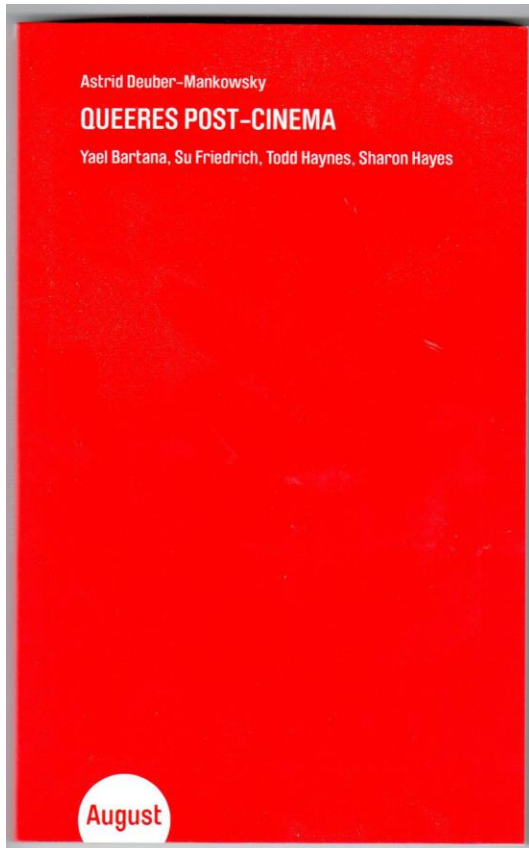


**Obsessive Play With Light and Sound:
Su Friedrich's SEEING RED With Walter Benjamin and Deleuze & Guattari**



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Playing with Technology

Su Friedrich has directed over twenty-three films in the last thirty-seven years. Some are longer, from sixty to eighty minutes, and some are shorter, from three to sixteen minutes. She directed her first film on Super-8, the following film on 16 mm. Since 2004, she has made only videos. Friedrich is known for connecting documentary elements with narrative, for playing with genres, structures of perception and questions of sexual identity, for subtly connecting her personal family and medical history with the political, for which she is constantly finding new formal languages of the moving image. She has played a central role in establishing an avant-garde queer cinema and has been teaching since 1998 at the Lewis Center for the Creative and the Performing Arts at Princeton University. She has been living in Brooklyn since 1989, which became the setting of her most recent feature-length video, **GUT RENOVATION (2012, 81 MIN.)**,

and where the shorter video **SEEING RED (2005, 27 MIN.)** was made. **SEEING RED** plays with the genre of the film diary and does so explicitly. In a time when, as the New York Times put it in a 2006 review, “with almost a million personal videos now posted on YouTube.com, we may guess that people today find self-recording to be as natural as tooth brushing.”¹

SEEING RED can with good reason be read as a commentary on the growing Vlog-culture and, at the same time, as a continuation of Friedrich’s artistic sounding of the interplay of the personal, the political and the medium of film. At the same time, **SEEING RED** marks a break with Friedrich’s earlier films and constitutes more than just her play with genres—as I will show in the following, against the background of Deleuze and Guattari’s reference to play in their genealogy of assemblages and Walter Benjamin’s connection of play with the second technology. With digital video technology, Friedrich pursues the process of filming itself as a kind of play. Play is understood here in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari’s “ring-around-the-rosy” game: as a passage and a movement of intensification, as a playing with repetition and a pacing-off of variations, as a playing with technology.

A Game of “Ring-Around-The-Rosy”

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the ritornello with the example of a child who becomes frightened in the dark and who calms himself down by singing. The refrain is the first attempt at creating order in chaos. A home is created when a circle is formed around this center. Deleuze and Guattari offer as an example the children’s game of “ring-around-the-rosy.”² “Ring-around-the-rosy” might remind the reader of the magic circle, which Johan Huizinga in his influential and, for theories of play, ground-breaking study *Homo Ludens: On the Origin of Culture in Play* counts as the fourth element characterizing the game as a cultural form, after free will, differentiation from everyday life, and the particular element of tension.³ For Huizinga, the magic circle is related to the temporal and also the spatial delimitation of the game. Moreover, the game is also characterized by its repeatability for Huizinga. This characterization, however, assumes that play, as defined against other activities, is closed off. A game, as Huizinga writes,

¹ Stuart Klawans. “Midlife Fury, Glowing in Glorious Red”, *The New York Times*, 24. September 2006.

² Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. 313.

³ Cf. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. Vom Urprung der Kultur im Spiel*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1987. p. 18. [Translation mine.]

