Charlotte Klink

Electric Seeing. Positions in Contemporary Video Art
What is the subject of video?

Charlotte Klink traces the development of electromagnetism in the pursuit of »Electric Seeing« that emerged in the 19th century as well as its curious relation to psychoanalysis and the contemporary discovery of the structure of the human psyche. In doing so, she exposes how this development laid the foundation of what we know today as »video«. This comprehensive theory of video entails a discussion of the technological, historical, and etymological roots, the media-theoretical concepts of medium and index, the philosophical and art-theoretical environment in which video emerged in the 1960s, the psychoanalytic concept of the phantasm, and artworks by artists such as Yael Bartana, Hito Steyerl, and Bjørn Melhus.

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Introduction
Zoom to a summer evening in 2011. [...] West Coast video curator Carole Ann Klonarides spoke about the history and collecting of Los Angeles-based video work. In her discussion of the actual material of videotape, she claimed “video is dead,” and in that moment, I realized either you’re a purist or you’re not.1

“What is video?” seems to be an adequate question for our time. Video is by now a ubiquitous practice, be it in the realm of art or everyday life: it surrounds us all, every day, in various forms. If in the middle of the last century, television—with its one-sided sender-and-receiver logic-dominated the visual realm, the video technology that soon became available (and to a large audience, affordable) fundamentally changed the division between production and perception. Video’s inherent capacity to simultaneously record and play back footage has shaped the prevailing argument that video democratizes the visual social realm insofar as it decentralizes2 the role of both the producer and the spectator of a (moving) image. I want to investigate this premise by taking a close look at the topological relations the video situation presents for a spectating subject and at the images this subject gets to see.

The premise of this book does not, however, pertain to an essentialist or (as stated in the opening quote) “purist” approach to video. Instead, it centers on its very structure: the circulation of the electromagnetic signal as video’s sine qua non. The difference is decisive and yet it is not often addressed in the study of video in particular or the moving image in general. The shift from analog to digital, from magnetic tape to digital storage, is thus less of interest here, since the basis for both is the electromagnetic signal, and since all contemporary moving image practices, including film, have converged to use this same material as their foundation.

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2 “One of the already familiar clichés about portable video is that it decentralizes television, allowing for a genuinely local use of the medium. [...] Lanesville TV could be one of the signposts toward a future in which we all will have video cameras.” WNET Video Television Review, “Videofreex Lanesville NY 1973,” YouTube video, uploaded by Molestastic69, September 6, 2011, 1:00:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8YT3OVCoAa.
Thus, I choose to discuss video in particular and abstain from a more general discussion of the moving image—unless I need to contrast specific differences. I do so with the aim to show the structural predispositions that video offers and to yield a concrete concept of what video can signify for us. In the following chapters, I demonstrate how video’s structure fundamentally deviates from other moving image practices (such as classic film) and from a whole tradition of moving image theory. I argue that video is not an illusion apparatus, a phantasmagoria, or a shadow play—at least insofar as these terms denote some sort of “unreality” in contrast to a given reality. Instead, I argue that in its structural premises, video allows us to explore subjectivity and mediality more closely than most other artistic forms.

This book thus follows the development of electromagnetic technology in the pursuit of “electric seeing” as it emerges in the nineteenth century and demonstrates how this development lays the foundation for what we today know as “video.” In this application of electromagnetism as an extension of human organs and their function—in the case of video technology, the eye/seeing, and in the case of radio and telephone technology, the ear/hearing—we find a curious relation to another nineteenth-century discovery, namely, the structure of the human psyche at the advent of psychoanalysis. The main endeavor of this book is, therefore, to show that this concurrence of video (avant la lettre) and psychoanalysis is more than just an arbitrary parallelism; it is, instead, a symptom of a shift in modes of thinking subjectivity and mediality drawing from the same source of technological enhancement.

