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Interpretation and Affect in Found Footage Remakes: Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée* (1989)

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The found footage remakes of experimental filmmaker Martin Arnold transform intimate domestic scenes from classical Hollywood into a series of neurotically repetitive back-and-forward gyrations. Exploring hidden psychological and socio-political subtexts, Arnold's *pièce touchée* (1989) offers a subversion of cinematic representational codes, as well as a sensorily engrossing experience to the spectator. This paper focuses on the graphic, visceral, rhythmic, and musical qualities of *pièce touchée*, examining the film's moments of direct kinetic delight and disarming hilarity. Further, the paper interrogates the bodily experience of *pièce touchée* through an examination of additive rhythm, audio-visual looping, and flickering repetition. Arnold's basic remaking techniques (editing, mirroring, and repetition) work to create an engagingly complex sampling piece, where the spectator's interpretative and critical activities are based on a pre-narrative, pre-language, audio-visual intensity, and an affective fascination with the reappropriated source material.

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In his first three found-footage films – *pièce touchée* (1989), *passage à l'acte* (1993), and *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998) – Viennese experimental filmmaker Martin Arnold transforms and prolongs intimate domestic scenes from classical Hollywood into a series of neurotically repetitive back-and-forward gyrations, using a homemade optical printer to manually multiply and rearrange thousands of individual frames according to a thorough script.¹ Limited to minutely detailed minimal action – in *pièce touchée*, an eighteen-second excerpt from *The Human Jungle* (Joseph M. Newman, 1954)² – Arnold's films microscopically explore hidden psychological and socio-political subtexts, offering the spectator, according to Arnold, a subversion of Hollywood's "social norms" and "codes of representation."³ Simultaneously, the films are sensorily engrossing and viscerally pleasurable, providing moments of direct kinetic delight and disarming hilarity. In this essay, I will focus on the graphic, visceral, rhythmic, and musical qualities of *pièce touchée* in order to demonstrate how Arnold's techniques of remaking original source material invite a range of interpretative and critical activities that maintain an affective fascination with original texts, even as Hollywood's representational repressions and technological mechanisms are being made transparent and undermined.

Martin Arnold's films, as a number of scholars have noted, bridge theoretical analysis with sensory immersion, socio-political revelation with pure aesthetic experience. For Michele Pierson, Arnold's films are "both overwhelmingly sensuous, and startlingly articulate and theoretically astute."⁴ Through their visually overwhelming special effects – understood by Pierson as a structural mode of visual communication that includes frame-by-frame montage and image manipulations within individual frames – Arnold's films "appeal as powerfully to the senses and to the arousal of strong affects as they do to the intellect."⁵ Similarly, Maureen Turim has pointed to the overwhelmingly sexual energy of *pièce touchée*'s forward-reverse-forward movement: "the tension that comes with the entrance of the man through the door is momentarily, suggestively, sexual. The door swings repetitively back and forth, the light switches on and off, as if motivated by a rhythm of desire."⁶ Turim's remark on *pièce touchée*'s eroticism is mirrored by Arnold himself: "I've been asked again and again why it's so sexual. I think that this impression originates on a formal level, as the product of that irregular vibration."⁷ For Arnold, as well as Pierson and Turim, strong sensual effects are created by incessantly running the film forward and backward; the manic, repetitive movements of the film thus extend to the body of the spectator, whose relation to the text is, it would seem, one of intimacy rather than critical distance.