“immediately takes on a fixed character as a cultural form.”⁴ For Huizinga, “a game plays itself out”⁵; it assumes a given amount of time and is not, like the ritornello, the movement of productivity that takes place only in its repetition and that is therefore created in time first and foremost. In actual fact, for Deleuze and Guattari—as opposed to Huizinga and all theories of play that refer to his study—it is neither a matter of fixing the game as a cultural form with hard and fast rules; nor is the creation of culture out of nature or the distinction of the game from work at issue. For Deleuze and Guattari what is at stake is the creation of time out of chaos, the creation of territories and assemblages. In the game of “ring-around-the-rosy” one is not creating a magic circle in Huizinga’s sense, rather, one is “combining rhythmic vowels and consonants that correspond to the interior forces of creation as to the differentiated parts of an organism.”⁶ The game of “ring-around-the-rosy” appears here not as a fixed form but rather as a passage. The circle opens onto a future, one “launches forth, hazards an improvisation,” one connects oneself to a world: “one ventures from home on the thread of a tune.”⁷

Variations

SEEING RED begins abruptly with the high G of a piano and a shot of a bed of red tulips in front of a black background. The high G is the first tone of the *Aria*, which is the first of the thirty total variations of the *Goldberg Variations* of Johann Sebastian Bach. It is a question of the rhythmic, sped-up recording made by Glenn Gould in 1981. The series of tones is combined with a precisely edited montage of images, in each of which red appears. The moving images are from Friedrich’s neighborhood in Brooklyn: red graffiti, a boy with a red cap, the red collar of a dog, a red brick wall, the tail of a cat on a red cushion, a crane with a red grille, cherry blossoms, orange peels in the street, the neon sign of a nail salon, a [lit-up bicycle], a woman’s red boot, pink tulips, children in the park, in between which are shots of Su Friedrich’s torso in various red t-shirts, blouses, sweaters with a microphone attached, taken at her home. Only after the first three minutes do we see the title card, and instead of the piano we hear the murky voice of Su Friedrich, see her in an orange-colored T-shirt in a cropped image that goes from her neckline to the attached microphone and listen as she complains: she is turning fifty years old, is in crisis, does not have her feelings under control, not like she did thirty years ago, considers herself, at

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Deleuze, Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. 311.

⁷ Ibid. p. 311

the same time, a control freak. She gets angry about a piece of paper on the floor of her hallway, she gets angry at her roommates, who won't clean up the paper. She gets angry at herself: she is angry and can't seem to change. Nothing has changed. Then the music begins again.

Constructing an Assemblage

According to Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of desire with and against psychoanalysis, to desire means to construct an assemblage.⁸ *With* psychoanalysis, they maintain the reality-construction capability of desire; *against* psychoanalysis, they insist that one never desires an abstract, that is, a completely isolated object—a thing or a person—but always a concrete ensemble: desire proceeds into a concrete assemblage of relations and is always constructive. Desire literally means to put together (*agencer*) concrete elements (colors, smells, landscapes, things, etc.) into an assemblage of relations. With this concept of desire and assemblage (*agencement*) Deleuze and Guattari undermine the abstract opposition of subject and object and thereby the opposition of work and play, technology and nature. They enlist themselves in an attempt to think technology instrumentally and, by the same token, not anthropocentrically, just as Heidegger presented it in his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, and—what is less well known—by Walter Benjamin in his various attempts at a philosophy of the second technology as early as the 1930s.⁹ “The principle behind all technology”—here Deleuze and Guattari are describing the relationship between technical elements and social machines—“is to demonstrate that a technical element remains abstract, entirely undetermined, as long as one does not relate it to an *assemblage* it presupposed.”¹⁰ They define the relationship between technical elements and social machines as being completely analogous to the relationship between technology and assemblage. Just as desire does not relate to an object, so too does technology constitute not an object but rather an element in the process, by which an assemblage is constructed. Interestingly, the two differently-formed machinic assemblages that run through *A Thousand Plateaus* each orient themselves towards different forms of play: the assemblage of the war machine is oriented towards Go, the old Chinese game of strategy, in which it is a matter of dividing an open space and to block movement constantly with no goal, with no direction, with no beginning and no end; and the assemblage of the state apparatus is oriented towards chess, in

⁸ Cf. Monique David-Ménard, *Deleuze und die Psychoanalyse. Ein Streit*. Berlin/Zürich: Diaphenes, 2009. P. 23-7.

⁹ Cf. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, “Spiel und zweite Technik. Walter Benjamins Entwurf einer Medienanthropologie des Spiels”, in: Christiane Voss, Lorenz Engell (ed.), *Mediale Anthropologie*. Munich: Fink, 2015 p. 35-62.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 397-8

which the figures are coded by limitations in their range of movement and in which it is a matter of dividing up a limited space.¹¹

A Complex Composition

Su Friedrich received artistic recognition for the first time in 1981, with *GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM*, a fourteen-minute experimental film with no sound. In this film, blazing white letters and words scratched into the film stock alternate with dream-like black-and-white images of women who desire women, producing fragile images of lesbian desire. The viewer enters into this dream-world with one of the female figures, moving in the water of a pool whose edge becomes, at the same time, the edge of the image, and only awakes from this dream at the end of the film. Friedrich became known with her following film, *THE TIES THAT BIND* (1984, 55M. 16 MM.), about the story of her mother, who grew up in Germany in 1920 and, traumatized by the experience of the war, emigrated with her American husband to the USA in 1947. He left her there, and she raised her three children alone. In this film, Friedrich is her mother's interlocutor; she appears, however, without a voice, speaks only in sentences that are once again scratched into the film stock. After that came *SINK OR SWIM* (1990, 48 MIN, 16 MM), in which Friedrich artistically documented and reconstructed her relationship to her absent father and his power over her. Here Friedrich shows a sequence of stories that connect her with her absent father. The stories are arranged alphabetically, beginning, however, with the last letters, following the alphabet backwards, told from a third-person perspective. The voice-over is read by an actress. In the next film, *HIDE AND SEEK* (1996, 63M, 16MM), Friedrich undertakes an experimental reconstruction of the childhood experiences of lesbian women in the 1960s in the United States and Germany. The film follows a script that Friedrich wrote together with Cathy Quinlan. Excerpts from interviews follow scenes from the fictive childhood, set in the 1960s, of a girl who, in her estrangement from a medial, entirely heteronormative environment, feels a kinship with monkeys. Friedrich herself appears in the frame for the first time in *THE ODDS OF RECOVERY* (2002, 65M, 16MM). The film is part medical report and part diary film, and draws an exact portrait of the emotions that run through a person after a series of medical procedures, from attempts at self-treatment with Tai Chi and healthy eating, through the crises in her relationships, as well as in her self-perception. Here Su Friedrich uses, among other film materials, her