I thus hope to demonstrate and make productive the underlying structure shared by both video and psychoanalysis—namely, the question of the positioning of the subject after the onset of (late) modernity at the verge of the twentieth century. As modernity is a complicated and somewhat difficult notion from an epistemological and historical perspective, I must specify that the “modernity” I refer to here is what is known in the arts as “classical modernity.” Early modern concepts of subjectivity and perspective—those of the Renaissance and the following 400 years—will interest me in relation to this rupture. I will also seek to answer how video relates to earlier artistic disciplines and aesthetic preconditions. My focus, however, is on classical modernism and postmodernism, in which both video (sometimes avant la lettre, as I demonstrate in chapter I.) and psychoanalysis symptomatically answered to—or maybe even formu-
lated—a question concerning the position of a newly exposed subject. Sigmund Freud's famous dictum that “the ego is not master in its own house”\(^3\) gives testimony to this shift in conceiving the subject and what we call subjectivity. This ascertainment is directly connected to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious—that is, of consciousness and psyche as incongruent—and of the psychic apparatus holding many unconscious drives and representations of these drives (Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen, as Freud calls them): wishes, dreams, phantasies, and other material that is not (or is hardly) accessible through its conscious parts (which we colloquially call the ego). Freud aligns this fundamental discovery with two other “fundamental mortifications” (Kränkungen) to human narcissism—the Copernican turn (the understanding that Earth is not the center of the universe) and the biological turn connected to Charles Darwin and evolutionary theory (the understanding that humans are not the “pride of creation” but a part of animality). The result is a definition of subjectivity that is no longer congruent with a conscious rendering but is fundamentally displaced from the position it presupposed—and still supposes—(for) itself.\(^4\) This problem of subjectivity as it emerges in the nineteenth century serves as a basis for both technological advancements—including the “electric eye” as an early manifestation of video, and general questions of perspective, optics, and seeing (“tele-vision”) that became ubiquitous objects of research and invention—and, simultaneously, the invention of psychoanalysis. Observed through this prism, it might not surprise us to find many examples in Freud’s own writing that draw analogies between the psychic apparatus (itself a technological term), electromagnetism, and optical devices. These analogies persist in the teachings of Jacques Lacan, and some get carved out with even more precision as they lose their analogous meaning and turn into something more material. One example of this can be found in the concept of the phantasm rendered as “a frozen image on the cinema screen,”\(^5\) a notion that is central to the concluding chapter.

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4 Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis,” 140–43.

Thinking of video as a scene is crucial for this book's argumentation. It presupposes an understanding of media theory and mediality that includes what psychoanalysis designates as *the analytical third*—that is, the topological relation that unfolds between and partakes in all positions (subject, object, “message”) of a medial situation. This way of thinking media opposes an understanding of communication in which message, sender, and receiver are discrete entities and the “success” of communication is expressed in how much of the message is properly transmitted to a receiver. Instead, psychoanalysis asks: Who speaks? From where? To whom? Most importantly, this “From where?” already implies a dimension of the message that is not just a piece of information but a piece of subjectivity to which misunderstandings, Freudian slips, and other everyday fallacies give testimony. A message, then, always contains more (or less) than what is “intended”—in other words, it contains more than its “informational character.” It is precisely this residue—a “too much” or “too little”—that psychoanalysis listens to in order to locate the subject in the scene. Thus, there is something that articulates itself in a medial process that not only pertains to the difference between what is *said* and what is *meant* but also to the process of articulation itself being split as an effect of the split subject: *There is a difference within what is meant, and this is what I call mediality;* this is what I call the place for the subject to emerge. Video, I argue, is the epitome of this medial structure in our contemporary world. Hence, I seek to redraw the lines of subjectivity and mediality in the realm of video by means of psychoanalysis.

This book thus attempts to determine video’s structural presuppositions from a psychoanalytic perspective. It examines video in four chapters from four different angles:

Chapter I exposes the etymological, historical, and technological roots of video as a constantly circulating electronic signal, from the technological advancements of “electric seeing” in the late nineteenth century to portable camera systems in the late 1960s.

Chapter II addresses two fundamental concepts of video: the notions of the *medium* and the *index*. By analyzing these often problematic terms, I present a media theory that does not depend on a dualism of a “sender-receiver” model but instead perceives the medium as that which mediates—which fluctuates between and partakes in the very positions it mediates.
Chapter III makes use of the findings of the previous chapters in a close analysis of Rosalind Krauss's groundbreaking essay “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism” and the discursive field in which the essay is situated.\textsuperscript{6} The first part of the chapter analyzes the context of 1960s art criticism and its Hegelian roots in the dialectic concept of acknowledgment—and how it is challenged by video’s medial structure. The second part focuses on questions of perspective and the shift that video brought about from the central perspective of the Renaissance to the “shattered,” multiplied perspective characteristic of video.

