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The video way of thinking

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This article rethinks the concepts of *zoê* and *bios* proposed by Giorgio Agamben in relation to the history of technology. It argues that the relationship between embodiment and the audiovisual is only beginning to be understood alongside the recent and increasing omnipresence of digital audiovisual recording technologies in everyday life. Just as writing completely changed human society's understanding of speech, the development of audiovisual media over the past century has profoundly affected and perhaps even founded our contemporary understanding of embodiment and embodied knowledge. Questions of performance documentation that have circulated in performance studies barely scratch the surface of what amounts to a new way of understanding life, embodiment, and knowledge, which I here begin to call the 'video way of thinking'.

Keywords: video; audiovisual; embodiment; Agamben; epistemology

1.

When philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that 'language presupposes the nonlinguistic' and that 'law presupposes the nonjuridical' (1998, p.20), he begins from the conceptual premise that language and law are the first phenomena to be explained while that which exceeds them comes later. This is what I have called the 'trope of excess' (Spatz 2015): a habit of thought in which affordances that ought to be considered primary are rendered secondary to those which in fact ought to be decentered. In this essay I attempt to rethink Agamben's well-known categories of *zoê* and *bios* from the standpoint of a third mode of life: *technos*.²

What we find in video – by which I mean *the audiovisual* – is that certain aspects of embodiment (understood as *first affordance*, cf. Spatz 2017) become newly available for inscription into a transmissible and relatively stable technological archive. If we did not have hundreds of years of writing and print culture with which to compare the emergence of video, we might be tempted to suspect that the audiovisual now delivers to us the main truth of embodiment itself, even if we still acknowledged secondarily that there are some modes of bodily 'excess' (notably touch and smell) that remain untraceable by the new medium. However, in the context of the history of technology it is evident that neither writing nor the audiovisual delivers embodiment, in the sense of first affordance, to the archive. Rather, each is able to trace and document particular

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dimensions of living first affordance. What interests me here is the way in which the new possibilities of audiovisual inscription interact with writing, thought, and action.

It is not that writing, or indeed video, is barred completely from particular zones of embodied life. Writing can and does inscribe taste and smell into the archive through language. But it has been discovered (notably this discovery coincides with the rise of the audiovisual) that writing has two aspects, which are sometimes called the signifier and the signified, or the semiotic and the semantic (cf. Agamben 1998, p.25). Writing first of all inscribes verbal technique, the technique of speech. Only because it does so with great clarity is it then able to access, by way of reference to speech, other areas of life. The word ‘lavender’, for example, refers first of all to the embodied technique of verbal production by which that word is spoken and heard. It then also refers, via that technique, to a particular plant or color which may be matched to that spoken word.³

From the perspective of the audiovisual it becomes possible to recognize that there is such a thing as a *writing way of thinking*. Indeed, much of what we call philosophy is not more than the development of a particular way of working with the technology of writing.⁴ How often do we refer to the ‘thought’ of a particular philosopher when what we mean is precisely their writing? The *writing way of thinking* has become so dominant that today we often simply call it ‘thinking’, but to be more specific we might use the term *logos*. With the rise of the audiovisual we are beginning to experience a new kind of thinking, which I will call the *video way of thinking*.

I think we begin to see the emergence of a video way of thinking in disciplines like performance studies, which despite its rich engagement with the audiovisual has mostly elected to remain bounded within the older medium of writing as far as its products and publications are concerned. The more recent emergence of artistic research and ‘practice (as) research’, with their endless debates over performance documentation, are still-early inquiries that push the matter of the audiovisual further into the territory of knowledge production and towards the institutional heart of the university: its engagement with the archive. I even suspect that the spread of embodiment as a key concept across the humanities and social sciences over the past several decades is closely related to the rise of the audiovisual and its new ways of thinking. Yet for all this I do not think that the video way of thinking, whatever it might be, has fully arrived. Cinema is its prehistory, but aesthetically and epistemologically limited by the economic constraints of that technology. Just as writing could not give us the modern university when it was bound to the economic and political elite but only as it became more widely available after the advent of printing, the era of the audiovisual does not properly begin until video meets the Internet.

2.

