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Sticky

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Sticky combines the investigative point of view of the desktop documentary with horror elements from recent screenlife films such as *Unfriended* (2014), *Cam* (2018), and *Host* (2020); using two documentary films about the highly mediated remembrance of societal disasters as a point of departure, it addresses the problems that arise when medial representation paradoxically prevents meaningful engagement.

In Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016), a 3.5-minute amateur video recording of a refugee ship in the Mediterranean is extended to last 93 minutes. The focus on an event that lacks drama, suspense, and tragedy contrasts conventional coverage that exclusively concentrates on these components. The artifice of the film disrupts empathy, thereby forcing the viewer into a state of self-reflection. Harun Farocki's *Respite* (2007) relies exclusively on archival footage from a Nazi transit camp in the Netherlands and reveals the impossibility of watching these ostensibly innocuous images without the knowledge of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Both films return to well-known images whose repeated reproduction has stripped them of their significance, recontextualize them, and force the viewer to reevaluate the evidentiary power of the individual image.

While *Sticky* takes up the questions these films raise, it expands on the discourse by introducing fictional elements of haunting into its investigation, mirroring both the instant obsolescence as well as the elusive and lingering impact of the image. Focusing on films that themselves rely visually exclusively on found footage further interrogates the conditions and makings of the video essay. *Sticky* reflects on spectatorship, (post)memory, and the impact of media consumption.
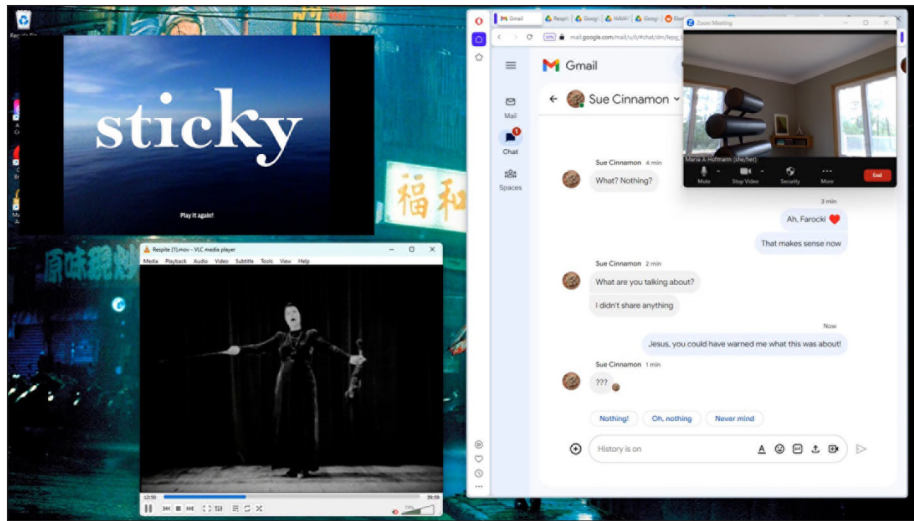
Research Statement

> 'Das Publikum ist ein Examinator, doch ein zerstreuter.' ['The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.'] (Benjamin 1963: 41; Benjamin 1969: 19)

In 1999, Bolter and Grusin described new digital media as being caught in a constant oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy, between the attempt to create the illusion that the viewer and object occupy the same space – without the medium – and the destruction of any such possibility with the co-presence of multiple media at the same time, e.g. websites that use both text and video. Immediacy and hypermediacy both represent the desire to 'get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real [...] which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response' (53). Yet 25 years later, our current media landscape as well as our individual experiences of media seem to have left the mere idea of immediacy long behind in favor of an extreme version of hypermediacy that involves the continuous, unavoidable overlap of various media. *Sticky* raises the question of whether there is any room for the real and authentic engagement in our contemporary relationship to media by initially taking the investigative approach of the desktop documentary to examine the methods and effects of two documentaries of societal disaster.

In Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016), a 3.5-minute amateur video recording of a refugee boat from aboard a cruise ship in the Mediterranean is extended to last 93 minutes, the approximate time it took rescue services to arrive. The jerky movement between the 1-second frames is accompanied by a soundtrack that includes interviews with refugees, conversations between refugees and their relatives, and communication between the cruise ship and the rescue service. The focus on an event that lacks drama,

suspense, and tragedy contrasts conventional coverage of the crisis in the Mediterranean that almost exclusively concentrates on these components, forcing the viewer to compare their own discomfort of a slow viewing experience with the position of the refugees, leading to a mixed reception of the film on its release: 'Eines von beidem, ein Ankommen oder ein Untergehen, wäre offenbar irgendwie wünschenswert, im Kino. Ein Drama, etwas Spannendes, ein tragisches Ereignis. Erlösung./One of the two, arrival or sinking, would apparently somehow be desirable, in the theater. Drama, something suspenseful, tragedy. Salvation.' (Lutz 2016) The artifice of the film disrupts empathy thereby forcing the viewer into a state of self-reflection.

