the spectacular time of the film and our presence in the gallery watching scenes slowly mutate. In a simple adjustment of time and viewing space, we watch a movie we already know (that does ultimately end up confirming the rightful order of things) but we become conscious of watching it differently. Gordon says, "The viewer is catapulted back into the past by his recollection of the original, and at the same time he is drawn into the future by his expectations of an already familiar narrative." *A slowly changing present forces itself in between.*<sup>17</sup> Every image in *24 Hour Psycho*, because it is slowed down so dramatically, becomes a time-image, a small intensity of stilled time that allows us to think about our perceptual experience in the present in addition to our need to create a meaningful narrative out of *Psycho*.

If Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* attenuates time to capture our attention, Paul Pfeiffer's loops seems to retract it, not by speeding up film or video speed, but by fragmenting a portion of narrative into highly concentrated short loops or second-long cycles of time. Pfeiffer employs the latest digital technology to manipulate each frame of his footage (erasing ads and logos, or sometimes even erasing essential characters) as well as to create rapid loops. Like Gordon, he is interested in narrative disruption, but his work is less beholden than Gordon's to film classics. He appropriates material from kitschy, but highly popular teen flicks like *Risky Business*. His most critically acclaimed loops are segments of pro-sporting events, whose high narrative content contains drama on and off the court. In many ways his looping style approaches the fast-paced editing of MTV, action movies, television sports, and other youth

media that commodify and reaffirm our notions of class, race, and masculinity.

*Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)*, 1999, (fig. 4) a silent digital loop of about two seconds in length displayed on a small three-by-four-inch LCD monitor projecting out from the wall (fig.5) shows the basketball star Larry Johnson pumped up and screaming, presumably after shooting an incredible shot. The look on his face may be one of triumph because he made a great play or perhaps because he got paid millions of dollars doing it but it is difficult to decipher, and that is precisely the point. At first the emotional pathos of Johnson (hence the title's reference to Francis Bacon's screaming figures) seems to enhance the narrative quality of his gesture, but as it quickly loops around, it is hard not to start seeing pain, frustration, and any number of other emotions on his face. The cause for his emotion is foreclosed by the loop, allowing an endless play of ambiguity to take hold. The incessant revolutions of the loop push the capacity of the spectacle to move beyond itself, offering an opportunity to witness, each in a different instant and then layered upon another, our fascination with the image and our investment in Larry Johnson's success, while also witnessing, in his over-performance, a sort of failure of masculine success embodied in his stalled progress.<sup>18</sup>

By holding down the repeat button longer than even MTV dares to do Pfeiffer guides our initial captivation with the hypnotizing image into recognizing of our own hypnotization. He reasons that it may have something to do with the speed of his loops, The difference is one of scale, or duration. You see the repetition happen before your eyes and so you are *forced* to deal with it as repetition.<sup>19</sup> The fast-moving loop becomes a pulsing, vibrating apparatus that literally touches the mind. As Deleuze states in *Difference and Repetition*,

It is a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representations; it is a

substituting direct signs for mediate representation; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances, or leaps which directly touch the mind.[20](#)

Another of Paul Pfeiffer's silent digital loops, *The Pure Products go Crazy*, 1998, ([fig. 6](#)) less than a second of film appropriated from *Risky Business* showing Tom Cruise leaping face-down onto and writhing on a couch in his underwear. The work demonstrates how the materiality of the vibration and rhythm of the loop can offer an alternative way to stimulate the mind if not outside of representation, at least in addition to it and definitely *in relation* to it. The temporality of the loop literally cuts up the commodified time of manufactured cause and effect, disrupting our comfort with mediate representation and turning it in on itself. We may recognize Tom Cruise and Larry Johnson, but the loop's rapid movement never gives us the satisfaction of concretely verifying their identity, and the smallness of the monitors underplays their spectacular bodies as media heroes while also intensifying our experience of the rhythm of the loop. Bending down close, concentrating on the quick, elusive recycling image, our attention circulates around our frustration of reading the image out of context, our fascination with Pfeiffer's technical skill, and the time that has passed as we stand there trying to decide what to make of it all.

