

Two Or Three Things I Know About Them

A Close Reading of *Moving Towards You, Moving Around You, Moving Against You, Moving Away From You*

Jan Linders

1. RIGHT

Vittorio Santoro's video is, as the label betrays, conceived as a loop. Assuming the unlikely scenario that a visitor to the installation would begin watching just in the moment when the cycle has reached its zero point, he or she would then initially construct the following, simple story: A man wearing glasses, let's call him C., is working at a computer. Maybe it's summer, because he's only wearing a T-Shirt. It can't be very hot: the fan behind him is motionless. It is daytime, a diffuse light illuminates the room... On a table elsewhere in the office there's an old portable typewriter; nobody's working at it. The red-cushioned swiveling chair has been rolled far back from the desk, maybe it was still being used just a few moments ago. The water glass on the desk is empty. The small radio is playing film music—or does the music come from somewhere else? A saxophone and strings convey the mood of a past decade. A couple enters the room, let us call them M. and S.; M. is wearing her red hair open, her shirt is turquoise-colored, S. has pushed up the sleeves of his black shirt. He sits down at the desk that stands diagonally in the room and looks to the windows. She goes further past her table directly at the window, and begins to look for documents in the cabinet. A third, younger man enters, let us call him N.; he turns his computer on and continues writing a text.

Now we see all four silently working in concentration. Another seat in the office still remains unoccupied. The office is furnished in a sober manner, but is not that tidy. Hardly any color disturbs the black and white of the furniture, computers, and documents; only the documents marked with color that are hung on the walls. The tangle of cables on the black-grey PVC flooring looks complicated: the computers are networked with one another, the people seem to be connected as well, even if they don't utter a word about it. C. brings the woman a list, and returns to his desk. S. sits on the red office chair, and corrects by hand an unidentifiable document. M. presents him the list that she herself has just received. Maybe the two are a couple. M. has long since sat back down at her desk when the telephone on the window ledge next to her rings. She first turns away, but then picks up the receiver. Only her answers can be heard, sounding strangely disconnected: "As long as life continues like this, you will have people who think like me...", "It's been a whole ugly mess..." M. closes her eyes, fiddles with the telephone cord, pushes her hair back, gesticulates, lets her gaze drift outside to the yard, checks if the window is closed. The others don't let themselves be disturbed in their work. M. is still on the telephone when the camera leaves her, floating, sliding out the room. S. is now sitting at the portable typewriter and staring at the inserted sheet of paper, his hands on the table. At the threshold of the hallway, the camera has three paths to choose from: left, right, straight ahead. With each run, it chooses a different way out: it first turns right, towards a empty hallway, painted white, that perhaps leads into a stairwell. Black out.

A man wearing glasses, let's call him C., is working at a computer. Maybe it's summer, because he is only wearing a T-Shirt. It can't be very hot: the fan behind him is motionless. It is daytime, a diffuse light illuminates the room...

2. LEFT

On the tenth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death in 1934, Walter Benjamin retold a story by Pushkin. Potemkin, the chancellor of Catherine the Great, suffered from time to time from depression, during which no one could approach him. Matters of state piled up that were impossible to complete without Potemkin's signature. By accident, the insignificant clerk Schuvalkin wound up in the antechamber of the chancellor's palace: seeing the state councilors complaining and lamenting, he offered to solve the problem. The councilors, who had nothing to lose, handed Schuwalkin a pile of files, and he then entered the prince's room. "In semidarkness Potemkin was sitting on his bed in a

threadbare nightshirt, biting his nails. Shuvalkin stepped up to the writing desk, and without saying a word pressed it into Potemkin's hand... as though in his sleep, he started to sign—first one paper, then a second, finally all of them. When the last signature had been affixed, Shuvalkin took the papers under his arm and left the room without further ado... Waving the papers triumphantly, he stepped into the anteroom. The councilors of state rushed toward him and tore the documents out of his hands. Breathlessly they bent over them. No one spoke a word; the whole group seemed paralyzed. Again Shuvalkin came closer and solicitously asked why the gentlemen seemed so upset. One document after another was signed: Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin, Shuvalkin..."