Here, it is imperative to interrogate Arnold's work in relation to the paradigms of 1960s and '70s structural film. The legacy of Austrian structural/materialist filmmaker Peter Kubelka, as Erika Balsom points out, "looms large in [Arnold's] work, but is distinctly reformulated by infusing the singular purity of structural-film paradigms with the productive contaminations of found footage, generic conventions, and narrative – in a word, by asking the question of history."⁸ For the structural avant-garde, the filmic medium, its specific sign systems and its underlying mechanisms and materiality are of primary concern: in Peter Tscherkassky's words, structural film's "main concern is with its own structure, and in order to demonstrate this structure, the specific content of imagery might occasionally appear interchangeable."⁹ In Arnold's work however, the paring down of content has been replaced by an intimate engagement with found footage material and an interrogation of its narrative conventions, limitations, and repressions. Found-footage filmmaking enabled the younger generation of the Austrian avant-garde (Arnold and Tscherkassky, as well as Dietmar Brehm and Gustav Deutsch¹⁰) to replace the formalism of structural filmmakers with, to borrow Balsom's term, a critical cinephilia: a love of cinema that critically interrogates its narrative codes and conventions, as well as its technological underpinnings, in all their historical specificities.¹¹ In Arnold's own words, "in the 1960s, some filmmakers attempted to get to ... the 'ultimate elements' of the medium. This was a very ahistorical and normative view, which cannot be taken seriously anymore."¹² Rather than taking cinema as an object of distant reflection and paring the medium down to its essential characteristics, Arnold's work has thus been described

as a historically aware investigation of film's past, present, and future – effectively generating theoretical knowledge about cinema's possibilities.

Arnold's transformative intervention has also been described as a method of critical analysis, where the filmmaker's role becomes one of the archaeologist who reveals hidden and repressed meaning in existent filmic material. In Arnold's own words, "the cinema of Hollywood is a cinema of exclusion, reduction, and denial, a cinema of repression. In consequence, we should not only consider what is shown, but also that which is not shown."¹³ For Arnold, his complex configurations of forward-backward-forward movement inscribe stuttering "symptoms" into original Hollywood material, enabling some of the latent, repressed elements of Hollywood to surface: in his words, "behind the intact world being represented, another not-at-all intact world is lurking."¹⁴ Arnold's found-footage films thus present a psychoanalytic analysis of Hollywood's images, which, as a result of the relentless, mechanically produced movements, critical decodes Hollywood's conservative representational codes.

Arnold's found-footage trilogy, as a number of scholars have pointed out, thus makes visible both the representational conventions and technological mechanisms that underpin classical Hollywood cinema. As Akira Lippit has suggested, Arnold's recycled cinema can be understood as a "memory apparatus," where the tension between the original material and Arnold's edits produces "a constant flow of nervous raptures" between the original film's repressed, violent interiority and the idealized representations on its surface.¹⁵ Lippit argues that Arnold's approach enables expression of latent meanings that lurk deep inside Hollywood's substratum.¹⁶ What is at stake is an alternative mode of perception that would offer the spectator access to a hidden topology: a "technological elsewhere, an active cinema unconscious."¹⁷ Further, Arnold's mechanical repetitions simultaneously assert, as Laura Mulvey points out, "the presence of the filmstrip, the individual frame in sequence that stretches towards infinity."¹⁸ For Mulvey, *pièce touchée*'s flickering repetitions accentuate the constructedness of cinematic illusionist movement: "as Arnold combines stretched time with the manipulation of human gesture, he combines reference to the strip of celluloid with the presence of the cinema machine."¹⁹ The breakdown of continuous movement foregrounds, for Mulvey, the materiality of the cinematic apparatus and the inherent stillness of cinema's celluloid filmstrip.