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.* p. 389

conversations with the doctors in the hospital, which she filmed with the aid of a hidden Hi8 video camera and then transferred to 16 mm. In this film, we see and hear the director speaking about herself. The video technology very obviously strengthens the tendency of the director to supplement her position behind the camera with her position before it. In this respect, the film *SEEING RED*, which is filmed entirely on video, might be considered as the culmination of this development in her preceding work.

Friedrich traces the central difference between these films and her earlier ones back to the fact that she was working with a new technology—entirely with video.¹² Methodologically speaking, the most significant break consisted of the fact that she was no longer following a textbook or a plan made in advance: she went into her study, set up the camera and started speaking. This had become possible, she said, because filming with video had become cheaper, while editing with the computer had become easier. There was still no plan after the first shots, only a simple rule: that the director would only record herself when she felt the need to say something, and that, at the same time, she would gather images that had something red in them from her immediate surroundings. At one point, she made the decision to use Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*—both an incarnation and the high point of the Baroque love of variation—as the soundtrack. Although technically it is easier to edit on the computer, as Friedrich emphasizes, finding the right rhythm and narrative flow is nonetheless a laborious process.¹³ And, in fact, the video constitutes a complex composition, in which a color answers contrapuntally to a sound. It is more than a playful assemblage following a count-off. It is more of an obsessive play with light and sound than a narration.

A Gently Swinging, Aimless Floating Movement

The précis given by Deleuze and Guattari of the quality of movement in the game of go, in which open space is divided up and movement itself becomes constant, without a final purpose, without direction, without beginning and without end, connects, as a glance at the theories of play of the nineteenth century makes clear, to the etymological meaning of the German word “spielen” (play) itself. According to that meaning, “play” is not a fixed and divided-off cultural form, but rather a repeating rhythmic movement that is at once movement and becoming-

¹² Cf. Katy Martin, “Su Friedrich Interviewed by Katy Martin for *Art World Magazine (Yishu Shije)*”, Shanghai, China and the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai (MOCA Shanghai), p. 7.

<http://www.katymartin.net/assets/su-friedrich-interview-by-katy-martin-sept08.pdf> [last updated, 17.12.2016]

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*

movement. “It can be shown,” so reads Buytendijk’s 19332 study “Essence and Meaning of Play. The Play of Human Beings and Animals as Manifestation of the Drive To Life,” “that in middle Dutch a meaning survived that had also existed in Old West-German, namely, to find oneself in a jerky movement, to jitter to move back and forth, to hop, particularly from joy. (lat. *ensultare*.)¹⁴ With his definition, Buytendijk was following a derivation, taken from the established literature on play, of the meaning of play. As early as 1883, the ethno-psychologist and linguist Moritz Lazarus reminds us, in his ground-breaking book “On the Charm of Play,” that the word “to play [*spielen*]” goes back to the Old-German *spilan*, which likewise indicates: “a gently swinging, aimless floating movement.”¹⁵ “In this sense,” Lazarus comments further, “we are speaking of a kind of play that takes place between two different kinds of similar movement: from the playing back and forth of the shuttle of a loom, the play of water in a fountain spring, and the play of waves in a well, and of the room for play, or the wiggle room that a thing must have in order to move itself freely.”¹⁶

While the connection between play and the feeling that one is alive already lay at the heart of the Kantian conception of aesthetic experience and Schiller’s aesthetic education of man, in the middle of the nineteenth century play was placed, against the background of the experimentalization of life¹⁷ into the proximity of technology. The spacio-temporal structure of play in the sense of *spilan* converged with that of the experiment: the “gently swinging, aimless floating movement” was embedded as a “doing-again-and-again” into the rule-ordered repetition and the running-through of all variations of a uniform process in a defined setting. Thus Karl Groos, a student of philosopher and psychologist Kuno Fischer, coined the conception of “playing experimentation” in order to understand play as cousin to a process of arranging oneself in the world.¹⁸ Understood in this double meaning, which is attributed to play by the rediscovery of the etymological meaning of a “gently swinging, aimless floating activity,” or, with Buytendijk, of a “flicker,” “jitter,” a “moving back and forth,” play acts, as one might say in summary, as a medium between the living and the technological. This ambiguity culminates in the on the emphasis in play-theory on rhythm and on repetition as the essential element of play.

¹⁴ Frederik Jacobus Johannes Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels. Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstrieb*. Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1933. p. 18 [Translation mine.]

¹⁵ Moritz Lazarus, *Über die Reize des Spiels*, Berlin: Dümmler Verlag, 1883. P. 19 [Translation Mine.]

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.20 [Translation mine.]