When in Vittorio Santoro's video a portable typewriter surfaces after a few moments, on the sheet of paper two lines in English can be read:

"..... I signed, I signed
.....and my name was Buffalo Bill."

Otherwise the paper is empty. Yet a signature is always a closing, an authoritarian figure, that makes a text a deed, turns the letter into an act. It thus fills any page, no matter how empty it might be. The signature is final, at best tolerating a postscript; it freezes the flow of text that only the reader again liquefies, and the camera that in our name approaches the text from the corner of its eye, turning to the empty water glass behind the machine.

All the same, the legal act demands a personal signature, not the signed print left by a mechanical bride. At best a "dictated by X, signed in absence" can play over the paradox of the absent author. The author or secretary of these two lines, unlike all the other texts visible in the video, is actually absent: the chair before the portable typewriter is (still) empty. And the two lines are no binding contract, but a fragment of a story that triggers associations: The authorial "I" tells of a past, uncanny encounter. "I signed, I signed, and my name was Buffalo Bill." Why the hesitant, reflexive repetition of the statement? Doesn't this jam the mechanism of assurance that the signature was in fact supposed to set in operation? In the void of his depression, Potemkin had unconsciously signed in the name of this zealous Schuvalkin opposite him, thus deauthorizing himself. Francesco De Gregori, whose song "Buffalo Bill" Vittorio Santoro often heard as a child, realized his dream trip to America by declaring the streets to be the prairie, and with his signature becomes a circus actor playing Buffalo Bill. The singer, now grown up, realizes how he had transformed his childhood to that of America. In this way, the two lines on the paper set their own meaning in a whirr, like the hummingbird: -indeed the German word *Kolibri* lent the portable typewriter its name. No closing credits notarize the video, no titles frame the bureaucratic cycle in the room. The beholder remains trapped in the loop, like the four office operatives C., S., M., and N., latter day incarnations of Kafka's clerk, damned to repetition. In the following close-ups of his video, the author Santoro, refusing a signature, leaves further traces of his artistic identity. Through the gaze of the camera, the quickly grasped and understood standard situation of everyday office life becomes a hypercomplex and yet fragmentary portrait. I can only roughly sketch out its figures here: On C.'s computer screen, the last lines of a one-page word file can be deciphered. The trilingual text touches at first, perhaps accidentally, Marshall McLuhan's media critique ("le médium est le message"), jumps then to a large font, and a self-analysis ("I confuse melancholy and depression sometimes I am sick and I am in love"), which a German text further complicates by parenthetically commenting ("(Sie gehören wohl zu der Sorte Leute, die beides verwechseln.)")

The last two sentences take this game of confusion yet another step: melancholy and sickness are exchanged for children. Depression and being in love with angels, beings of pure contradiction, and thus at first alienated with a missing plural 's', which appears again in the negation:

"It is a dangerous thing to confuse children with angel.
No, it's not dangerous to confuse children with angels."

Of course, all files can be corrected, they are only virtually a document, a paperlessness waiting for completion in the printout, threatened by a computer crash. But on the other hand, the completed work, in Benjamin's words, is merely the death mask of the conception. In this perspective, the looming crash and the restraint become signs that undermine all idealistic aesthetics. While Renaissance melancholy might meditate over a book (closed in Dürer), modern depression sinks in a bewildering file of infinite capacity and permanent alterability.