Lastly, chapter IV offers a structural analysis of video through a psychoanalytic lens. Here, the concept of the \textit{phantasm}—the most instructive “classic” concept in film and media theory—is reconstructed from its Platonic roots to its emergence in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory under the auspices of contemporary video works by Yael Bartana, Hito Steyerl, Ulla von Brandenburg, and others. This book thereby exposes video’s circular structure as a significant example of the psychoanalytic rendering of subjectivity and shows the close structural relationship that video and the practice of psychoanalysis have shared since their simultaneous emergence in the late nineteenth century.

Video—I See
I. Video—I see

How can one fail to see here the essential characteristic of video technology: not a more or less up-to-the-minute ‘representation’ of an event, but *live presentation of a place* or an electro-optical environment—the result, it would seem, of *putting reality on waves* by means of electro-magnetic physics?¹

And although the term ‘video art’ connotes an analogue era and an apparent fixed-ness, its material specificities are in flux. As such it necessitates continual theoretical or philosophical review; the polemics are open to change; so that video is and always has been a technology of combination, and in its current guise, a chameleon-like extant property in the continuing history of digital ‘new’ media. A philosophy based upon ‘video’ materiality per se would be built upon shifting-sands […]. The technology itself resists definition on the basis of analysis of its material constituents. In the late 1960s to 70s, it was the *apparatus* of videotape, which was a definable object, i.e. a portapak, a monitor, the conduit of broadcast, but ultimately, *video* is a stuff of concept, and a challenge to medium specific rhetoric; a perceptual thing—post-material moving-image.²

Three Approaches

A return to the manifold and largely diverging origins of video is a persisting symptom of the research in this field—an approach that gives rise to the ubiquitous and vastly accepted claim of video's elusiveness. For this reason, it seems appropriate to begin this investigation with not one but three possible ways to address video's roots. The first approach considers video's heterogeneous heritage on a historical, discursive plane, beginning with video's emergence in the late 1960s. The second approach elucidates the possible technological premises of video in order to define, from a technical point of view, the necessary components to create or experience it. Finally, the third approach examines the etymological scope of video's potential meaning. These three approaches are in no way arbitrary. Rather, they attempt to formulate three main conceptual strands that can be found in various combinations in any publication on video. Rarely, however, are these three approaches distinguished from one another, nor are they identified for what they are. The first approach is a genealogy formed by the logic of ancestry. With all its cracks and irritations, this genealogy describes a continuous lineage of art forms in which one form gets shaped out of others—and is, in time, bound to shape another. The second approach is materialistic, as it focuses on the physical conditions, means, and tools necessary to produce and experience video. The third approach is structural, following the logic of etymology and the signifier, and aims to register and classify video within its semiotic context, examining its conceptual origins. Irrespective of which approach one considers most important, all three, in their own right, provide an answer to the question: What is video? It is only if we acknowledge the complex tension between all three approaches that we can shed light on the conglomeration of semantic relations that we call video. Thus, when I examine each aspect closely and separately for its modus operandi in this chapter, it is merely to highlight a certain discursive angle in relation to video and to focus on the implications and problems this position entails. In other words, the separation of these three approaches—analyzing one aspect of video's structure at a time—must always be artificial. Thus, the approach I take in this chapter is not an attempt to reduce video to any of these positions, nor is the material discussed in each section disconnected from the others.
1 Heterogeneity

We thus face the first theoretical paradox in the definition of a post-modern electronic medium which doesn’t extend modern traditions, techniques or genres, in spite of the obvious relations to film and photography, nor respect the conceptions and cognitive orders on which modernist categories of art/art objects were based. […] An aesthetic theory of “video art” would have no object of study commensurate to the analytical and referential constructs of autonomy, authority, authorship, genre, style, and intellectual property through which subject/object boundaries of knowledge and representation were drawn in modern literate culture.3

When video emerged in the late 1960s—just sixty years ago—it presented itself in many ways as a Pandora’s box for the modes of modernist art production. With its uncommitted and unspecified aesthetic, material, technological, discursive, and conceptual predispositions and boundaries, video posed not only a question but a threat to the modernist paradigm of medium specificity, which was, in fact, not much older.4 Modernism had, in this regard, been based on a certain understanding of purity: a quasi-essentialist division of different “media,” such as film, painting, and sculpture, which were divided not only by their means but also by corresponding theories and modes of thinking and practicing. Video’s emergence challenged both the pre-existing divisions between genres or disciplines and the very concept of dividing artistic forms into disciplines.