Now let us think through these developments in terms of what Agamben calls *zoê* and *bios*. Please note that I am not attempting to reduce Agamben’s theory of the political to the history of technology. Rather I think that a glance now at the history of technology can help us imagine the future of politics. Just as I intend ‘language’ to refer not merely to the technology of writing but more importantly to the *way of thinking* afforded by that technology, I ask you here to understand by the audiovisual not specific new digital video technologies but the domains of life which these new technologies allow for the first time to be inscribed in an archive and – perhaps even more importantly – the ways of thinking and doing to which that new possibility of inscription points.

Agamben traces to the ancient Greeks – one of the origin points of Europe’s *writing way of thinking* – a division of life between *zoê* and *bios*. I want to rethink these categories in a way that does not begin from writing and the law and work backwards towards embodiment (understood through the trope of excess as ‘the nonlinguistic’ and ‘the nonjuridical’) but which rather begins from embodiment and asks about the relationship between writing/law and the audiovisual.

Recall that embodiment here means no more or less than first affordance: ‘the first site at which the dialogue between agency and materiality takes place’ and thus ‘the first site of that negotiation which makes possible all other negotiations and affordances’ (Spatz 2017). Embodiment in this sense is a teeming, lively thing, both with and without organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), more than the body but less than a full ecology. Aristotle’s city or *polis*, which is the etymological and philosophical root of politics, emerges from the development of a new technology – writing – which captures in a relatively stable and hence transmissible form a certain aspect of embodiment, namely the technique of speech, and allows it to appear as a stable system of what then becomes law or *nomos*. In this moment, the ‘word’ as such comes into existence as that which can be written. *Logos* then refers not to the word as spoken utterance but to the written word and to the cut by which writing separates word from sound, cry, and song.

In the city, the full life of *bios* becomes distinguishable from the much older mere or bare life of *zoê*, which humans share with other animals.⁵ Agamben tells us that the culmination of this division, two millennia later, occurs at the site of the fascist death camp, wherein *zoê* is radically severed from *bios* in the absolute debasement of human beings. We are thus shown an opposition between *zoê* and *bios* in which the former is a horrifying reduction. But what if the apparent binary opposition of *zoê* and *bios* is an artefact of the writing way of thinking? If *bios* is the written life, then, from the perspective of writing, *zoê* (unwritten life) is merely an excess or remainder. I would instead refigure *zoê* – as Alexander Weheliye (2014) begins to suggest – as the full body, as embodiment in the sense of first affordance, which precedes writing and the writing way of thinking (and living) by hundreds, thousands, or millions of years. The death camp is then not so much the site of *zoê* as the site of *zoê*’s most extreme abuse at the hands of *logos* (writing) and *bios* (written life).

In the sites of embodied activation studied by anthropology and performance studies, where writing is either not historically dominant or intentionally postponed, could we hope to find something like a relatively free manifestation of *zoê*? Or at least *zoê* in a state of equilibrium with *bios* rather than *zoê* as produced by the violent subtraction of *bios*. But it is not enough to look for places in which *zoê* appears on its own terms rather than as the remainder or excess of a violently metasized *bios*. What we need to ask is why *zoê* seems to be appearing for us now in a new way, that is, why other aspects of life are newly entering into philosophical and political and scientific discourse at this time. To answer this question, we may need to expand our ancient Greekist ontology with a further entity, which I will call *technos*.

3.

In the idealized *polis* or city – which here stands for all kinds of institutionality, including the national and the international, that are made possible by inscription and its archives – *zoê* is not meant to be opposed to *bios*. Rather the city should allow for

bios as a harmonic relation of *zoê* and *logos*, of life and writing, in which pre-writing ways of thinking and doing are structured and supported by writing ways of thinking and doing. In this imagined *polis*, writing and *bios* both constrain and enable *zoê*, to be sure ranking different forms of life (citizen, woman, slave, animal) but not in order to destroy or annihilate any of them. In the death camp, on the other hand, this nominally harmonious relationship between *bios* and *zoê* is overturned as the former seeks to exterminate the latter. In the camp, *bios* and *zoê* are radically split, as prisoners are debased to a state of pure *zoê* and guards are required to act as pure disciplinary incarnations of *bios*.⁶ (This is not to say that the split is ever completely achieved. Even in the most horrific situations, victims and prisoners find moments of dignified thought and action. The concentration camp is merely the most extreme example of the potential to divide life in a violent hierarchy of law and body.)