In the silent film *Respite* (2007), Harun Farocki programmatically questions the use of footage from the Holocaust, our memory of it and its impact. With the exception of some photographs in the beginning, *Respite* exclusively uses footage from a 90-minute film about the Westerbork transit camp, commissioned by a Nazi officer and filmed by Jewish photographer and inmate Rudolf Breslauer, only interrupted by comments on black intertitles. Farocki uses the first half of *Respite* to call into question the use of filmic footage to access historical truth and the evidentiary power of film, while the second half returns to already viewed scenes with the question of whether these images – that, unlike many Holocaust representations, do not visually depict any explicit atrocities – can be viewed without the ever-present knowledge and context of the horrors of the Holocaust. '*Respite* is not (yet another film) about the Holocaust; it is about our knowledge of the images of the Holocaust, and how the memory of this knowledge (and of these images) has forever altered our sense of temporality and causality, and thus how we see an image from the archive' (Elsaesser 2009: 65).

Both *Havarie* and *Respite* employ counterstrategies to conventional methods of engaging with societal disaster through media by the exclusion of narrative structures, focus on repetition and echo, on inaccessibility through empathy, and on shifting the focus from multimedia representation to a single-sense experience. They play with what Jamie Baron (2012) calls the 'archive effect,' a viewer's sense that the footage was produced at a different time and for a different purpose. Baron proposes viewing archival documents as a spectatorial experience rather than an intrinsic property of the object. Through the use of aggressive remediation, the presence of the found footage material remains inevitably visible and forces the viewer into a state of reflection on the medium.

Instead of the focused viewing experience necessary to truly understand the *affect* and *effect* of these works, *Sticky* represents the ever-distracted multiscreen environment in which we generally engage with media. Full of distractions and interruptions, the video starts out as an investigative exploration of these two films, putting them in dialogue with each other, creating new intertextual connections between them, their paratexts,

and other media present on the screen. Over the course of the video, the hypermediacy spectacle of these connections starts taking on a life of its own, invading the desktop, the *home* screen, with its familiar sounds and rooms, a place of vapid conversation and light entertainment.

As a distinct genre of videographic criticism, one of the desktop documentary's most emblematic characteristics is the foregrounding of the videographer's subjectivity and (ideally) self-positioning through the intimacy of perspective and supposed transparency of the depicted investigation. According to Miklós Kiss, this approach 'often direct[s] attention to the medium and the construction itself' (2021: 111). I argue that this inherent feature of self-reflection, both of the maker as well as of the medium, makes desktop documentaries particularly well suited to engage in arguments about a content's embeddedness in a specific medial context. Rather than an examination of *Transformer* movies, Kevin B Lee's *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), one of the earliest and most renowned desktop documentaries, is, according to Lee himself, a 'critical investigation of the global big budget film industry, amateur video making, and the political economy of images.' Just as *Havarie* and *Respite* are not films about societal disasters but about their medial representation, collective memory, and cultural impact, *Sticky* utilizes the desktop documentary's specific characteristics to make an argument not about the films themselves (at least not directly), nor about the respective catastrophes, but about the relationship between the viewer and the medium.

Drawing inspiration from horror screenlife films such as *Unfriended* (2014), *Cam* (2018), and *Host* (2020), an unknown presence starts to come after the female protagonist in *Sticky*, taking control of the technological surroundings that finally seep into the world beyond the computer screen. As in these fictional examples, the uncanniness of the desktop suggests an interrogation of the relationship to media while simultaneously unsettling the lines between fiction and nonfiction. Leaning into artifice instead of authenticating strategies when facing real-world tragedy mirrors Scheffner's and Farocki's approach in forcing the medium in its mediumness into view and enables access to authentic engagement from within contemporary hypermediacy. *Sticky* aims to tease out the haunting effect of these documentaries by reproducing it. '[H]aunting [...] is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely' (Gordon 2011: 2). The specters raised by the suppression of events such as the Holocaust and the crisis in the Mediterranean, even within a media landscape that suffers from an oversaturation with imagery of such instances, demand attention, force themselves onto the viewer, making it impossible to look away, coercing the spectator to bear witness; and finally, to acknowledge one's own reflection.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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