Along with contemporary practices such as performance, happenings, and fluxus, video questioned the idea of a medium-specific art altogether, engaging in fluid forms between the genres rather than “medial purity.” However, it assumed a special position in this development because it not only combined different pre-established “media” but also introduced a completely new technology to the realm of art. Video thus shook the ground of the mid-century art world, introducing,

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4 For a further discussion of the problem of the medium and medium specificity, see chapter II.1: “The Medium.”
along with its new technology, a new aesthetic, social, and medial realm that had yet to be defined. Informed and influenced by pre-existing media, video art drew from different sources. First of all, it drew from television, which made the earliest “video” artworks possible avant la lettre, before portable and affordable video cameras and videotape recorders (VTRs) became available. It also drew from performance art, which used video as a means—as a document or component—before video art itself emerged. Video also drew from painting, film, theater, and other artistic practices. However, although pre-existing media helped to shape and establish video within the realm of the fine arts, video formed a vacuum in artistic (and social) practice that—as is true for any medium—only began to be occupied over time, and was never entirely filled.

1.1 Medial Struggles

One year prior to video’s introduction to the public, Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media (1964) proved almost prophetic in its anticipation of this new tool, indicating the fundamental problem any new technology poses to a society:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any

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5. “Prior to the arrival of the Sony portable video system in 1968, ‘video art’ was primarily a matter of manipulating signals within the frame of the television screen. Magnets were applied to TV sets, internal circuitry was altered and black boxes were attached.” Paul Ryan, “A Genealogy of Video,” Leonardo 21, no. 1 (1988): 40.

6. “The use of video as a medium in the context of performance and installation work, which began in the late sixties and continued throughout the seventies, functioned essentially in three ways: one, as a form of performance documentation; two, as a prerecorded component within a performance or installation; and three, as a ‘real time’ component within a performance or installation. It is worth noting that these ‘intermedia’ models existed before the genre known as ‘video art’ began to appear in the mid-seventies.” Robert C. Morgan, “Moving Images,” Performing Arts Journal 18, no. 2 (1996): 57.
extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.7

McLuhan’s now iconic phrase “the medium is the message” points to the core of the problem. Any new technology used as “an extension of ourselves” (i.e., a “medium”) not only shifts social relations that directly pertain to technology or the discourse around it but also entirely restructures social practice and perception. Thus, the world before and after the introduction of a new medium is rendered fundamentally changed and all prior media and social constellations attached to them are reorganized and re-signified.8 In this sense, video’s introduction to the realm of art does indeed imply a rupture in a previous system of categorizing artistic genres, not only in terms of concept but also at the levels of perception and production. Following this train of thought, we might ask how fruitful it is to think of video as a rupture in the classic paradigm of modernist art and, consequently, to what extent this paradigm of medium specificity was ever justified at the level of production. As the film researcher Gregory Zinman argues in his text “Analog Circuit Palettes, Cathode Ray Canvases: Digital’s Analog, Experimental Past“ (2012), the boundaries between media were never as static and pure as the discourse around them suggested, and projects that combined different media (such as painting and film) were created throughout the history of modernism.9 Film, in this specific sense a predecessor of video, struggled in similar ways with the modernist idea of medium specificity. As Andrew V. Uroskie points out, “Time and time again, cinema’s complex ensemble of social and technological factors frustrated this mode of reduction” and could “not be definitely separated from the rival arts of painting, music, sculpture, and performance.”10


8 “The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.” McLuhan, 18.

9 “In fact, the desire to make ‘paintings in time’ stretches back to the first publicly screened abstract film, Walter Ruttmann’s *Opus I* (1921), and continues through animator Mary Ellen Bute’s experiments with cathode ray oscilloscopes in the 1940s and 1950s.” Gregory Zinman, “Analog Circuit Palettes, Cathode Ray Canvases: Digital’s Analog, Experimental Past,” *Film History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 136.

The idea that video emerged in an art world shaped by the concept of medium specificity thus clearly requires a closer analysis. The often-quoted paradigm of medium specificity was formulated by Clement Greenberg in his 1960 essay “Modernist Painting” (first published 1961), just several years before the fundamental changes that would take place in artistic practice in the mid to late 1960s. We might therefore see Greenberg’s idea not so much as a modernist paradigm but as a last attempt to save the already frail discourse of late modernism from the emergence of new, fluid artistic forms.