We now have *zoê* and *bios*, united in the *polis* and torn asunder in the anti-*polis* space of the camp. What then if another form of inscription, a wholly different way of incorporating *zoê* into *polis*, appears? What should we call the audiovisual in this sense, understood not as a specific set of technologies (photograph, phonograph, cinema, video, hologram) but as a distinct mode of contact between *zoê* and *polis*? It is telling that we do not have a word that specifically incorporates the auditory and the visual aspects of embodiment in their moving conjunction. The linking of recorded sound with motion pictures in the twentieth century produced a new kind of inscription that unites what were previously understood as two different senses or zones of embodiment: audio + visual. There is no compound word that names both the sonic and visual aspects of embodiment as practiced, that is, those aspects of embodiment which are traced by audiovisual technologies. We may call this domain the audiovisuality of the body, audiovisual embodiment, or most concisely the *audiovisual body*. This embodied audiovisuality is neither *zoê*, in the sense of first affordance, nor that *bios* which is produced through writing and textuality. It is rather a distinct territory of inscription, which I will argue is part of the larger domain of *technos*.

How appropriate is *technos* as a term for the audiovisual and its associated ways of thinking and doing? Scholars of ancient Greece may correct me, but is not *techne* just exactly that kind of knowledge which is deemed 'practical' because it is not easily inscribed in writing? Is not *episteme*, in contrast, knowledge that can be written, knowledge articulated through the embodied technique of the verbal, which itself is retroactively defined by its availability for inscription by writing? Remember, this does not mean that *episteme* knowledge is actually written down but only that it can be expressed verbally, that is, within the writing way of thinking. And is not *alethia*, truth, that kind of knowledge which cannot be inscribed by any means, which precedes all writing and which for us would be linked to *zoê*? Then is not *techne*, which we more recently refer to as the 'how' of knowing ('know-how'), a kind of knowledge that appears between or alongside *episteme* and *alethia* and is not synonymous with either of those?

The ancient Greeks did not have advanced audiovisual technology of the kind I mentioned above. How then could they have encountered this category of knowledge as distinct from both *episteme* and *alethia*? But is not *techne* precisely the kind of knowledge that can be shown in drawings, that is, with the help of analogues of life (such as maps and charts), and the techniques of interpretation they require, rather than through a symbolic alphabets? And is not *drawing* the ancient precursor of

the audiovisual? If so, then perhaps *techne* really is the right word for the kind of knowledge that is made by possible analogue (analogous) inscription and the mode of thinking and doing that is afforded by this knowledge can with some accuracy be called *technos*. This *technos* would then refer to ways of thinking and doing that arise in relation to all manner of analogue inscriptions, from ancient drawing to contemporary digital video.

We then have *alethia*, knowledge that is present without inscription, and the mode of life (*zoê*) afforded by that knowledge; *techne*, knowledge arising from analogous inscription – the audiovisual in a broad sense – and the ways of thinking and doing, the mode of life (*technos*), made possible by that knowledge; and *episteme*, knowledge arising from symbolic inscription (writing or *logos*) and its associated ways of thinking and doing, its mode of life (*bios*). At long last the ancient hierarchy is reversed and *logos-bios-episteme* is no longer our starting point. Beginning instead from a triangulation of *zoê*, *bios*, and *technos*, we can now perhaps begin to grasp the enormous significance of a video epistemology or *video way of thinking*.

4.

If *technos* begins with drawing, which predates writing; is surpassed by writing at the founding of the ancient Greek and Jewish traditions; is further rendered secondary following the advent of print technology; and then begins a new ascendancy with the photograph and phonograph, which culminates in their synthesis in digital video – then what is its future? Does the new era of the audiovisual bring us closer to *zoê*, to life itself as primary affordance and origin of all inscriptions and archives? Or does *technos* merely supplant *bios* as a new system of domination, exploitation, and abuse, a new technological mode through which to control *zoê*?