Even as the same thing passes on the monitor each time we watch it, it is different. Why? Because [exact] repetition repeats the unrepeatable.[21](#) Even though a loop consists of the same piece of videotape, celluloid, or laser-etched plastic, read over and over again, each iteration happens in a different instance, thus becoming, at each pass, a singularity unfolding in time. As we watch each repetition unfold and then spiral back on itself, we build up an experience of sensation and thought that is informed by each new viewing of the same image. In other words, each repetition of Cruise writhing on the couch is fundamentally different because we experience it in a continually shifting present of a different now and

so our perception of it changes as we become conscious of our accumulating memory of the image. Maybe we begin by noting how we see Cruise's perpetual flopping on the couch. He looks like a fish. As the loop rapidly returns again, we decide, yes, and he is masturbating. Again, yes, and he is having a seizure. As our interpretations multiply with each loop, we start to lose our focus on how we interpret the image, and start to consider *why* we see the exact same image differently every time.

Watching the same image over and over tends to intensify a self-consciously reflective viewing experience where we are not only intent on deciphering the image but on deciphering the way we experience the image and the unfolding of the time of experience.<sup>22</sup> How many times will we watch it? What thought and action will finally allow us to break away from the screen and move on to something else? As Deleuze argues, the order of time has precisely undone that circle. It has undone it in favour of a less simple and much more secret, much more torturous, more nebulous circle, an eternally excentric circle, the decentered circle of difference.<sup>23</sup> Our experience of the looping that unfolds in the now becomes a kind of excentric rotation that causes an undoing of circular, mediated, habitual thought and spirals outward, producing difference through the singularity of each now. With that spiraling of time, it is possible for other notions of self to emerge -- what Deleuze called becoming that might momentarily depart from our continually reiterated subjectification through media representation. In the tiniest moments, present everywhere and all the time, not just in video loops, becoming within the eddying of time is one possible way to divert the flows of capital. To explore this in more depth, it might be useful to look more closely at the way in which Pfeiffer and Gordon's use of the loop alters our identification with media stars.





In Pfeiffer's *The Pure Products go Crazy*, we don't see Tom Cruise (an unknown when *Risky Business* was made, but definitely a star product by the time *Pure Products* was displayed) master the art of love or commerce. The narrative structure, usually tamed by the continuity of shots, progressing toward the ultimate goal of initiating Cruise and the viewing subject into manhood, is displaced by the continuous present of the loop. The repetition breaks our identification with Cruise because it stymies the possibilities of recognizing ourselves in his predicaments and successes. Seeing Cruise writhe on the couch introduces the obvious question, why is he such an icon of desirability (and the object of whose desire?) if he behaves in such a manner?<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the splicing of the classic display of masculine coming of age presented in *Risky Business*, originally showing Cruise playing air guitar to Bob Seger's Old Time Rock N Roll, into a flailing figure on the couch could be read, in yet one more interpretive iteration, as a feminization of Cruise. He flops on the couch as if he's having a hysterical fit, a condition long attributed to women. Whatever gendered confusions are caused by the time of the loop, we never see them resolved, just reiterated, as with Larry Johnson's own seizure.

These characters' perpetual state of hysterics, and their failure to perform their proper roles, intensified by repetition, calls into question their status as objects of our fantasy and identification. This logic also applies to two other well-known loops in the history of video installation, Bruce Conner's *Marilyn Times Five*, 1968-1973, a loop of an appropriated film featuring Arline Hunter impersonating a young Marilyn Monroe seducing the camera in the same way five times, and Dara Birnbaum's, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1979, an explosive loop of manipulated, edited footage of Linda Carter as Wonder Woman spinning and interminably failing to transform into her alter-ego. The intensity of her whirling actually seems to cause spontaneous combustion. The duration and repetition of each action by Arline Hunter and Linda Carter, like those of Cruise and Johnson, intensifies the over-performance

of gender in these clips, escalating our awareness of the fact that gendered subjectivity must be acted and re-acted in order to remain meaningful to us.

The way in which our identification with these characters collapses within the circulation of the loop is perhaps best exemplified in Douglas Gordon's *Through a Looking Glass*, 1999, ([fig. 7](#)) a video installation with doubled looped segments from the famous "You talkin' to me?" scene in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Two screens mounted on opposite sides of the gallery show mirror images of the looped video clip. De Niro as Travis Bickel, practicing his gun draw and gangster attitude in front the camera/mirror, seems to address himself across the space of the gallery. The gallery becomes the space of the mirror, the land of the looking glass, in which the difference between subject and object become indistinct, for it is unclear whether De Niro is talking through us or to us.<sup>25</sup> The looming floor-to-ceiling double images, along with the echoing sound, accentuates the viewer's confusing position at the center of De Niro's aggressive address. "You talkin' to me?"