¹⁷ See also: Michael Hegner, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. (Ed.) *Die Experimentalisierung des Lebens. Experimentalsysteme in den biologischen Wissenschaften. 1850/1950*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1933.

¹⁸ Cf. Karl Groos, *Die Spiele des Menschen*. Jena: Verlag Gustav Fischer, 1899. p.7

Rhythm connects the moment of the mechanical with that of the living, functioning as a hinge between the technological and the living. By the same token, however, play threatens to lose its connection to the living in the mechanical element of repetition. That can be seen in frequent association between games of chance and desire, money, automats and automation, self-destruction and lack of productivity.¹⁹

To Hold a Movement Constantly

It is not only the *Goldberg Variations* that evoke repetition loops in SEEING RED. It is also the repetition of the settings: Su Friedrich, whose face is never seen, variously wears red sweaters, shirts, T-shirts at home in front of the camera, complaining, reporting, pacing back and forth, smoking. The film is staged as a diary, a video diary. There is no information concerning the dates, however, or the diary's orientation in time. There is a today, a yesterday, a "when I was young," a "this evening", "now I will go," but no developments. "Words of wisdom don't come. Don't come," as she says at another point.²⁰ It is not certain the scenes we see have taken place after one another. They appear out of nothingness, are thrown. This impression is reinforced by the fact that individual images and scenes, with their incident red, pink and orange tones, appear repeatedly, like parts of a refrain—of a ritornello. All eight scenes with Su Friedrich can already be seen in the trailer, indicated by eight images taken from these scenes, woven together with scenes from her neighborhood in Brooklyn with its streets and park, with its people, animals and machines. The visual composition takes the form of the *Aria* and reflects it. While Friedrich does not move during her posts, repeats her complaints, seems to spin around in a circle, the play between the sounds and the moving images in the scenes, in which no one speaks and Friedrich cannot be seen, intensifies.

Particularly beautiful is one sequence that follows an outbreak of anger from Friedrich that no "want," no "can," and also no "do" follows the "ought," but that the "ought" still remains as an imperative before which one feels oneself constantly in the wrong.²¹ We hear a quick succession of piano tones from the 14th variation of the *Goldberg Variations*, which is introduced with an image in which one sees cars driving in the foreground as well as in the background. In the next

¹⁹ It is precisely in this ambiguous light that the game is understood by Freud as an expression of the death drive and of repetition compulsion in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in: *Gesammelte Werke. Chronologisch geordnet*. Bd. 13. London: Imago, 1940. P. 1-69.

²⁰ SEEING RED, 7:50.

²¹ SEEING RED, 7:25.

sequence, the camera moves with the fast rhythm of the music along a red fence, so that the gliding of the bars of the fence and the images framed within them remind one of a moving film strip. The speed of the camera increases with the rhythm of the music, control of over the image is lost, the image turns completely black and ends with a view into a bit of blue sky and a pan over to red crane. After a brief moment of peace the black repeats itself and once again travels quickly along the fence, this time in the other direction, the red bars flash and flit by, serial and self-repeating. On the level of sound, the scene closes with the end of the variation; on the visual level with a somersault of images of a red piece of plastic moving by itself, and finally with a swinging red.

In its editing and composition, the interplay of image and music, the film enacts the same movement that Buytendijk, Lazarus and Groos connect with the etymological significance of the word “play.” A jitter, a swaying, aimless floating activity, a movement that in Deleuze and Guattari’s description recalls the assemblage of the war machine and Chinese go, in which it is a matter of dividing an open space and of constantly maintaining a motion.

Experimenting with Original Rhythm

In his review of Karl Gröber’s *Children’s Toys from Olden Times: A History of Toys* in 1928, Walter Benjamin developed the fundamental features of his theory of play. In it, he took up the monumental attempt of Karl Groos and his 546-page-study *People at Play* from 1889. Such a theory has three tasks according to Benjamin: first, it must establish a “formal study of the gestures of play”; second, it must investigate the “enigmatic doubles of stick and hoop, whip and top, marble and king-marble, as well as the magnetic attraction generated between the two parts.”²² Benjamin surmises in this play with things that are not living an experimenting with primal rhythms of work, in which “we first gain possession of ourselves,” and/or an experimentation, before we enter into the “transcend[ing] ourselves in love” of sexual experience, in the “often alien rhythm of another human being.”²³ Crucial for the connection of play and the “second technology” that Benjamin undertakes in his “Work of Art” essay, however, is the conclusion that he draws for the third demand: “Last, such a study would have to

²² Walter Benjamin, “Toys and Play: Marginal Notes to a Monumental Work.” *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Belknap Press. p. 120

²³ Ibid.

explore the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition.”²⁴

With Freud, Benjamin connects the pleasure in the repetition in the child’s play with the drive, beyond the pleasure principle, that determines the sexual life of the grown-up: “We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to ‘Do it again!’”²⁵ We also know, however, that “in fact every profound experience longs to be insatiable, longs for return and repetition until the end of time, and for the reinstatement of an original condition from which it sprang.”²⁶

The limiting of the feelings of happiness and of fear that Benjamin discerns in repetition he finds again in the double meaning of the German word *spielen*, which means at the same time “play”, “game”, “perform”, “gamble” and “doing as if” : “the element of repetition is what is actually common to them. Not a ‘doing as if’, but a ‘doing the same thing over and over again,’ the transformation of a shattering experience into habit—that is the essence of play.”²⁷

Consequently, in what follows Benjamin describes play as the “midwife” of habit: “For play and nothing else is the midwife of every habit. Eating, sleeping, getting dressed, washing have to be instilled into the struggling little brat in a playful way, following the rhythm of nursery rhymes. Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end. Habits are the forms of our first happiness and our first horror that have become congealed and become deformed to the point of being unrecognizable.”²⁸ And the end of the paragraph might serve as a commentary on Friedrich’s *SEEING RED*: “even the most arid pedant plays in a childish rather than a childlike way; the more childish his play, the more pedantic he is.”²⁹

“O me! O life!”