When Greenberg defined flatness as “unique and exclusive to pictorial art”\(^1\) (i.e., painting), he was, in fact, trying to defend art against the ruptures of modernism itself. His call for medium specificity was uttered at a time when the “symptom” of said specificity in the arts was no longer functional. Thus, what Greenberg identified in modernist painting as a unique form, expressed by means of what he deemed the equally unparalleled modernist capacity for “self-criticism,”\(^2\) was already in the process of collapsing and transforming into a medial structure. This is to say that painting, like all other artistic disciplines at this point, had to take on the ruptures within its own framework, the precarious place of mediation (meaning the need to mediate different disciplines and positions) that these ruptures invoked, and, in short, the fact that art forms are never proprietary to anyone or anything, but emerge in relation to different positions.

Another curious aspect of Greenberg’s idea of medium specificity is that he identifies flatness as unique to painting, while painting’s other attributes—such as “color” and “enclosing shape”—are shared with arts like theater and sculpture.\(^3\) This argument is particularly interesting since it excludes photography and film (which are also “flat”) from the list of arts in question. Only a few years after Greenberg’s essay was published in 1961, the first Portapak camera was sold in the United States, introducing video as another art form sharing flatness with painting. One can argue, however, that the flatness in photography, film, and video is not quite the same as the flatness in painting. In the latter, flatness exists on a level support, whereas in photography, film, and video,

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\(^2\) Greenberg, 85.

\(^3\) Greenberg, 87.
a whole apparatus is necessary to transmit the flat (and supposedly immaterial) image onto a surface. Yet although the “enclosing shapes” in painting and theater are not the same, Greenberg treats them as such. Whether the shared (or allegedly shared) attributes of different art forms are essentially the same or similar is irrelevant here. What is most important to note is that flatness, the attribute Greenberg defines as particular to painting, is already non-exclusive to painting at the moment Greenberg articulates his claim.

To see just how relevant this argument is in relation to video’s emergence, it is important to remember the context. While portable video equipment was not yet available, video images (in the form of broadcast television) were already ubiquitous in the majority of Western households. Greenberg thus wrote his essay within a fundamentally changing world in which the mass medium of television was already anticipating the next revolutionary development: the introduction of video technology for a vast private audience. Purity needed to be proclaimed because it became clear that no such thing existed in late modernism, with its many intermedial approaches. “Medial purity” was, indeed, a paradoxical construct; a phantasy exposing the fact that mediation requires a fluctuating position between and within positions.

It would not, however, do Greenberg’s project justice to perceive it as merely reactionary, provoked by a confrontion with intermediality in the arts at the verge of postmodernism. His project is also just as much an attempt to save the arts from obsolescence caused by modernism’s internalized criticism. As Greenberg emphasizes, this process of cultural criticism begins with the Enlightenment, continues its trajectory through Kant’s philosophy, and eventually enters modernism:

We know what has happened to an activity like religion, which could not avail itself of Kantian, immanent, criticism in order to justify itself. At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion’s. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by
demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.14

Perceived in this way, Greenberg’s project is an attempt to save the arts by assigning them a specific place within the realm of cultural practice. However, medium specificity does not solve the problem Greenberg identifies in this climate of social, political, and artistic change at the beginning of the 1960s—namely, the issue that the arts, just like religion in early modern times, had become profane.15 With the introduction of video, it became apparent that no attempt or claim of medium specificity would change the fact that mediality had become a problem for artistic practice, just as artistic practice had become a problem for mediality. That is to say that when video technology was introduced to a broad private audience, it was far from clear what sort of practice would develop from it (fig. 1).

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14 Greenberg, 85–86.
15 See chapter III.1.2: “Pointing at the Center.”
1.2 Practical Struggles

In “A Genealogy of Video” (1988), Paul Ryan, a New York-based artist who worked as Marshall McLuhan’s assistant from 1967 to 1968 and was an early adopter of video technology, recounts the struggle to attribute meaning to this new form in the late 1960s and early 1970s. An especially important question was “whether video would be considered a tool of social change or a medium of art.” Ryan divides the question of meaning into six “dimensions”: technological, theoretical, political, institutional, economic, and cultural. Each dimension offers insight into a field that is deeply heterogeneous in how it is used and understood. Different demands were expressed to video depending on how it was put into practice. Ryan thus emphasizes that video art is a “mutation” sprung from the “unlimited sense of possibility that early video held.”