The doubled loop does more than simply confuse the psychological process of subjectification, it also creates a gap in time and space in which to concentrate on how our body is literally moved by the time of the loops address. Though the loops are duplicated, the slight material differences in the lengths of the two loops, each about seventy-one seconds, begin to pull DeNiro's mirror, and cinematic time, apart with each revolution, creating a dissonance throughout the gallery. Imagine facing one De Niro asking, "You talkin' to me?" and then hearing it again across the room, turning to face the other De Niro. Shifting back and forth like a pendulum to the dictating rhythm of the films, De Niro's literal interpellation of the viewer is as much a phenomenological event as a psychic one. The peripatetic perceptions, bodily confusions, and even dizziness we experience as we literally oscillate, if not our whole bodies, at least our heads, and as the loops move into and out of synch with each other, are integral to the confusion of media

narrative time and the open up to the time of becoming.

*Through the Looking Glass*, as with most of Gordon's video installations, while tapping into a strong tradition of exploring the psychological effects of video address initiated by Nauman and Vito Acconci, also intensifies the phenomenological recursiveness of that address. Using many of the same mechanisms of mirroring, doubling, and looping, Gordon's *Through the Looking Glass* at first seems to participate in what Rosalind Krauss dubbed an aesthetics of narcissism in her 1976 article, one of the first considerations of the medium specificity of video.<sup>26</sup> Her argument revolves around, or takes as its symptom, Acconci's video *Centers*, 1971, in which he attempts to point at his own image, almost simultaneously fed back into the TV, as long as he can hold his arm up. *Centers*, Krauss argues, is the summation of video's self-encapsulated, self-involved condition. Ann Wagner, stimulated by the reconceptualization of video and performance history, has argued more recently that the narcissism of video feedback, rather than being entirely solipsistic in its recursion, actually solicits the viewer into participation.<sup>27</sup> Returning to an analysis of *Centers*, Wagner argued that Acconci was not only aggressively (and impolitely) pointing at himself, he was also addressing the viewer watching him point out of the TV screen. Gordon's appropriation of Scorsese's camera-as-mirror footage, like Acconci's own use of the camera, uses the narcissistic implications of the screen to open up to and engage with the viewer. In Acconci's work, the viewer is forced to be on the other side of the mirror and to hold his gaze. Similarly, the viewer is forced to be the other to DeNiro's character in the traditional cinema screening of *Taxi Driver*. But in Gordon's installation, DeNiro is already doubled, mirroring himself, allowing the viewer a mobility within the land of the looking glass that rivals a model of the Lacanian mirror stage. It is the rhythmic drive of the doubled, repeated frames, and our position in-between them, that allows a momentary distraction from what sometimes feels like the mis-en-abyme of mediated subjectivity.

The experience confirms that the self is not *only* defined through interpellation and induction into the symbolic structure through the screen or the mirror. It is also an infinite accumulation of instances of the now a process of becoming that can disrupt subjectification in any instant. This kind of Deleuzian reading of loops offers a way of conceptualizing the potential of our experience of time - without aim, without image, and without narrative - in a way that can rival the power of representation in regulating our thought processes. De Niro's (like Cruise's and Johnson's) reiterative performance of masculinity, while fascinating and enticing, also becomes incongruous with our sensory overload of movement and noise. Without the narrative cause and effect that reaffirms (or warns against) Travis Bickel's behavior, we lose stake in his performance as a lesson in subjectivity and we become more tuned into the emotional, temporal, and psychic intensities materialized in the unending repetition and doubling of the loop.<sup>28</sup> The process of thought, when given the opportunity to somehow be diverted from representations of progress and productivity and from our relationship to the media into smaller eddies, opens up to the possibility of being transformed by the reflection on the condition of time itself. This type of thinking or becoming affirms our own idiosyncratic and unfolding experience. It unleashes the force of contemplation as a productive activity within the forces of constructedness.



At present, the power of media time seems to be a condition with which we need to come to terms rather than to try and escape. It is important to freely acknowledge our investment in media culture; we may enjoy getting involved in the predicaments of De Niro and Cruise at the movies, Carter on TV, Johnson on the court, or even Nauman in the gallery. Within that involvement though, looped time can turn our attention upon itself. Whether sitting on the floor of the gallery or

sitting on a couch, we can watch time whirl around itself and open up to a time for becoming. But we must also acknowledge the fact that becoming is not a fairytale happy ending, a freedom from the confines of the media flow that is finally achieved and then sustained. It is constantly being incorporated back into spectacular time, but it is also always in the process of creating new lines of flight for itself. This is the lesson of Steve McQueen's looped video, *Prey*, 1999 ([fig.8](#)).