Similarly to Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane has suggested that *pièce touchée*, by "dislocating the frame from its normalised linear trajectory ... reasserts the explosive instantaneity at the heart of cinematic continuity."²⁰ Arnold's interventions into found-footage material thus expose, for Doane, "the profound rupture underlying the apparently seamless continuity of real time."²¹ That is, the films construct an alternative temporality, an altered perception of time by translating coherent, continuous movement into individual "neurotic gestures."²² Arnold delays, defers, and disarticulates continuous movement and time, thus disturbing cinema's alignment with irreversible temporality. However, as Erika Balsom concludes, "by highlighting the ghostly specter of death and discontinuity that haunts all cinema, Arnold is by no means engaged in a destruction of visual pleasure. Rather, his films heighten an awareness of the terms of our pleasure, even accentuating it: they are accessible, enjoyable, even funny."²³ While engaging in an iconoclasm of dominant ideological positions on heterosexual union and the nuclear family, Arnold's work simultaneously implicates the spectator on a visceral, pre-intellectual and pre-language level through the arousal of powerful affects. Indeed, as Michele Pierson has suggested, the intellectual and sensual aspects are intimately intertwined in Arnold's theoretical project.²⁴ Where Pierson associates the films' mode of articulation to (visual) special effects – that "communicate in ways that sneak under spectators' conscious wrestling"²⁵ – the second part of this essay will attempt to expand on this and examine how additive rhythm, audio-visual looping, and flickering repetition in *pièce touchée* work together to create a bodily experience, during which the spectator intimately engages with both the original text and the sampled reappropriation.

Pièce touchée opens with the synchronous appearance of a white-on-black title card and a robotic, mechanically repetitive audio track that will continue unaltered and uninterrupted

throughout the fifteen-minute film. The image then cuts to a black-and-white shot of a woman sitting on a sofa, framed centrally, in what appears as a nondescript domestic living room. For over a minute, the woman remains almost entirely immobile, exhibiting only slight, barely perceptible head movements and finger twitching: indeed, before the arrival of a man (presumably the woman's husband), the entire visual image is largely static, as if it were a still frame suspended in time. Here, Arnold incessantly replicates and repeats short samples of successive, virtually identical still frames, effectively prolonging the immobility of original filmic material to desired length. The visual stasis thus achieved confirms both Doane's suggestion of "explosive instantaneity at the heart of cinematic continuity,"²⁶ and lays bare Hollywood's gender norms, which position the woman as a passive, immobile object of desire. However, the stillness discernible on-screen is always already part of *pièce touchée's* continuous forward-facing movement: while miniscule samples from the found-footage material are rapidly repeated, resulting in perceptible stasis, Arnold's film is nevertheless an uninterrupted, albeit disfigured, progression in time. Both the opening title and the frame of the found-footage images are lightly, but noticeably trembling (presumably due to the imprecisions of Arnold's handmade film printer and the human imperfections of his manual handling of celluloid). In addition, his analog filmmaking process amplifies the physical distortions of individual celluloid images: scratches, dust particles, film grain, and chemical stains (imbuing the image with uneven changes in light levels) continuously flicker and pulsate even while the diegetic characters remain uncannily immobile. Rather than into a finite stasis, temporality is sculpted and deformed into a continual running backwards and forwards of individual filmstrips, whose celluloid materiality is foregrounded by Arnold's manual interventions into found-footage material.



Fig. 1: Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée*

As the husband enters the living room, the steady temporal progression of the source material is disfigured into an unceasing series of progressions and regressions, a repeated forward-backward-forward running of samples of various lengths, where once fluid motion becomes an irregular, erotic series of developing vibrations. Similarly to Hollis Frampton's *Critical Mass* (1971), the temporality of *pièce touchée* is characterized by a forward progression that is always also a backward regression, as every movement is followed by a reversed repetition of the same movement, resulting in an asymmetrical, limping progression of time. The husband opening and closing of the door, reaching for the light switch, and the woman turning around and lifting her magazine are spasmodically repeated in samples of varying lengths – from a few frames to a few

seconds. The separate advancements and reversals thus range from jolting micro-convulsions to fluid forward-reverse-forward repetitions. In all cases, what is foregrounded to the spectator is the constructedness of cinematic movement and the pure, kinetic movement of the human body that underpins it. While not being able to constitute narrative movement, the stuttering projection foregrounds the physical, bodily movement of actors' bodies, enabling the spectator to re-appreciate the original film's pre-narrative energy. With Arnold as the "choreographer", initially insignificant everyday movement is transformed into a complex ballet of contractions, vibrations, and shocks.²⁷

