

Mediating Uncertainties

- an artistic research project by Sara Eliassen

Project description:

“An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized... and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value, rather than a fact”, Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*¹ Following this insight, my PhD project, *Mediating Uncertainties*, reflects upon the crucial role contemporary images and screen materials play in naturalizing processes of dominant ideologies in order to ask what modes of aesthetic resistance could, in turn, be mobilized today? How can image- and screen materials be used to question and counter dominant versions of recent histories and produced facts, with the explicit aim of contesting collective memory production?

In *Recursive Colonialism and Cosmo-computation*, Luciana Parisi and Ezekiel Dixon-Román write: “The process of the past becoming reconfigured in the present, is a mythopoetics that shapes the collective cultural ways of knowing”², referring to what Gregory Bateson has called a “recursive epistemology”. Considering the incessant repetition of dominant narratives and imagery that combine to form our pasts, my project asks if subverting archival materials and altering data of the past could interrupt the loop, and instead contribute to building futures that are not repetitions of unjust histories. Further reflecting upon strategic media productions of fear, often connected to a vision of an uncertain or violent future, how can we as producers of images and screen materials respond: *Mediating Uncertainties* suggests we need to tackle these questions by requiring approaches and strategies that operate beyond a conception of simply producing an alternate narrative or making a counter move, and rather “mediate” a multiplicity of narratives, connections, modes and techniques in order to reassess how memories and histories are being produced. In attempting this, I aim for the project to also explore the apparatuses of circulation we use, and the possibilities of developing other channels of distribution.

My artistic research project has conducted this study by organizing and conducting a range of individual and collective artistic instalments employing various modes and

¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (John Hunt Publishing, 2009) 16.

² “Recursive Colonialism and Cosmo-Computation – Social Text,” n.d., https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/recursive-colonialism-and-cosmo-computation/.

approaches—producing and examining images and screen materials. By intervening material into screens in public spaces, organizing events of screenings and performances, creating assemblies and gatherings, interviewing people, and making essayistic film explorations, at times live—my project has aimed to create situations and interpretive communities talking back to mediations of histories and futures. Working with an expanded idea of montage, two different sets of materials have served as starting points for the artistic research. These sets of materials have led to two investigations happening in parallel throughout the project, informing each-other and at times overlapping through artistic methods and organized instalments. Materials revolve around historical and archival material from the early days of propaganda cinema and cultural production in Norway in the 1920s and 1930s, in particular *Norgesfilmene*. As well as contemporary media material from a Mexican context, related to a proclaimed “historical truth” by the Peña Nieto government in the aftermath of the forced disappearances of 43 students from Ayotzinapa in 2014. Materials from different times and places, and with different means of dissemination; constructed to shape public opinion in specific interests—naturalizing beliefs and political ideas.

I decided to work with these materials as prompts in the project, to think around approaches for aesthetic resistance. I was looking for practices and works contesting memory production at works in contemporary media, and as an image- and filmmaker with a media-critical approach, I discovered a kinship between what I aimed to do in my own practice and works I saw coming out of a Mexican context as responses to “the historical truth.” I wanted for the project also to consider whether, and how, certain approaches might traverse contexts during these digital times, considering the obvious different stakes in the matters and contexts. By doing screen-based experiments, in Norway and Mexico, and by inviting in other media-critical practices from a Mexican context to instalments conducted in Norway, various approaches have been explored to contest the processes of naturalization and memory production in these two cases and beyond. My project has not been leading up to one final artistic display, but the investigations have rather existed as various artistic and curatorial instalments along the duration of the inquiry. However, two separate and “larger” instalments are essential to the material coming out of the two respective investigations: The site specific *Under the Park / Do I Accept That the Future is Looped (2021)* and the spatial film essay *Images [and Talking Back to Them] (2023)*.

Considered a prelude to *Under the Park / Do I Accept That the Future is Looped*, and a first project testing out various artistic and organizational instalments, *The Feedback Loop* (2018) took place in Oslo at the very beginning of my PhD project. Executed together with Munchmuseet on the Move, *The Feedback Loop* was thinking around circulation of images and screen materials in public space and consisted of a screen intervention into commercial screens at Oslo Central Train Station, a correlating curated screening & lecture program, as well as an exhibition at Munchmuseet on the Move – Kunsthall Oslo with invited guests (*The Feedback Loop: Fragmented*). The project considered cinema material from the 1920s and 1930s Norway and Europe as a starting point; a moment particularly relevant with regards to cinema and political history—propaganda and the montage. The materials with which the project intervened into the commercial screens, were a series of short video vignettes appropriating material from a 1938 *Norgesfilm, Symfonie Des Nordens*, mixed with live action shot in front of the screens at the train station; a young boy trapped in a repeated loop between material of the past and his position as a spectator in the present at the central train station in Oslo. Drawing from Jonas Staal’s description of propaganda in *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*: “Propaganda is aimed not only at communicating a message, but at constructing reality itself,”³ *The Feedback Loop* was thinking around how propaganda have changed throughout times and media. Considering the reality existing on the train station between images, infrastructures, architecture and humans, the intervention considered the critical potential of feeding back images into the circuits of this very reality. Through a multi-channelled montage between the various elements present at the train station: images, screens, humans, the project asked whether adding noise into the flow of materials possibly could taint the very materials on the screens themselves. Could a self-reflexive approach regulate the production of memories and hack the loop of the past—to build other futures? Reflections and artistic approaches from *The Feedback Loop* became central in informing the continuation of the project and the further artistic instalments. Following the earlier statement by Luciana Parisi and Ezekiel Dixon-Román—how might we most efficiently reject recursive notions of history?