In one of the video diary scenes, one sees Su Friedrich just up to her mouth, sitting in her red sweater in a white armchair, holding the frontispieces of a well-thumbed volume of poetry in front of the camera. The camera shows the drawn portrait of a young man with a floppy red hat

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. [I have corrected the translation here, from Livingstone’s “mother” to the more accurate “midwife.”]

²⁹ Ibid.

and light, long hair and bear, a green pasture and a pale sky in the background. Red letters on the book read *Walt Whitman and Leaves of Grass*, the title of the volume. Friedrich then reads a verse that she wrote into the volume when she was twenty: “Nestled in the crook of my arm where the sweat crept on a summer day.”³⁰ She thinks back and smiles at the sudden presence of the past. She opens to a poem titled “O me! O life!” Walt Whitman is considered by many—because of his patriotism and despite it—as a prophet of the gay rights movement. He embodies intensity, youth, romanticism, and the living present, to which the fifty-year-old says ironically: “So much the sentiment of a twenty-year-old.” She can imagine, she adds, that one reads and loves these poems of Walt Whitman when one is twenty; when one feels like “O me! O life!”. Without pausing, she continues: she seems to be doing the same thing at fifty. She begins to read the poem out loud, while at the same time the verses and their shadows—as depth, the dimension of time—appear on the screen in red letters and the fast runs of the piano from Variation 29 can be heard:

O me! O life! Of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself, forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and
who more faithless)?³¹

Su Friedrich does not read aloud the answer with which the poem ends: “That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse!”³² She enters instead into the play, and creates her own ritornello: child-like not childishly.

Habit

In his reflections on play and the relation between play habit, Benjamin takes up the *Training Theory* of Karl Groos, whose observations on infant pleasure and rhythmic movements, on experiments with sensory stimulation, on counting rhymes, on children’s songs, on dancing, etc. leads to the theory that drives, in humans no less than in animals, are trained by play-like experimentation. Concerning the significance that he attributes to imitation, Groos refers among others to Gabriel Tarde and his 1890 study called *The Laws of Imitation*,³³ in which Tarde presents an evolutionary social philosophy and philosophy of nature, based on the concept of

³⁰ SEEING RED. 15:58.

³¹ SEEING RED. 16:30.

³² Walt Whitman. *The Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2005. p. 298.

³³ Gabriel Tarde, *Die Gesetzle der Nachamung*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2009.

imitation and innovation, that Deleuze draws on in central passages in *Difference and Repetition*, among others, particularly there where Deleuze presents *habit* as a contraction and thus as the first synthesis of time.³⁴

According to Groos, Tarde can be credited with having shown that the concept of imitation can be destined to “gain in biological psychology a similarly principle significance as the conception of association had in the older doctrine of the soul.”³⁵ Here Tarde nonetheless understands, as Groos emphasizes, imitation in a wider sense than that in which it is usually taken: in this wider sense, Tarde considers imitation “as a special case of the great law of the world of repetition.” He also specifies: “ondulation, generation, imitation are the three forms of ,répétition universelle’.”³⁶ Groos refers to the fact that Tarde defines the molecular motion of oscillation at the level of physics, reproduction at the level of biology, and imitation at the level of society as the three types of universal repetition. Deleuze similarly emphasizes Tarde in his commentary: “It is the inadequation between difference and repetition which gives rise to the order of generality. Gabriel Tarde suggested in this sense that resemblance itself was only displaced repetition: real repetition is that which corresponds directly to a difference of the same degree.”³⁷ Here Deleuze is concerned—as is Tarde—with the small variations that are tallied up and integrated in repetition.³⁸ It is a question of how a more and more exact correspondence between difference and repetition can be produced. Deleuze formulates it bluntly: “it is habit that which extracts the new—in other words the general—from the pseudo-repetition of particular cases.”³⁹ What is to be noted here is that when Deleuze, with Bergson, defines habit as a contraction, he conceives of this contraction as a qualitative impression. It is first as *something perceived* that contraction, as habit, extracts something—that is, a difference—from repetition. It is the same form of movement in relation to itself as in the affect-image. The living present, which Deleuze, building on Bergson and Kant, defines as the first synthesis of time, is together with the pleasure that accompanies it, the new that habit extracts from repetition as a melting-together of repetitions in the observing mind, that is, as a passive “form of pure determinability (space and time).”⁴⁰

³⁴ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 78

³⁵ Groos, *Spiele der Menschen*. p. 361 [Translation mine.]