Like many of his contemporaries, Ryan frames the question of whether video should be seen as a social or an artistic tool within the context of the ongoing Vietnam War as well as the racial and gender struggles dominating the sociopolitical climate of the United States in the 1960s. Instead of joining the military, Ryan spent this period as McLuhan’s assistant at Fordham University. His own attraction to video was directly associated with the “ideal put forth by Marshall McLuhan of a more harmonious society based on electronic communications.” This was not a solitary perspective: the view was symptomatic for the era, which becomes apparent through the diverse examples of video practice that developed during this time. Two famous examples of the ambiguous use of video technology—located somewhere between artistic expression and the struggle for social change—are the video collective known as the Videofreex (who ran their own pirate television station, Lanesville TV, in the Catskill Mountains in New York,

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16 “The genealogy of video is a history of the struggle between the drive to use video as a tool of social change and the drive to use video as a medium of art. Specifically, this version deals with New York City video from 1968 to 1971. I settle on the term ‘drive’ because during that period there were no clearly defined factions of art versus social change. There were videomakers who thought of themselves as artists and saw their work as promulgating social change, and there were videomakers working for social change who considered their work artistic. Activity in the video field tended toward one or the other of these diverging poles. Choices could be made according to an agenda of social change, and choices could be made that individuated oneself as an artist.” Ryan, “A Genealogy of Video,” 39–40

17 Ryan, 39.

18 Ryan, 40.
These strong expressions of idealism in relation to the medium are particularly remarkable considering the circumstances of video’s emergence. The United States military had developed portable video technology from broadcast television equipment as a means of surveillance in the Vietnam War. It seems somewhat curious that artists and political activists would place their hopes for a “harmonious society” in the very technology that had been invented and employed by their two major opponents: the military and broadcast television, both of which were understood as tools for strategic control and social normalization. However, the new availability of video and the resulting void of its potential application gave rise to hopes that the new medium could be used to bring about social change.

Video is far from the only example of a technological innovation introduced by warfare and later transformed into an artistic medium. In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1989), Paul Virilio demonstrates the relationship between modern military technology and modern medial modes of perception:

> If we remember that it was an optics professor, Henri Chrétien, whose work during the First World War perfecting naval artillery telemetry laid the foundations for what would become Cinemascope thirty-six years later, we can better grasp the deadly harmony

19 See, for instance, the 1973 WNET *Video and Television Review* featuring the Videofreex, which reflects on the possibility that video “decentralizes television” (an idea that is already called a “familiar cliché”). WNET *Video Television Review*, “Videofreex Lanesville NY 1973.”


21 “Like many technologies, video was born of an alliance between military and industrial concerns in the West. The first portable equipment was developed in the early 1960s by the US army for surveillance purposes in Vietnam. The medium already existed in the form of broadcast television, an institution that was increasingly dominated by commerce and subjected to political pressures. Shot through with thinly disguised ideological messages such as the ultimate desirability of consumer goods and the ‘natural’ place of women in the kitchen, the new ‘opiate of the people’ was looking more like an agent of social control than a form of family entertainment. Video art came into being deeply opposed to both its progenitors and, when Sony Portapaks went on sale in the mid 1960s, artists decisively reclaimed video as a creative medium capable of challenging the military, political and commercial interests from which it sprang.” Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 3–4.
that always establishes itself between the functions of eye and weapon. And, indeed, while the advance of panoramic telemetry resulted in wide-screen cinema, so the progress of radio-telemetry led to an improved picture: the *radar picture*, whose electronic image prefigured the electronic vision of video.\textsuperscript{22}