Moreover, *pièce touchée* dialectically explores the interplay between visual and acoustic rhythms and beats. While visual movement is not split into discreet segments (but rather, as I have shown, is continuously re-sampled and reversed), the borders between two successive samples (the point where on-screen movement changes direction) function as visual pulses, akin to beats in electronic techno music. As the hypnotically pulsating techno-beat of the soundtrack remains unchanged and uninterrupted, the alternations of visual samples create complex, additive rhythmic structures that mutate through increasing and decreasing loop lengths. In addition, while the audible drone-pulse seems, at first, to be entirely asynchronous and dissociated from the cadenced visuals, the two rhythms often momentarily converge, forming an audio-visual synchronicity that increases the affective intensity of both sound and image. As the visual and aural beats overlap, the sensory impact of *pièce touchée* is amplified and the spectator's bodily immersion intensified.



Fig. 2: Horizontal mirroring in Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée*

As the husband's flickering of the light switch is rapidly looped, Arnold enhances the delirious, mesmeric impact of the visuals by horizontally mirroring the image and, later on, flipping it vertically. In addition to demonstrating the geometric precision of *The Human Jungle's* original composition (the couple is revealed to be situated precisely on the frame's central vertical axis), the rapid alternations between the original image and its mirrored counterpart (some samples lasting only a few frames) establish a frenzied, flickering, even hallucinatory light-show, where Hollywood's realist representation is converted into an aggressively stroboscopic play of graphic effects. The representational qualities of found-footage material mutate into surface-level plays of light and dark with little relation to the filmic diegesis. Indeed, as the image ceaselessly rotates along its vertical axis, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern, which images retain the source material's original orientation, and which are its mirrored analogues. Arnold's repeated vertical

and horizontal rotations thus reveal, to the spectator, the constructedness of filmic space (by foregrounding the graphic qualities of individual frames), at the same time as they sensuously overwhelm her. Moreover, by both horizontally flipping the images and reversing the sample's temporal directionality (while retaining the start and end points constant), Arnold is able to construct an entirely new form of circular movement, not present in the source material. The husband's hands and head, as well as the woman's torso and her outstretched arms appear to hypnotically spin and pivot in dance-like circular gestures. Again, the human body's kinetic momentum is foregrounded in complex configurations of varyingly sampled and mirrored images, whose graphic intensity is privileged over narrative illusionism.



Fig. 3: Vertical mirroring in Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée*

As linear time and narrative space are abstracted and deformed into an affective audio-visual sculpture-in-time, *pièce touchée* appears to invite the spectator into a non-human, robotic mode of perception, based on the circularity of the loop rather than linear spatiotemporal progression. Towards the end, as Arnold's sampling and flipping intensifies (both through a reduction of loop lengths, more abrupt changes in loop start/end points, and by increasing the frequency of horizontal and vertical mirroring), individual loop cells only consist of a single frame, before being followed by a horizontally and/or vertically inverted adjacent frame. In effect, a sequence during which the woman follows her husband into another room is transformed into an aggressively flickering visual display, during which the spectator does not discern individual frames. Instead, the successive images blend into a visual continuum, a polyphonic play of light and shadow where photograms overlap and amalgamate in the spectator's mental perception. While *pièce touchée* consists solely of a continuous, monophonic line of separate visual frames (none of Arnold's manipulations, apart from horizontal/vertical mirroring, occur in-frame), their rapid alternation disintegrates the borders between them.

Arnold's loops (ranging approximately from fifty milliseconds to two seconds in length) primarily take the form of jittery pulses (resembling the subtle trembling of a paused VHS image), fluid repetitions (one- or two-second long samples), and, what one might call, moving loops (during which a short-length sample continually shifts its start-point, jittering through until it reaches the end – effectively resulting in a trembling, time-stretched sequence). In all cases, the loop cells remain monadic – separate from each other. However, due to the complexity of the varying repetition structures and the rapid interchanges of individual frames, the spectator is, at times, not able to distinguish between separate film images or determine the type of structure

that governs them, resulting in an overwhelming display of visual effects. In other words, while Arnold's filmmaking technique can be delineated in theory, its audiovisual presentation immerses and inundates the spectator to the point where borders between individual frames disappear.