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. p. 25

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.* p. 55. fn. 4

³⁹ Ibid. p. 50

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze. *Foucault*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. trans. Paul Bové. 1988. p. 87

Inexhaustible Variations of the Experimental Arrangement

“I suppose it would be great if I could think.” So begins one entry in the film diary in which red dominates (one sees only a shot of Friedrich’s stomach and her red sweater, the play of its folds when she speaks and the black microphone attached to the sweater), “that I have a certain number of mannerisms, and devices, and you know, values, interests, whatever, and I can just, you know, do variations on them. So it’s not just a matter of like, you know, being a bad person and then trying to turn into a different person. But instead to think that you’re a very enthusiastic person and so that means that sometimes you’re manic and excessive and other times incredibly focused and appreciative—whatever...”⁴¹ It is as though, the speech concludes, this personality and its various moments were variations that were held together by a particular interest, as by a refrain, in the many that in the *Goldberg Variations* Bach plays through and repeats the motif that is introduced in the *Aria*. Friedrich is here conducting a precise reflection on the interplay of form and content in her films. This interplay is emphasized by the editing and the composition of image and sound. Thus, during her speech, the viewer’s gaze is directed towards the faded red comb of a plaster hen, which, on a different occasion, is superimposed onto the red beak of a plastic duck. As Friedrich’s speech changes over into the ninth *Goldberg Variation*, the camera shows a fifty second-long shot without no cuts of a robin with a luxurious, puffy orange stomach, who is listening quietly and attentively and moves herself in a hop, in rhythm. Instead of her song one hears the piano music from Gould.⁴²

Friedrich’s precise commerce with technology suggests, in addition to its association with the little variations from Tarde and Deleuze, a connection between Benjamin’s characterization of the second technology as “once is as good as never,” as well the “and endlessly varied test procedures”⁴³ and Friedrich’s playful, rule-guided approach to the production and post-production of her films.

⁴¹ SEEING RED. 14:10-14:50

⁴² SEEING RED. 14:54-15:44

⁴³ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*. Ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Belknap, 2008. p. 26

Play and the Second Technology

The central significance attained by the question of the aesthetic, of stimuli, of sensations and of perception Groos's concept of the game as experiment was doubtless an important cause of Benjamin's interest in his study on *People's Games*. In distinction to Groos and also to Freud, from whom Benjamin took over the mechanical moment in reception and in play, Benjamin closely drew together aesthetics, play, and technology, and bound his theory of play to a theory of the second technology. Thus he sets out with the rhythms, "in which we first gain possession of ourselves,"⁴⁴ and not from the child and his relationship to objects. These rhythms are, however, the same rhythms as those, which, since the nineteenth century, with its technological innovations of the steam engine, electricity, and corresponding recording media, connect the living with the technological through play.

In his texts from the middle of the 1930s, Benjamin drew a distinction between two technical ages, which denote in turn two different modes of being oriented in the world and of orienting oneself in the world. He called the one "the first technology" and the other "the second technology."⁴⁵ In its dependence on the antique concept of *téchne*, technology for Benjamin—and later for Heidegger—did not simply denote simply technological things, machines, apparatuses. For Benjamin technology meant more than the expertise of the artisan and the artist or the processes and methods goal-oriented activities. The potentiality of technology lay for Benjamin, and in this he goes beyond Heidegger, in its mediality. He connects the concept of "second technology" with the question of an aesthetics of perception as a collective perception. In this way, the concepts of "first" and "second technology" comprise at once two distinct technical *dispositifs* and the dispositions towards the world that change with them. The "second technology" is characterized by Benjamin as "endlessly varied test procedures," an approach that he associates with the concept of experimental play.⁴⁶ These historical changes, which Benjamin observes in art and the sciences, form the reference point for this bringing together of technology and play.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Toys and Play", p. 120.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art." p. 26

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty." *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge" Belknap Press. p. 731

For Benjamin, this constellation of the second technology distinguishes itself by a “tremendous [*ungeheur*] gain of room for play.”⁴⁸ This room for play is as inexhaustible as the “tremendous [*ungeheur*] unfolding of technology”⁴⁹ in both sense of the word: tremendous in the sense of huge, as well as strange, threatening, unfamiliar. When in his “Work of Art” essay Benjamin notes that “the origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play,”⁵⁰ he is taking his earlier insights into the relationship between play and habit. The second technology changes everything, with its tremendous gain in room for play. It opens new, unheard-of possibilities and movements of intensity, but it also opens up an unforeseen destructive force. This destructive force can be seen in full clarity in the “tremendous unfolding of technology” during the First World War.⁵¹ As Benjamin makes clear, it is now a matter of gaining possession of itself in the new technological environment by experimental play. Benjamin sees this experiences not only in the practices of avant-garde art, but also in the new scientific methods of modern physics and sociology, in their interdisciplinarity and constructive procedures, and in the movements of the Bauhaus and the new Bauhaus.⁵² Human beings must grow younger and reorient themselves. That means first of all overcoming the habit of regarding technology as an instrument that serves to dominate nature. Benjamin emphasizes that this anthropocentric and teleological concept forms a central element of the *dispositif* of the first technology and belongs, together with Wilhelmine imperialism and class society, to that heritage that a truly cosmopolitan society must overcome. While, as Benjamin writes, “the once and for all” goes for the first technology, in which what is at issue is an “irreparable lapse or sacrificial death that holds good for eternity,” while the “wholly provisional” goes for the second technology, which deals with “the experiment and endlessly varied test procedures.”⁵³ “Human beings as a species completed their evolution millennia ago,” so Benjamin wrote as early as 1924 in *One Way Street*, “humanity as a species, however, stands at its beginning. In technology a *physis* is organizing itself in which mankind’s contact with the cosmos takes on

⁴⁸ Benjamin, “Work of Art.” [I have changed the translation from “huge” to “tremendous” and “scope” to “room”.]