Here we are inclined to ask: What does a technology entail on a discursive level and to what degree can it be used by a pre-existing institutionalized discourse? To what extent can—or must—it subvert the preexisting social framework it is thrown into? According to McLuhan, the answer could be that video, as a technology that was turning into an artistic medium, proved “that any technology could do anything but add itself on to what we already are.”\textsuperscript{23} Video thus found itself in the middle of an ideological rupture while simultaneously existing on both sides of the struggle: as the mass medium of broadcast television and a tool of commerce and military surveillance on the one side, and as a new, idealized democratic tool for a political, artistic, and social revolution on the other.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figures.png}
\caption{Figs. 2–5
Video stills from Lanesville TV, WNET, *Video and Television Review*, 1973.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{23} McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 11.
The idea that video technology held the cathartic power to democratize society through decentralized broadcasting—thus altogether subverting mass media—stood in direct contrast with other broadcasting projects. Video shows emerged that were commissioned by public television. WGBH in Boston, for instance, invited the artists Alan Kaprow, Otto Piene, Aldo Tambellini, James Seawright, Nam June Paik, and Thomas Tadlock to produce a show called *The Medium is the Medium.*\(^{24}\) This example is paradigmatic for a practice of video art formatted for television. Such approaches were, as Ryan points out, not so much invested in practical social and political questions but in exploring aesthetic forms. Gene Youngblood, who was the first theorist to conceptualize video as art in *Expanded Cinema* (1970), described the early relationship between television and video art thus: “Until videotronic hardware becomes inexpensive enough for individual use it is the producers, directors, and station managers who make today’s video art possible.”\(^ {25}\)

Access to video technology was indeed a problem for many artists in the 1960s and 1970s. The artist Mike Leggett describes the situation in his catalog contribution for the Serpentine Gallery’s first video exhibition, “The Video Show,” in 1975:

Creating the conditions for people to make their own recordings, to employ video as a valid, explicit, easily assimilated tool, is not a straightforward matter; thought [sic] the cost of its functioning is relatively low the accessibility of the equipment itself is problematic. I myself borrow it in the course of employment at an institute of further education but at the present time because video is largely regarded by Industry and Education as being second string to the aesthetic and technical resources of the broadcast stations the proliferation of resources to “outsiders” has been virtually nil.\(^ {26}\)

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The lack of available equipment encouraged collaborations not only between artists but also between artists and institutions outside of the realm of art, such as public television stations and educational institutions like schools, libraries, or universities. Meanwhile, the new field was—at least in the United States—largely funded by private organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Markle Foundation as well as public institutions like the New York State Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. Established in the 1960s by Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the New York State Arts Council—the first of its kind—provided over half a million dollars for video in 1969 alone. Initially, the money was equally distributed between video groups based in New York. According to Ryan, this led to a “gift economy” in which practitioners circulated both equipment and knowledge within the movement.27

Video’s beginnings were not just characterized by problems around the availability of technology and the collaborations that occurred as a result. It was also shaped by the shift that television/video technology underwent under the auspices of art. Due to its new portability, video changed both artistic practice and viewing habits:

Tripods, with their fixed viewpoints, were out; hand-held fluidity was in. Video’s unique ability to capitalize on the moment with instant playback and real-time monitoring of events also suited the era’s emphasis on “process, not product.” Process art, earth art, conceptual art, and performance art all shared a deemphasis on the final work and an emphasis on how it came to be. The absence of electronic editing equipment—which discouraged shaping a tape into a finished “product”—further encouraged the development of a “process” video aesthetic.28

We can indeed view “process, not product” as a key attribute of early video. The first tapes were of poor quality and could not compete with television images. Instead of broadcasting video signals “through the air,” video practitioners sought “alternative kinds of TV making, and

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one alternative form of transmitting it: closed-circuit links to small groups or even individuals."29 This practice was more than just an alternative: it was a fundamental change in position toward video technology and its implications, as demonstrated in the following analysis by John Howkins in the catalog to “The Video Show”:

Video as process gets even closer to television's electronic potential. Broadcasters have used it, but secretly. A chat-show host may look at his private monitor to check that his tie is knotted smartly, but he would be ashamed if his vanity was broadcast to the audience. Video people take the opposite view. They actually concentrate such personal moments of feedback. They don't use process as a secret preliminary to the performance, but as the show itself. It can be private or public, boring or spectacular; funny or frightening. [...] Seeing myself from the outside can change my idea of my body; my sense of identity; my attitude and behaviour towards others.30

While this “seeing myself from the outside” is a key attribute of video and will be of great importance in the following chapters, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of the change of direction described here in the shift from television to video. Instead of a hierarchical and highly ideological broadcasting model in which the means of production (monitors, cameras, the set, etc.) are veiled as much as the product (the viewer),31 video exposes the radically circular and non-hierarchal structure on which it is based. This goes far beyond Howkins's analysis: what is veiled is not just the vanity of the host looking at the monitor but the fact that the host also has a monitor in front of him—just like the viewer at home in front of the television. Thus, video is not so much about “personal moments of feedback” (since this is already an effect, not a cause). More