Entering into the empty gallery, save for the floor to ceiling projected image of *Prey*, we are invited to watch two tape spools, one red, one green, gently couched in a field of grass, turn round and round as the sound of tap-dancing emanates from it. After minutes of simply watching time loop in the most literal fashion, the tape recorder, attached to a balloon, which we do not see until this instant, suddenly takes off into the air, the sound of the music fading as it floats higher into the sky. The balloon carrying the recorder up into the air conveniently symbolizes freedom, our freedom, as we escape the confines of the media. That image of freedom, just as quickly as it took off, jettisons down to the ground and the loop begins again. This simple narrative arc - the representation of the media loop, its sudden taking off, and its equally sudden return to the earth, seems a ready metaphor for our own experience of looped time. While it may accurately depict the trajectory of becoming inside the loop and avoid the spectacle of media stars, as a representation it loses its material, phenomenological force. Rather than a possibility in time, it presents itself as an ideal that we must approximate. It has been subsumed back into the narrative flow.

But, even though becoming is re-spectacularized in this way, its eddying opens up new spirals of time. Within the looped time of this representation of looped time, we also enter into the temporal experience of the loop, allowing ourselves not only to relate to, or to feel like the tape-recorder taking off, but to become tape-recorder, following it on its trajectory and getting caught up in the whirling sensation around us.<sup>29</sup> We allow ourselves to enter the composition, just as we did by being in the

middle of Gordon's *Through the Looking Glass*, bending over to meet Pfeiffer's small LCD monitors, or reacting to the aggression of Nauman's address. The empty sky of *Prey* fills our vision and the proximity and contingency of our experience of time is directly related to our surroundings. We become looped-time. In this way, the conditions of our experience of the looped video installation move beyond the static image of representation and momentarily exceed it.

In this instance our attention, turned toward the elliptical oscillation of our own thought *as an action or process in time* rather than as an approximation of an ideal, may be enough to start considering our relationship to media culture differently. Although our thoughts inevitably get swept back up into the flows of capitalist time and representation, it always has the potential to take off in a different direction again. In the viewing of these loops, we may not have completely escaped the dominance of the cultural spectacle and its structuring of our leisure time, but it may be enough that we let go and circled in a different way to a different rhythm for a moment, even if it ended up ultimately carrying us back into the onward flow of culture.

*Jaimey Hamilton is a doctoral candidate in the Art History program at Boston University in the field of modern and contemporary visual culture and theory. Her dissertation examines the theme of excess in the postwar assemblage practices of Alberto Burri, Robert Rauschenberg, and Arman. Her research focuses on issues that concern the intersection of contemporary commodity culture and art. She can be reached at [jaimeyh@bu.edu](mailto:jaimeyh@bu.edu).*



I would like to thank my advisor, Caroline A. Jones, and my colleagues, John X. Christ, Emily Gephart, Mari Dumett, Stuart Steck, and Stacey McCarroll, for their careful readings of and thoughtful comments on this essay.

1. Paik's interest in the technology of live video feed extended to the idea of a free global exchange of ideas, leading to his collaborations with live broadcasting on public television. For more on Nam June Paik's video art, see Toni Stoos and Thomas Kellein, *Nam June Paik: Video Time-Video Space* (New York: Abrams, 1993). ↑
2. Nauman's first interest in video equipment was as a tool to record his explorations of the body's engagement with space, namely his own exaggerated and repetitive movements within his studio. But he also became interested in exploring alienation and aggression as a way of re-engaging with the question of inter-subjectivity. For more on Nauman's video experiments, see Susan Cross, *Bruce Nauman: Theater of Experience* (New York: Guggenheim, 2003) and Marcia Tucker, "PheNAUMANology," *Artforum* 9 no. 4 (Dec. 1970): 38-44, also anthologized in Bruce Nauman, ed. Robert Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). ↑
3. Though I do not want to privilege the gallery context as a site for effectively critiquing media culture over the movie complex, the couch, or any other site of spectatorship, I do want to acknowledge that its uniqueness as a viewing space offers ways for artists to play with the repetition of media time that might differently affect our experience of the media. For more on the current dialogue between media culture in current video installation, see Malcolm Turvey, Hal Foster, Chrissie Iles, George Baker, and Matthew Buckingham, "Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art," *October*, no. 104 (Spring 2003): 71-96. ↑
4. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol 60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 50. ↑
5. For more in depth arguments on film as a cultural apparatus see Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 104-128; Theresa DeLaurentis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). ↑
6. While my primary focus in this article is on media time, I realize that I am doing so at the risk of isolating it from its intimate connection to space. Our

experience of mediated time can depend heavily on space, as I indicated in my earlier discussion of the difference between movie theaters and galleries. Incidentally, space can also take on the quality of essential repetition, like McDonald's built all across the world. Our experience of mediated time can depend heavily on space, as I indicated in my earlier discussion of the difference between movie theaters and galleries. ↑

7. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 113. Debord defined the spectacle as a new model of social life predicated upon a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12. In order to make my argument in the space provided, I am forced to generalize a bit about the notion of capitalist time. For this essay I am relying primarily on Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. But there are other authors that offer slightly different perspectives on capitalist time. See for instance, Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e) and Columbia University, 1983); and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). ↑
8. Although much of media time is based on nanoseconds, the speed at which computers and many other electronics run, this hyper-speed is arguably masked by more consumable and marketable fragments of time. ↑
9. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). ↑
10. I am calling this phenomenological time for the sake of simplicity in an attempt to not get too entangled in Deleuze's own terms. Deleuze might call it immanence, among other things. At its most basic, it is a way of understanding that interpretation or thought has a materiality and temporality as well as a much-theorized structure of visibility. This exploration is part of his larger aim of philosophizing that the materiality or imminence of thought has the potential to transform discourses or visibilities. ↑
11. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1972] 1989). ↑
12. For a more detailed description of his film projects, see Elizabeth Sussman, *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). ↑
13. Other current artists also exploring the power of narrative media include Stan Douglas, Matthew Buckingham, Pierre Huyghe, Tracey Moffatt. Though their work is relevant to this discussion of capitalist narrative, their

- work falls out of the scope of my paper's focus on the video loop. ↑
14. Just as a side note on Warhol's own manipulations of film, many of his silent films, including *Empire* (with a running time of eight hours) and *Sleep* (with a running time of six hours) were filmed at twenty-four frames per second, but projected at sixteen frames per second. To further extend the running time and to confuse any sense of narrative progression, he often re-projected reels he had already shown, mixing up the sequence of the events. Martin Schwander, ed., *Andy Warhol Paintings 1960-1986* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1995), p. 45-48. ↑
  15. An analogous comparison of circadian time could also be made with Warhol's films. As Warhol once noted, "You could do more things while watching my movies than any other kinds of movies. You could eat and drink and smoke and cough and look away and they'd still be there." Warhol interviewed by Gretchen Berg, "Nothing to Lose," *Cahiers du Cinema in English*, No. 10 (May 1967): 39-43. ↑
  16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). ↑
  17. Douglas Gordon in "Douglas Gordon" pamphlet (Wolfsburg, Germany: Kunstmuseum, n.d.), quoted in *Douglas Gordon*, ed., Russell Ferguson (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001), p. 16. Italics represent Gordon's emphasis. ↑
  18. Paul Pfeiffer states, "So, can you get beyond the spectacle by making more spectacle? It's an interesting question to me. In a way you can't attempt to push the envelope without in some way being involved or inside the envelope." Paul Pfeiffer interviewed for *Art:21*. <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/Pfeiffer/clip2.html>. Accessed 8/19/2004. ↑
  19. Paul Pfeiffer, interviewed by Jennifer Gonzalez, *Bomb*, no. 83 (Spring 2003): 22-9. ↑
  20. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 8. ↑
  21. Patrick Hayden, *Multiplicity and Becoming, The Pluralist Empiricism of Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998), p. 8. ↑
  22. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 88. ↑
  23. Ibid., p. 91. ↑
  24. Katy Seigel, "Openings: Paul Pfeiffer," *Artforum* 38, no. 10 (Summer 2000): 174-5. ↑
  25. For excellent discussions on the psychological effects of mirroring and doubling in Gordon's work, see Lynne Cook, ed., *Double Vision: Stan*

*Douglas and Douglas Gordon* (Dia Center for the Arts, 2000) and Russell Furgusson, op. cit. ↑

26. Rosalind Krauss, Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism, *October*, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 51-64. Although she admitted that the narcissistic feedback of video holds the potential (especially in pieces like Boomerang that employ the temporal discontinuity of sound rather than image) to pit the temporal values of consciousness against the stasis of the commodity fetish, her article as a whole is a sweeping indictment of video's self-involvement (p. 64). ↑
27. Anne Wagner, Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence, *October*, no. 91 (Winter 2000): 59-80. ↑
28. George Baker claims that current projected image art is less interested in the defamiliarization, and critique of representation of the 80s and more interested in an aesthetic of emotional and psychic intensities. Malcolm Turvey, Hal Foster, Chrissie Iles, George Baker, and Matthew Buckingham, Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art, p. 85 ↑
29. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 232-309. ↑

**Issue 8**

**Home**

**Facts**

**People**

**Reviews**