It is not at all clear that the death camp, the site of total abjection and annihilation of *zoê*, was dominated more by *bios* than by *technos*. The Nazi system was surely a culmination of some kind of horrible power found in the *logos*, which from Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* to the printed schedules of the death trains allowed for the coordination of genocide on an unprecedented scale. And surely the racialized logic by which the victims of the Holocaust were ejected from the *polis*, violently deprived of *bios*, and reduced to bare life (*zoê*) followed mechanisms of racialization that were developed by European colonialism via the ascent of *logos* during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. But Nazi propaganda, as in the films of Leni Riefenstahl, was powerfully audiovisual. The Nazis themselves documented their own camps with audiovisual recordings. We should therefore in no way carry an expectation that *technos* will depart from the violent history of *logos* unless the specifics of emergent history guide it to do so.

It is not difficult to imagine a tyranny of the audiovisual that would rival or surpass that of the *logos*, from colonial genocides to the Holocaust. It is not difficult to see how *zoê* might be absolutely objectified before a new law or *nomos* that consists not in written rules, orders and policies, but in a set of absolutely charismatic audiovisual commands and exemplars. Contemporary forms of biopolitical violence such as mass shootings and terrorism in general, including the terrorism of the state, seem to speak clearly of this potential horror. The question is whether we can imagine a different future in which *technos* is enlisted to right past wrongs: a *technos* in service of *zoê* rather than the reverse.

Perhaps there can be a new *polis*, necessarily planetary, based on a triangulated practice of care in which the gifts of *logos* are combined with those of *technos* not in order to further discipline and control *zoê* but in order to support and sustain it. If globalization was made possible by the unrestrained zeal and zealotry of the *logos*, could the rise of *technos* become linked, historically, not with an increase and expansion of global exploitation but with the development of a planetary democratic or socialist politics? In short, will the opening of the audiovisual domain help us move further away from life and earth, as some proponents of virtual reality seem to desire, in a final nihilistic spree before the crash? – or could it instead bring us back to earth and to life? This is much less a question of the inherent politics of *technos* or *bios*, as in some kind of technological determinism, than of how politics is unfolding today in the still new domains of the audiovisual.

We have already begun to see the public audiovisual documentation and dissemination of governmental and international debates. With Facebook ‘live’, political events of all kinds may be streamed directly to mass audiences who comment individually upon them in the old medium of writing. This is already a shift in the operation of the *polis*, but certainly not yet the full arrival of *technos* to work alongside *logos* in the custodianship of *zoê*. What will happen to the role of the politician as the audiovisual continues to ascend? How will the very concept of law or *nomos* be transformed when it becomes possible to write and sign legal documents in audiovisual form? It is easy enough to track the rise of celebrity culture and its horrors, from Reagan to Trump, but also necessary to link the growth of alternative and radical movements and lifeworlds, such as the World Social Forum and Black Lives Matter, to the audiovisual.

Can we dare to hope, with anarchists and other ambassadors of embodiment, that instead of a shared sovereignty between *logos* and *technos*, to the further detriment and imprisonment of *zoê*, the rise of the audiovisual may yet create a crucial opening through which a social and political movement might appear that would displace the primacy of inscription and initiate a return to the sovereignty of *zoê*, with *logos* and *technos* in merely supporting roles? Would this be desirable?

What, after *technos*, is the *zoê*?

5.

The exploration, intensification, and expansion of the audiovisual seems to be unstoppable and needs no supporting argument. Barring a level of global catastrophe that destroys the Internet, the audiovisual domain will continue to grow. Let me then offer a reminder of what else there is.

As scholars of performance and embodiment have been saying for more than two decades, the audiovisual is not life itself; *technos* does not deliver *zoê* to the archive. The video way of thinking and the writing way of thinking coexist alongside older, pre-writing modes of life (*zoê*). Whenever we see the latter figured as an excess of the former, we should remind ourselves of the order of things, not only as a chronological history of technology and mythopoetic origin story but perhaps more importantly as a set of ethical commitments that must be renewed in every moment: embodiment, not writing or the audiovisual, is *first* affordance. When we refer to writing or video as thought, we are taking on board the entire history of inscriptive technologies. Perhaps, in the present era, it would be wiser to continue to distinguish

between thought proper, which is a function exactly of *zoê* and not available to inscription, and those powerful modes of inscription (*bios* and *technos*) that allow thought to cross vast geographical and historical distances in the form of archival traces.

