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#1 *Politics after Networks*

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TO SEE AND TO BE (WITH) – REFLECTIONS ON THE ECOLOGY OF WEB VIDEOS[1]

Andreas Treske calls for a paradigmatic shift in the study of video. His concept of a video sphere addresses the almost sublime quantity and variety, the unleashed mobility and adaptability, and the ubiquitous availability of moving image content in digital computer networks. It thereby aims to catch up theoretically to an everyday media experience that by definition is also a social one. Published in the series *INC Network Notebooks*, designated to "ground works [sic!] for a future research project", the short monograph provides some signposts for the gap between theoretical language and a given media practice, but postpones a more patient exploration of this space to a publication yet to come.

Treske's initial points are the different screening practices of web video and its audio-visual ancestors. Whereas the renaissance paradigm – a single frame seen on a single screen – had still binding effects on popular cinematographic and TV aesthetics, the current viewing conditions of web video bypass this traditional restraint, having moved towards an interactive "simultaneity and multiplicity" of signs, formats, frames, screens and locations.[2] By establishing multiple frames, web videos "blur the borders between what we still perceive as physical reality and representation" and reveal the spatial bonds of what Treske calls the video sphere.[3]

He borrows this notion from a work by the design company Bestiario. Its *TED Sphere* rearranges videos from the TED Talks archive according to their semantic relations and allows the user to navigate through a three-dimensional globe of thumbnails by following edges to related video-nodes, selecting from tag lists, playing videos in direct vicinity, or just browsing around randomly. For Treske this interface works as a visualisation of what he perceives as a general and primary

1 Review of: Andreas Treske, *The Inner Life of Video Spheres. Theory for the YouTube Generation*, Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2013.
2 Treske, p. 12.
3 Treske, p. 14.

state of vicinity or togetherness created by, with and around web videos. Already on a technical level, no video exists alone. On the contrary it always links to at least one other coded object with which it "simultaneously separated and unified" creates a common space.[4] With this observation in mind, Treske argues for an ecological revision of video research. What catches his interest is neither the disclosure of a technical apparatus, nor the things happening on the surface of a single video frame, but the adaptability between videos and their environment.

The introduction of HTML5 marks a crucial turning point for him, as it fosters transcoding and transposition of content in a new way. For instance, it allows for videos to be embedded as dynamic, corresponding objects, thereby opening up new possibilities for responsive design and even undermining the status of distinct object types like video, audio, images or text. Redefined as temporal objects among other temporal objects, videos establish more dynamic and richer connections to their surroundings, enabling almost effortless interactions. "We could say that the environment understands the video, just as the video can comprehend its environment", speculates Treske about this relationship and, by describing it as "neighborly" and atmospheric, crosses the border between the realms of mechanical and human communication even further.[5]

This Latour-inspired shift will be discussed later. First it is necessary to complete the recurrent argument that the book is built on. Not only on a technical level, but also on a social level, a "video never exists alone", but always in the paired constellation of viewer and viewed and furthermore together with a wide range of "possibilities and multiplicities and others" with which they form the video sphere.[6] The theoretical backbone for this idea of an artificial ecosystem is transplanted from Peter Sloterdijk's sphereology. It not only provides the basic terminology, but also suggests a social apriori, presuming the pair – of a caring mother and her child in particular – as the initial bipolar unit of all human existence, that subsequently becomes related to other elements, opening up larger and multipolar spatial dimensions.[7] The sociality Sloterdijk is concerned with is a spatial one, and again Treske points out that this social space nowadays is always mediated, because "[m]edia becomes a substitution for togetherness between humans."[8] And so does video, which according to Treske should not be considered merely with regards to its technical properties or designating

4 Treske, p. 15; cp. Vito Campanelli, *Web Aesthetics. How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society*, Rotterdam, Nai, 2010.
5 Treske, p. 15.
6 Treske, p. 15.
7 Cp. Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume I: Bubbles. Microspherology,* Los Angeles CA, Semiotext(e), 2011 [1998], p. 61.
8 Treske, p. 33.

functions, but as a "technology in the social sense"[9] and an "artificial companion" respectively, building up atmospheric and living relationships just like a "roommate".[10]

Just like the case of a roommate, there seems to be no other option than to simply live with it. At least that is what Treske describes as the appropriate attitude in the face of a media evolution that outgrew its origins as a technical device for the procession of electronic signals[11] as well as its later (mis-)use for storing, reproducing and distributing content of the mass media industry. The current digital phase accentuates the ephemeral and intermedia qualities of video, emphasizes "video's special vocation to embody relationships" and thereby for the first time brings its social character to life.[12] The sphere serves as a metaphor to describe this state of a medium, whose further development is still to be discovered – from the inside, not from a privileged distance, as Treske points out again and again. To understand and describe the video sphere, Treske suggests exploring it like a flaneur strolling around a "navigable space" in the sense of Lev Manovich.[13]

Treske's own analytical exploration of the video sphere consists of two steps and begins with an examination of HTML5-based editing and compositing services. Editing and compositing on the web does not affect the source data, which means the locations of storage are separated from those where the actual assembling takes place. Instead of amalgamating into an inseparable unit, the assembled entities preserve their modular identity. Because of that and in contrast to traditional nonlinear video editing systems, the HTML5-framework arranges web videos not only in the two dimensions of time or shape and layer, but rather augments them with depth. In this third axis the moving images are supplemented with "simultaneously occurring events and things",[14] which could be embedded coded objects and related behaviours, "for example an arrow pointing to a location on a Google map",[15] or devices like screens, remote controls, or sensors to engage with physically. The outcome is a "three-dimensional image object"[16] that must not be confused with "transplane images",[17] which