⁴⁹ Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty.” p. 732

⁵⁰ Benjamin, “Work of Art.” p. 26.

⁵¹ Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” p. 732

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Benjamin, “Work of Art.” p. 26

new and different forms from those it assumed in nations and in families.”⁵⁴ This oft-cited sentence contains another sense, foregrounded by its association with play, habit, living and experimentation with original rhythm: “The terror of true cosmic experiences” is tied to the speeds that journeys into the “interior of time” enable *via* the technology, where man smashes into rhythms that hold ready entirely new possibilities, that are more than the sum of small variations.⁵⁵

Intensity

Su Friedrich too is concerned in her film, in one of her scenes, with humanity. She complains and levels charges. She sees no possibility for changing the world. Of six billion people, most of them have no work that sufficiently feeds them, they’re either bored by their work or it makes them unhappy. They have difficulties in and with their families. Friedrich draws the conclusion that a great number of people on this planet call on God many times to improve their lives, or play the lotto, or take drugs, smoke, cheat on their loved ones... We see her from her chest to her chin in a red shirt, behind her on the wall there hang stills from *HIDE AND SEEK*. Once again, scenes from the neighborhood fade in, this time it is people who are shopping at the 99 cent store. Su Friedrich’s voice disappears and Glenn Gould’s interpretation of the 22nd variation takes up the soundtrack. The hands of an Italian ice vendor, red from the ice, appear in the image, they scrape the ice from a big bucket of flashing metal, the ice glowing red, to the rhythm of the music, put it artfully into a small white cup and take a dollar bill for it. The camera follows his hands and records the beautiful, almost dancer-like movements with which the man arranges a bundle of dollar bills, turning this one or that one over, and counting through them. Again it is a long take; it goes for 84 seconds without a cut.⁵⁶ The movement of the red-colored hands finally gives way to the movements of a little girl with a red sweater and black hair who is trying to ride in a circle on a scooter, to find a common rhythm with the movement of the scooter. This leads us to the next and last question concerning the rule according to which the greatest possible amount of red is to appear in the image, as well as the function befitting this red in light of the many theories of experimental play, the second technology, and the ritornello presented here.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, “One Way Street.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*. Ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Belknap, 2008. p. 59

⁵⁵ Both *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *SEEING RED*, 9:54—11:27

How does the intensity of the color relation to the assertion, that change demands more than the sum of all its little variations?

Expressivity

Su Friedrich poses this question concerning the red in her video herself, immediately before the scene with which the video ends. She formulates her question from a place of not knowing (any more). The truth is—or so she would teach her students—you don't use red in video filming, and you have to deal carefully with metaphors. But why use no red? “Blinding, kitschy, hideous red that bleeds over the screen, that one doesn't want to see, and that contains no information.” She opens her jacket and lets the red of her sweater flow over the screen. She leaves the question open, the scene ends with an eclipse: “Chances are when I...”—there is no other answer.⁵⁷

With her question Friedrich introduces a self-referential moment into the film, and alludes to the level of the aesthetic. “Seeing red” is not only a metaphor, but also a turn of phrase, a word game. In an interview with Katy Martin, Friedrich answers the question of what “seeing red” means, that it refers first to the affect of rage, of anger, second that for her it was a matter of showing colors and thereby of alluding to the variety of tones and shades in which the colors appears. And third, the color red stands for passion, for a passionate relation to the world in a positive sense of the word.⁵⁸

Red shows—to speak with Deleuze—a difference of intensity. The color becomes an expressive material, Su Friedrich's play becomes expressive through the color. When in *Difference and Repetition* with the introduction of habit as contraction and the first synthesis of time, Deleuze emphasizes that only habit can extract something new—here, the living present—from repetition only when it is understood as qualitative impression, meant here as experienced difference, so too does this differential play between quantitative and qualitative factors appear again in the description of the ritornello in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which reads: “There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness. What defines the territory is the emergence of matters of expression (qualities.). Take the example of color in birds or fish: color is a membrane state associated with interior hormonal states, but it remains functional and transitory as long as it is tied to a type of action (sexuality, aggressiveness, flight). It becomes expressive, on the other hand, when it

⁵⁷ SEEING RED, 23:21

⁵⁸ Martin, *Su Friedrich Interviewed By Katy Martin*. p. 10.

acquires a temporal constancy and a spatial range that make it a territorial, or rather, territorializing mark: a signature.”⁵⁹

Temporal constancy assumes the contraction of time, or habit and thus the experience of difference in repetition. Something new is extracted from the repetition by a difference of intensity, which, just like habit, constitutes a *qualia*, that is, an *experienced* difference. The differentiation between the functional and expressive significance of colors corresponds to the difference between physical intensity, which can be measured, and the aesthetic significance of the intensity, which eludes measurement as *qualia*.⁶⁰ While from a scientific perspective intensity as a variable remains a function in the realm of quantitative factor, intensity in the realm of the aesthetic, as well as of philosophy, constitutes a quality or, to use another concept from Deleuze, an *être de sensations*, that is: a sensation that lasts and that becomes a movement of expression.