The young man N. sits before an initially illegible text, beside an open laptop, the successor of the portable typewriter. It is waiting in sleep mode, and serves merely as a support for a little black and white drawing. The fleeting glances that the camera allows us make us suspect a puzzle picture, the cartoon of a long-haired man. Perhaps the cover design for a literary journal, and perhaps the drawing, covered, masked, not just the display, but the masked character of the laptop in and of itself: a cardboard mock-up. When the camera -finally allows us to read a text on the large screen, first over N.'s shoulder, then, in a still shot that forces us to read, the layout has changed: it now ends with an interjection in a larger font and a different language:

“Masks are not intended to be static sculptures, they are made to be worn, to hide and transform...”

Who is speaking here? Is N. writing his own text? Is he quoting someone? Is he writing dictation? Is he -writing prose for a certain role? Is he wearing a mask of the author?

Every text, every combination of letters and words to units that could convey a certain meaning, we understand as a masking, encoding a living meaning with rigid, dead letters. Every author hides behind a mask, through which he, necessarily transformed, can speak to us. He can not do otherwise than to speak to us masked, for the author of a text is absent, is always already dead, not a living narrator, but a spirit distanced from us, with a detached voice. In reading, in the reanimating gaze of the reader falling onto the letters, this mask comes into play. The text is not a static sculpture, not a meaningless artificial sign, but appears as a transformer (of meaning) and transformed (through the meaning), the concealer (of a meaning) that through this very movement directs attention to the concealed.

“The text is cleverer than the author,” writes Heiner Müller. Vittorio Santoro has quite consciously constructed his complex play with masks, operating on all levels (narrative, image, text, sound, editing, etc.) with the undecidability of meaning. The office, as closed as it might well appear, is open for our reading. The fragments of text are all quotations; they are not random but they do not point to any clear, authorial meaning. They are not symbols of a fixed story, but allegories of a moved and moving vision and reading. In this way, the texts change perspective, not just the beholder: “Moving towards you, moving around you, moving against you, moving away from you”: there will be more to say about the title of this video, or video installation.

“Dann, ist es nur eine Frage der Zeit?
How to disappear completely”

Obviously, these lines have been typed with the portable typewriter. They occupy the empty space between a French text on memory and the camera, only part of which is visible, an English quotation about mirroring interest, and a typeset—that is, not typed—French footnote that conceals its typographical out-of-placeness behind blackened meaning. Interesting here the question: “Wie kann man gänzlich verschwinden.” Of course, the meaning does not disappear behind the letters, but with time it begins to hover. As Benjamin quotes Karl Kraus, “The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.” The camera retreats, a surreal light from the left throws a shadow of the typewriter on the paper. The accent again disappears. Santoro cuts to M. and back to S., her partner, who is filling out a form by hand, and has turned his laptop away from himself to face the camera. But the text still remains illegible: the camera does not look closer at it,

but at the keys of the typewriter, until the telephone rings. Who's calling for the woman? Whom does the telephone mask? This time we only perceive a negative, answers from M. to inaudible questions or sentences, interrupted by breaks:

- "As long as life continues like this, you will have people who think like me."
- "It's been a whole ugly mess."
- "Who is returning to Virginia Woolf?"
- "I would like to apologize to the people..."

On first hearing, the continuity of voice and appearance of the woman produces a context of meaning for the beholder. This falls apart on repeated listening and watching in the loop. M. speaks in quotations, or more precisely, quotations have in her found a shared voice. They are taken from the "Quotations of the Day" that adorn the pages of *The New York Times*. There's news everyday, but news can only be always in the same frame, the loop of newspaper circulation. In this way, change and continuity are thrown into a whirr, a state of undecidability.

"What matter who's speaking?" in the words of Samuel Beckett, as quoted by Michel Foucault. The important thing is that somebody speaks. Every day the voice speaks with another mask, every day the collective consciousness bears another face. The voice of M. brings them together, reproduces them, hands them on to an unknown listener, who had the telephone ring, an absent person who intervenes in the loop, but perhaps doesn't even exist. We viewers are witnesses of the quotations and at the same time witnesses of absence—and as absent witnesses ourselves part of the loop.