9 Treske, p. 47.
10 Treske, pp. 33f.
11 Cp. Yvonne Spielmann, *Video. The Reflexive Medium*, Cambridge MA & London, MIT Press, 2010 [2005].
12 Treske, p. 51.
13 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge MA & London, MIT Press, 2001, pp. 213ff.
14 Treske, p. 24.
15 Treske, p. 21.
16 Treske, p. 23.
17 Cp. Jens Schröter, *3D. History, Theory, and Aesthetics of the Transplane Image*, New York NY, Bloomsbury, 2014 [2009].

are colloquially labeled as 3D-images. The "thickened images" Treske talks about transgress representational conventions like continuity and linearity, offering a multiplicity of perspectives and trajectories to follow up, demanding further operations and sometimes even physical involvement.[18]

The latter calls attention to the role of bodily presence in the video sphere. Treske approaches this matter by the way web videos mediate geographically distant events. He argues that the awareness of different events like the Arab Spring uprising, the campaign Kony 2012 or Felix Baumgartner's space jump is created by a "density in the flow of videos",[19] which itself is the outcome of a self-amplifying process: The more often related videos are shared, the closer they get and the bigger the space they inhabit in the sphere; the stronger their "magnetizing effect" is,[20] the larger their vicinity and the more visible they are – and visibility on the other hand is the prerequisite for being shared on a large scale. Events spread like clusters or bubbles expanding into a spherical space, which is not at all restricted to digital networks. On the contrary, Treske is especially interested in the interplay of physical and online action. As mentioned before, the video sphere is not thought to be limited to the actual videos but also consists of all kinds of video gadgets. And in this regard the almost omnipresence of live video recording and streaming not only increases the amount of events and witnesses enormously, but also lets squares, streets and digital networks converge into "a common space of action".[21] In this case, videos not only serve as documents, but rather perform an affective "transmission of situations and events" that bundles recording and streaming practices as well as modes of optical and haptic visuality.[22] This hybrid space allows short-term companionship, for example, between people physically united in a protest march and those watching them on their screens, allowing the latter to participate over distance, share the experience as witness, or mobilize support. It thereby opens up political potentials, which build a counterforce against "new forms of control and command" stimulated by digital traceability.[23]

That Treske contents himself here with some open questions and does not elaborate on this confrontation in depth is quite emblematic of his whole argument. The small book is an essay in the literal sense of an attempt. It reacts to the challenges of digital media in general and the lacking theory in the debates on web video in an exceptional and promising way, which corresponds with the recent currency of media

18 Treske, p. 24.
19 Treske, p. 37.
20 Treske, p. 38.
21 Treske, p. 40.
22 Treske, p. 41.
23 Treske, p. 42.

ecology, as discussed by Matthew Fuller, Jussi Parikka, Mark B. Hansen or Erich Hörl. But it also leaves the reader with unresolved questions and loose threads. Maybe a more explicit acknowledgment of these ecological debates could help here; surely a more profound analysis of Sloterdijk's sphereology would have done so. Treske gives in too easily to the suggestive force of Sloterdijk's language, and misses the opportunity to strengthen his own argument by challenging the one it relies on. Yes, the idea of the video sphere is appealing and could provide a convincing theoretical answer to the chaotic stream of web video, but just repeating it over and over again will not make it right – especially, when a new idea challenges established ones, as is the case here, and brings to light plenty of crucial issues to focus on instead.

One of these crucial issues is the difference between networks and spheres. Treske is quite aware of this and in response quotes Bruno Latour, who assigns spheres useful "for describing local, fragile, and complex 'atmospheric conditions'" rather than addressing the movements and edges of networks.[24] And although this makes perfect sense for Treske's purposes, he does not take it completely seriously, instead using the word network throughout his book as a synonym for sphere. This could be ignored as stylistic looseness, if it was the only indication of Treske's lack of faith in his own vocabulary. But his sphereology also seems undecided regarding the role of video itself and how it interacts with human agency. The double function of video as a spherical environment on the one side and as an almost living actor inside this environment on the other side is the most daring complex of his theory. Once worked out properly it would help to clarify the roles assigned to both video and humankind, which blur between post-humanist metaphors for the sphere as a living and even breathing space,[25] and then again the invocation of a human "we" that serves as a sensitive fixed point of this technical ecosystem and template for its sociality.[26]

And talking about sociality: Treske's insistence on the social and the relational disposition of web video is a noteworthy and crucial proposition. But are these two aspects necessarily identical? Whereas it can be taken for granted that sociality is about relations, the converse argument, that every relation is always social, is not necessarily valid. Treske's own exclusion of representation can serve as an example, since representations in a formal sense are of course also relations. Mainly because Treske elevates his "spherical thought-project of video […] as a

24 Bruno Latour, "Some Experiments in Art and Politics", *e-flux,* 23, 3/2011.
25 Cp. Treske, p. 35.
26 Cp. Treske, pp. 35, 48.

model for social theory",[27] his idea of an extended sociality needs a further explanation. One source for that could be actor-network-theory, which Treske identifies as a possible supplement for his Sloterdijkian concepts.[28] And surely one can find enough imagination in ANT-writings to speculate about a sociality of things and even envision a *parliament of video*.

But this is one of the many paths Treske hints to without following through on. In this sense, his *Theory for the YouTube Generation* does not live up to its potential, although this diagnosis is not meant to simply criticise Treske. At the same time, it should encourage him to follow his initial intuition for this book in a more comprehensive publication – or in his words, to add some more life to the video sphere.

27 Treske, p. 35.
28 Cp. Treske, p. 48.