This differentiation appears again when Deleuze insists that rhythm is not the same as a measure. That is already apparent in the first sentence of the cited passage, which reads; There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness.”⁶¹ Deleuze and Guattari thereby emphasize what they had affirmed before in their text on the relationship between chaos and rhythm: the commonality of chaos and rhythm is the space in-between, and further: “It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregular meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march. [...] Meter, whether regular or not, assumes a coded form whose unity of measure may vary, but in a noncommunicating milieu, whereas rhythm is the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding. Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical: it ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another.”⁶²

Spaces of Desire

This leads, by way of conclusion, back to the ritornello and the children’s game of “ring-around-the-rosy.” As was explained at the beginning of this essay on Su Friedrich’s play with technology, in Deleuze and Guattari’s the “ring-around-the-rosy” game does not form a magic

⁵⁹ Deleuze, Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 315

⁶⁰ Cf. Astid Deuber-Mankowsky, “Einleitung” in: Hermann Cohen, *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte. Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik*. Wien/Berlin: Turia+Kant, p. 7-70

⁶¹ Deleuze, Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. 313.

⁶² *Ibid*, 315

circle in the sense of play-theory of Huizinga, but rather it creates a passage, in the sense of the ritornello. The circle, in which rhythmic consonants and vowels are combined, is opened in the proverbial sense: you let somebody in or you yourself step out of the circle, “tumbles outward.”⁶³ This tumbling-out agrees, for Deleuze and Guattari, with the tendency of the circle to open a future for itself: “You launch forth and attempt an improvisation.”⁶⁴ The red in Su Friedrich’s indicates exactly this: the red is the becoming-expressive of rhythm and, in that sense, more than a further variation. With the red she marks a border and creates an abode for herself. Deleuze and Guattari see the emergence of art in this becoming-expressive.

Unlike Deleuze, Benjamin is interested in the historical change in perception that occurs with the transition from the first technology to the second. An important index for this change was—in parallel with film and photography—the arrival of the masses into the metropolis. Masses were however for Benjamin, as Samuel Weber has noted, in their essence mass *movements*.⁶⁵ Consequently Weber reads these movements as a corollary of the movement towards dissolution that heralds the collapse of the aura and with it the downfall of the first technology. Thus the aura relates to the masses not only as singularity does to the multitude, but rather—in spatial terms—as fixed place (here and now) to a place that is entangled in a ceaseless and complex movement. In actual fact, Benjamin connects the collapse of the aura in his “Work of Art” essay with the increasing growth of masses in the metropolises and the “growing intensity of their movements.”⁶⁶ That Benjamin uses the expression of intensity at this point in the text is no accident. It shows, moreover, that the collapse of the aura is at the same time a transition of intensity from the singular, as well as from the here and now—from the point—into the ceaseless movement of the masses. This transition of intensity from the point to the movement marks the historical change in the medium of perception. Thus the medium in which the perception of the reality that corresponds with the masses realizes itself no longer the aura, but rather small, self-scattering, differentiated in themselves and self-differentiating movements. Accordingly, Benjamin comments on the “growing intensity” of mass movements in his second version of the “Work of Art” essay with reference to the changed forms of reception: “The desire of the

⁶³ Ibid, 313

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cf. Samuel Weber. *Mass Mediauras: Form Technics, Media*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. p. 84

⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Work of Art.” p. 23. This sentence is not in “A Little History of Photography,” from which Benjamin took the passage on the aura and its collapse word for word. “Cf. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*. Ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Belknap, 2008. p. 274-9.

present-day masses to “get closer” to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.”⁶⁷

This transition of intensity from the point to a complex movement of masses can be read with Deleuze and Guattari as a process of becoming in which new forms of play and new variations are added to the world. These processes, which are connected to a movement of intensification, are, in the sense that they are described in *A Thousand Plateaus*, affects: they are transitions in condition that are endlessly differentiated in themselves and that pull the subject as well as the “human being” into the process of differentiation. These conditions open a space of difference that is at the same time a space of desire, in which present wishes and present desires and long-past wishes and long-past desires criss-cross one another. The aesthetic experience that is associated with play and the second technology opens—just like the affect preserved in aesthetic experience for Deleuze and Guattari—not only access to types of play in the present, but also to the potentiality of the past.

...that I am a woman

In the last scene of her film, Su Friedrich turns on a black office chair and, as she spins, she removes the orange, her red, her red-checked shirts, sweaters and t-shirts that she has worn throughout the course of the film and video diaries. Once again, only her torso can be seen. She introduces the game with the remark that she does everything she does in light of the fact that she is a woman. While Glenn Gould plays the 14th variation, all of the speeches that she has spoken over the course of her appearances are superimposed over one another on the soundtrack into a tower of words. Until, finally, she has only a T-shirt on. She swings around one last time and also pulls the T-shirt over her head. The video ends with a shot onto the back of the chair, her naked back and the black straps of her bra, in a gentle, back and forth swinging movement. While the image can no longer be seen, during the closing credits the last runs of the piano can still be heard. A new game, a new cinema can begin.

⁶⁷ Ibid.