The camera violently tears us away from this reflexive imprisonment, suddenly panning the room away from M. and all to whom she lends her voice. The camera glides across the shoulders of S., now sitting at the typewriter, and whom we hear inserting another sheet of paper, on which he writes something that we will not read, even if the loop is about to bring us right back to the room. On the way to one of the three ways out, the voice of the telephoning woman is slowly faded out: now we become aware of the strange mumbling that has run through the entire loop, like the background noise of the office. It is probably a taped voice, a man's voice, distorted beyond recognition, without body and name, a voice that always already preceded all silence and speech in the room. The recording is played forwards and backwards at the same time, as if the voice were always simultaneously emerging and passing.

"I must go on, I can't go on, I must go on; I must say words as long as there are words, I must say them until they find me, until they say me—heavy burden, heavy sin; I must go on, maybe it's been done already; maybe they've already said me; maybe they've already borne me to the threshold of my story, right to the door opening onto my story; I'd be surprised if it opened." Maybe Michel Foucault called the office and spoke his order of discourse on the answering machine. On the endless tape, the loop, the room with three ways out to a story with a threshold over which we cannot step.

3. STRAIGHT

Watching a third time, we can look beyond the levels of narration and quoted material to the filmic dimension. Then the threefold loop proves to be a complex construction of camera angles and cuts. The space is developed with an expressly filmic view of time: the soundtrack in so doing creates an acoustic unit that undermines the partly anti-conventional editing. The first half-close up shot lets us observe C. diagonally from above. The subsequent approach of the camera towards the seat leads us to the opposite, still empty side of the room. The beginning music, really an inaudible accompaniment, precisely because of this underscores its generic character and self-referential use of filmic signs in the video. In the following long shot, we can for the first time locate the protagonist C. at his desk at the wall. The red office chair that just stood before the typewriter is now facing the window. This small continuity disruption causes an irritation that persists when Santoro again cuts back to camera moving towards the typewriter and the music gets louder. Returning to the quieter long shot, S. and M. make their appearance, followed by N. The next cut leaves the three -additional

protagonists time to get to work, and continues with the opening shot, C. working at the computer. Then, for the first time a close-up of a screen comes into view, making reading possible. The cut suggests that the person writing is the author of the text, although—this is the disturbing thing—the cursor is standing still, and we saw C. earlier clearly editing a list, not a literary-theoretical text that would be more or less out of place in an office context. Doesn't it seem from a distance like an intertitle in a silent film?

After this rigid, epic shot, we then jump back to the total shot. The young N. is now working on a text. But instead of jumping back to the screen, the camera backs away from N., reversing its first movement. This discretion makes the illegible text on the monitor meaningful. Finally, the montage brings us back to N. In a close-up, we can read the text about masks. We can now translate the filmic connotation as well. "The camera is not static, it is made to be part of the game, to hide and to transform." If we send our view of the filmic means into a loop, then we can say something analogous about editing as well. A soft cross fading and an angled top shot now establish a fully authorial perspective. Not through subjectivity, as in the montage of very different shots, but in a weightless, technically elaborate camera movement over the heads of the office clerks and then down to the desks, placed together, to the floor, which is thus introduced as a spatially constituting element. The repetition of the camera movement cancels the authority of this view: like a miniature of the whole loop with its three ways out, this camera movement does not stop at the floor, but remains hovering over C.'s desk. "What now," is written on the business card, to which Santoro now cuts in close-up. The office workers seem not to pose this question; one would have to call their identity modern: it is not constituted from one-time, dramatic actions, but from working in repetition. Now the camera pans towards a hand tuning in the radio. The film music fades out, but the cut does not commit itself whether it wants to stage the radio as a source in the moment of its disappearance. In the absence of music, the atmosphere of the room can be heard more clearly, the music that always already underlies the images.