29 John Howkins, “The Video Show,” in The Video Show, unpaginated.
30 Howkins, “The Video Show,” unpaginated.
31 Here I distinguish between the viewer (which I use for broadcast television) and the spectator (which I use for video and film) in order to emphasize the different ways they function within their respective framework. “Viewer” supports the idea of a passive position while “spectator” highlights the activity on the part of the watching subject. While both are “active,” television veils this condition while video exposes it.
fundamentally, it is defined by the fact that there is always instantaneous feedback, be it in the television studio or in works by early video artists. Broadcasting veils this feedback and makes it seem like there is a one-sided relationship between a sender and a receiver; a relationship in which the sender conveys or imposes something on the receiver, who, in turn, absorbs it. Video, however, exposes its own (and with it, also television's) circular structure. This not only ruptures how television is perceived but also poses the question of how both the producer and the viewer relate to the medium, thus challenging the supposedly unproblematic relationship between them. It is not that the producer—in this case, broadcast television—imposes its “ideology” on viewers. Rather, video's instantaneous feedback demonstrates what is true for any medium: that it produces its subject at the very moment of contact. It doesn't matter if it is a painting, a sculpture, a performance, a text, or a video: the relationship between a subject and its medium is never unproblematic. Following this train of thought, video (and related contemporary practices, such as performance, body art, etc.) shows us that the assumed split between the producer and the recipient is nothing but ideology—and that this differentiation cannot be maintained.

The exposure of this ideology is what early practitioners referred to as the “democratizing power” of video. It could, however, be argued that this exposure is not so much a democratizing move (a claim that itself sounds highly ideological) but one that simply de-hierarchizes and decentralizes video once and for all. Thus, the question of what to do with video becomes more urgent than ever. Leggett's pamphlet-like catalog contribution suggests that in the face of the “tyranny we are all nightly affected by in the shape of Broadcast Television,” there is no value in people coming to the gallery to gaze for an indefinite period at other people [sic] work. From my experience of working with video, the time is better spent in making recordings. The other reason is that if people come to the Show to simply consume other peoples [sic] ideas and experiences, albeit secondhand, in the way broadcast television trains us to accept, then they will in the same way have to pay for it.32

Leaving aside Leggett’s idea of an unproblematic split between the side of production and the side of reception, one could argue that it is precisely at this point of producing/watching that video reveals itself. Hence, becoming a video practitioner has little to do with whether someone picks up a camera. Instead, it is connected to the position taken in relation to video as a whole. As Leggett shows, a “consumerist” position toward video is attributed to television and its corresponding hierarchies. If we watch video in this manner, he suggests, it simply ceases to be video. Making video nonetheless requires more than just contrasting it with a consumerist attitude. Since video is technically rooted in the simultaneous production and reception of an image—that is to say, a simultaneity of making and watching—the conceptual line between production and reception is no longer clear-cut. “Making” is a position that not only can but must be taken from both sides, reception and production, and the same goes for “watching.” Although this may be true for any art, it becomes most obvious in video, since the medium openly demands that both positions be taken at once. Another demand also surfaces—namely, to reconsider these positions and their relation to one another. In a wider framework, these demands challenge a certain idea of expertise and craftsmanship in the arts. Although this notion has been questioned since the shift towards a processual understanding of artmaking in the eighteenth century (and was proclaimed dead by modernist modes of art production), it has never found a clearer formulation than in video.33 In contrast to the television image, the poor quality of early video, the tenuousness of its technical supports, and the perishability of early videotape did not allow for much craftsmanship. Instead, early practitioners focused on an experimental approach to “making.” In this sense, making videos, rather than consuming them, is what attracted many to the portable video system. Turning everybody into a (potential) producer entailed a shift in the way we theorize media—one that has had wide-reaching effects. Nowadays, almost everyone is a video practitioner.

33 The discussion of processuality and the shift in art from “product” to “production” since the eighteenth century is too complex for a detailed examination here. For a comprehensive analysis of the subject, see Michael Lüthy and Christoph Menke, Subjekt und Medium in der Kunst der Moderne [in German] (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2006).