Do I Accept that the Future is Looped / Under the Park (2021) continued to explore public space as a site for questioning processes of naturalization through screens and cultural material, this time by taking over an unused pocket in the underground of Oslo and

³ Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2019), 2.

inserting it with noise. Pointing to unresolved aspects of the writing of Norwegian history and art history, the project used one of the works produced for *The Feedback Loop: Fragmented*, the exhibition at Kunsthall Oslo (2018) as a starting point: A video triptych connecting works by the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland (active in the 1920s and 1930s) with Leni Riefenstahl's seminal propaganda film *Olympia* (1938). A cinematic technique of transitioning images employed by Riefenstahl in her film as antique sculptures of the past transformed into live idealized humans in the present, was applied to images of Vigeland's sculptures, pointing to his interests in Norse mythology and the *ur-norske*. A zoetrope-like installation based on the triptych, was placed on screens inserted at a derelict underground station in Oslo. Drawing from an early form of cinema technology, a sequence of images produced the illusion of motion by the passing trains, only on view for the commuters passing by in the week the installation was in place. The underground station Valkyrie plass (active from 1928 to 1985) is near *Vigelandsanlegget* in Oslo and was built around the same time as the construction of the sculpture park with Vigeland's sculptures was initiated. The overall instalment was an attempt to bring Vigeland under the park and transform the station into an alternative channel for distribution of screen materials, and conversations: For one night, after the last train passed and until the first train was arriving, the transitory site was transformed into a temporary autonomous zone, aiming to construct a temporary interpretive community. The platforms were taken over for a larger montage of artistic and scholarly invocations, inviting thinkers, performers, and audiences to collective noisemaking. Exploring screen materials together, with the zoetrope and Vigeland as a backdrop, the night staged a moment of interruption—looking backwards and forwards—rhetorically asking whether we accept that the future is looped.

Images [and Talking Back to Them], the investigation into contemporary images and screen material from a Mexican context, partially happened in parallel with the investigation into archival materials and cultural production from the 1920s and 1930s Europe and Norway. Functioning as the second set of prompts to work through the concerns of the project, the investigation started by observing screen materials disseminated on social media after the “historical truth” was proclaimed by the Peña Nieto government regarding what had happened to the 43 Ayotzinapa students in September 2014. The proclaimed “truth” was protested by many, and later contested by an international forensic committee established to investigate the incident. My initial inquiry was to examine whether the massive social mobilization following the incident, was

leading to new and alternative ways of subverting official narratives constructed to shape public opinion. Since 2015, I have documented conversations and gathered media material; works and practices aiming to counter fabricated narratives and collective memory production, in particular stemming from the Ayotzinapa incident.

The investigation first started out as an endeavour of examining and organizing media materials, looking at practices and bringing works into dialogue with other material in a Norwegian context in both *The Feedback Loop* and *Under the Park*. But spending longer stretches of time on the ground and getting to know various communities and people, relations have formed, meetings and conversations with practitioners have been organized, and the matter and inquiry slowly turned into an essayistic film exploration. Materials and research now span from the incident of the 43 students and into recent, and less recent, Mexican history, also reflecting on media's complicity in the production of fear and desensitizing violence in a Mexican context. In *Gore Capitalism*, the Mexican writer, poet and transfeminist Sayak Valencia considers media's active role in the feedback of violence in Mexico: "The media functions as over-expositors of violence, which they naturalize for viewers through a constant bombardment of images to the point where they turn violence itself into a manifest destiny, to which we can only think to resign ourselves."⁴

Materials accumulated to this date as part of this investigation, are a set of documents: audio-visual works, video and sound interviews with media practitioners and artists, media scientists, human rights lawyers, transfeministas and others, as well as documented encounters and journeys. I am approaching these documents with Badiou's "truth-process" in mind, thinking of the gathered material as an organizing of complexity rather than the documenting of reality; fragmented narratives moving towards truth, not as facts but as a process. For the final instalment in the project, these materials will form the bases of a spatial essay film, using montage as an active tool in the process between my own filmed materials and works by other artists, as well as montage between the various materials and the screens where the materials are to be on display. Exploring a different form of self-reflexivity and informed by the temporary community formed *Under the Park*, the final gathering of material for this investigation was an assembly, where I invited key people from the investigation to meet for a collective conversation. As a mediator playing material

⁴ Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* (MIT Press, 2018).

gathered throughout the investigation, I asked the group to collectively talk back to the images—setting to work a truth process, mediating the uncertain grounds of the case and the material.

The project has been drawing from a history of the montage as in linking disparate elements together to make them speak, into thinking of montage as a way to mediate materials; on screens, in space, in the city, between archival material and material shot today, as well as organizing and programming as part of this montage. With *a para-cinematic approach* in relation to histories and screen histories, and to other artists and filmmakers, the project has had an emphasis on the organizing of encounters, inviting in other screen-based practices and thinkers, both for lecture and screening series, as well as for the various artistic instalments that have taken place throughout the duration of the project. Through this, different forms of collective engagement and redistribution have been explored as part of the instalments, in addition to my own screen-based experiments. Both dominant and alternative channels of image circulation and distribution have been explored, and the various artistic instalments have been made with different receivers in mind. At times, the very people gathered for an event, at other times the circuit of imagery themselves.

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