The next close-up from a somewhat more steep angle stages the things in the room as a film technique and in so doing gives them a second existence: the dark table top as fade to black, the typescript placed in the scene from the side as a fade to white. "The closer the look one takes at a word..." As if the camera had become uneasy with the magic it released, it jumps from the extreme close-up to a conventional, medium shot, a position of observation and corrects itself a few moments later by withdrawing further still. On the typewriter and the typescript, a bright light falls, that cannot possibly come from the window of the room; it would of course have to come from the right.

The cut plays over this disturbance, and brings us for a short moment to M., who is working at the window, then in a reverse shot to her partner S., whom the camera further observes in edge of the frame at work, this time from the front. It seems to be a time consuming activity: we are told this by the cut that with the by now classical effect of a soft "jump-cut" fades into the same, temporarily displaced work shot, while the sound track continues, uncut. Immediately afterwards, Santoro presents the traditional technique of the inter-mittent cut where once again the small radio becomes visible in a close-up. After the last, half-close shot, the cut takes it another step. Now we see the keys of the portable typewriter from above, white letters on a black background, the negative of all written, and all texts to be written in future. The camera jumps back and wanders as a top shot across the desk, where at the beginning the adeptly used technical deployment referred to the camera as author, this is now done by a slightly wobbly handheld camera. The following brief sequence prepares for the narrative focus of the next large and last sequence: M. works, this is also an irritation, in front of a not yet booted up computer. The telephone rings, then the soundtrack takes on the lead of the sequence, even if this only simulates continuity in its quote-like character. The camera remains now in various angles half close with M., who is speaking on the phone and thereby directs her gaze inwards. The cut intercuts already familiar shots, of the radio, of S., seen from the front. Even the soft jump cut with continuous soundtrack is a stylistic repetition.

The artistic devices played though are now themselves in a loop. Only the rapid pan around the room seems to free them: it rips, ignoring all rules about axes, the gaze from the endless telephone

conversation of quotations and leads in subjective perspective from the frame of the room. In the hall, the camera turns in a first run of the loop to the right, in the second to the left, in the third, it moves directly towards to closed door. There is no escaping the freedom of choice, or the compulsion to repeat.

4. LOOP

Just as Vittorio Santoro on all levels of his video simultaneously constitutes and dissolves space and narration, the installation of the video presents a further constructed deconstruction. The visitor enters a space in which he finds a smaller closet, where the entrance is shifted to the side. An initial view of the inside of the cabinet is provided to the visitor through two windows: through half-mirrors, he can observe the pre-ceding visitors watching the video, and over their shoulders, the video itself, but without being able to hear the sound track. A further turn in the path brings him to the threshold of the cabinet, which he must overstep in a movement in reversal of the camera movement in the video when he wants to stand before the wall, on which the video is projected in a picture-sized frame.

Just opposite is a half-mirror, opaque on the inside, that reflects the situation of beholding, and thus directs every gaze to the projection. The gaze of the beholder thus remains caught in the cabinet, even before he has allowed himself to get caught by the puzzling game of the video itself. This has always already begun, in its undramatic, but clearly staged sequence of shots. Only when the beholder surrenders to the loop, only when he accepts the masquerade of repetition and memory will he find his way out. The way back from this cabinet of complexity is simple, unlike that of the secretaries, damned to eternal, threefold varied repetition. It is a backward walk (like a crab) through the narrative of his own vision, back across the threshold, past the window to the entry to the exhibition space that has now become a way out. It is not the walk from a cinema of a captive gaze: walking freely has now itself become filmic in the mind of the beholder.

A film director is half blind: he only has one camera-eye, and has to control his means in the mono-perspective of convention. In contrast, Vittorio Santoro can and wants to allow that his world of signs repeatedly gets out of control. It sets itself in motion with the beholder (as well as the reader of this text), a movement that the title perhaps describes most precisely: "Moving towards you, moving around you, moving against you, moving away from you."

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a. Main

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