An additional element of *pièce touchée*'s popular appeal is its humorous deconstruction of mundane gestures. As the husband's insignificant hand movements are repeated, reversed, and mirrored, a fundamentally different type of motion arises, its meaning and interpretation remaining open to the spectator: at times, the husband's hand moves circularly around his lower abdomen (resembling masturbatory gestures), while his neurotically trembling head, hovering over the couch, appears as a comical eruption of repressed animalistic, predatory desires. In both cases, humor is achieved through excessive, exaggerated repetition, where transitory gestures are transposed from their original context into a radically different visual environment. In the process, their original semiotic coherence is overturned and subverted. As Gilles Deleuze has written, "repetition belongs to humour and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws."²⁸ By destroying their significance at the level of language and narrative, the couple's movements are reduced to abrupt, mechanical convulsions, which appear comical precisely because of the absence of a coherent narrative motivation that would underpin them. In the same way that *Alone.* dissects words and syllables of spoken language into a series of musically repetitive phonemes (thus eliminating any linguistic qualities), *pièce touchée* removes the sensory-motor motivations of the actor's movements. In both cases, is achieved through an incessant repetition of microscopic samples, thus dismantling the linguistic and narrative significance of individual gestures. Indeed, as I have attempted to show throughout this essay, a major part of *pièce touchée*, and Arnold's filmmaking in general, is based in pre-narrative, pre-language, visceral intensity. Through a handful of basic remaking techniques (editing, repetition, and mirroring), Arnold creates an engagingly complex sampling piece, where the spectator's interpretative and critical activities are based on an affective relation to the reappropriated source material.

1. Scott MacDonald, "Sp... Sp... Spaces of Inscription: An Interview with Martin Arnold," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1994): 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. Michele Pierson, "Special Effects in Martin Arnold's and Peter Tscherkassky's Cinema of Mind," *Discourse* 28, no. 2-3 (2006): 31.
5. *Ibid.*, 46.
6. Maureen Turim, "pièce touchée," in *Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema 1955-1993*, eds. Martin Arnold and Peter Tscherkassky (Vienna: Sixpack Film, 1994), 30.
7. MacDonald, 5.
8. Erika Balsom, "A Cinephilic Avant-Garde: The Films of Peter Tscherkassky, Martin Arnold, and Gustav Deutsch," in *New Austrian Film*, eds. Robert von Dassanowsky and Oliver C. Speck (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 265.
9. Peter Tscherkassky, "Ground Survey. An Initial Mapping of an Expanding Territory," in *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Peter Tscherkassky (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2012), 30.
10. Tscherkassky, "Ground Survey," 31.
11. Balsom, 266.
12. MacDonald, 7.
13. MacDonald, 7.
14. MacDonald, 11.
15. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 59.
16. *Ibid.*, 60.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 172.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Mary Ann Doane, "(De)realizing Cinematic Time," in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, eds. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge, MA: Alphabet City Media and MIT Press, 2004), 278.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Balsom, 271.
24. Pierson, 46.
25. *Ibid.*, 30.
26. Doane, 278.
27. Indeed, modern dance artists Xavier Le Roy, Willi Dorner, and Christine Gaigg have based their own performances on Arnold's work. See Karin Cerny, "Es Erzählt, Was Fehlt," *Falter* 43, no. 3 (October 22, 2003): 10.
28. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004), 6.

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Filmography

- Alone. *Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (Martin Arnold, 1998)
- Critical Mass (Hollis Frampton, 1971)
- The Human Jungle (Joseph M. Newman, 1954)
- passage à lacte (Martin Arnold, 1993)
- pièce touchée* (Martin Arnold, 1989)