The pre-writing way of thinking undoubtedly persists as embodied technique and through the embodied transmission of knowledge. Activities organized by memorized repetition, including the repetition of memorized words in poems and songs, continue to structure performing and other embodied arts. Writing has been ascendant for so long that we now often think of words as if they derive their meaning from their inscription. Theatre then becomes a sanctuary for the pre-writing way of thinking in which words are memorized and not merely inscribed. As the audiovisual continues to rise, we will more often think of our own movements, gestures, and sounds (including spoken words) in terms of their inscription and recording in *technos* rather than as written words (*bios*) or as structures of repetition. Yet the relationship of the audiovisual to embodiment is not the same as that between *bios* and *zoê*. Whereas *bios* is based on a symbolic logic, *technos* is analogical (even or especially when it is digital). While I would not ascribe to this difference any kind of deterministic political valence, it must be reckoned with. The analogical mode of inscription that defines *technos* could be seen as risking a dangerous substitution in which the video way of thinking is understood to replace living thought. On the other hand, the same analogical power might be figured as a powerful sensory return to life itself after a millennium of *logocentrism*. In fact, these are not two different possibilities but the same one: It is precisely the unique power of *technos* to trace embodiment analogically that makes it both so tempting and so risky.

Among our priorities during this period of increasing audiovisuality should be the defense of the *logos* – as found, for example, in the institution of the university. If we consider the current neoliberal attack on universities as an attack of *technos* upon *bios*, we can immediately see that the destruction of books and laws and their general replacement by images and sounds is not a path we should risk treading. If the video way of thinking is to develop in a historical arc towards sustainability and justice for *zoê* (and there is no reason to limit *zoê* here to human life only), it will do so in dialogue with the *logos* rather than by replacing it. We must not, in a heady march into the audiovisual, abandon the writing way of thinking. Rather, writing and the audiovisual must be counterbalanced in service to life. This is what I have attempted to propose in the form of ‘illuminated video’, in which uncut audiovisual documentation of experimental practice is overlaid by textual annotations and citations.⁷ In these videos, which reverse the relationship between *techne* and *logos* that was found in medieval illuminated manuscripts, we not only approach *zoê* from the standpoint of the audiovisual but also attempt to find a proper place for *logos* within and alongside *technos*. The juxtaposition of audiovisual and textual inscription makes clear in a new way that what we are witnessing is not merely video documentation of practice but an entirely new domain of inscription in which other aspects of embodiment can circulate: the video way of thinking.

In this article I have attempted to articulate the meaning of the audiovisual through writing. In some emerging documents of artistic research, writing finds a new home inside the audiovisual (or more broadly, the analogue) way of thinking: *technos*. I do not think it is a coincidence that the invention of illuminated video as a medium of thought appeared within the context of a project aimed to investigate Judaism through the embodied technique of song (Figure 1). Judaism is the other mythic origin point,



Figure 1. Ben Spatz (practitioner) and Nazlıhan Eda Erçin (videographer) in a laboratory session of the project ‘Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork’. Photo by Agnieszka Mendel.¹

along with the ancient Greeks, of the European *logos*. As we have seen here, *logos* is not the spoken or sung or danced word but the written word, the inscribed or inscribable word. There could not be any clearer statements of the ascendancy of the *logos* over *technos* during the past two millennia than the commandment against graven images (drawings) and idols (sculptures) and the appellation ‘people of the book’. My attempt to rework the relation between *zoê* and *bios* through university-based research led to my stumbling upon a third term in this equation: the mode of *technos*, which between (let’s say) 1440 and 1927 was merely an addendum to writing but which has now entered into a new period of ascendancy. There is no returning to a time before the *logos*, but there may be some hope for a time after it: an epoch in which *technos* points back to *zoê*, an era that honors not the medium of video but the video way of thinking.

Notes

1. Gold open access to this chapter is made possible by the University of Huddersfield and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Leadership Fellow project ‘Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Song-Action’ (2016–2018) [grant reference AH/N006879/1]. The insights shared here arose following a series of embodied laboratory work sessions with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel, and Caroline Gatt, which took place under the rubric of that project. I am extremely grateful for their co-authorship of those sessions.
2. This article is an extended speculative meditation on the concepts of *zoê* and *bios* as developed in Agamben’s best known work, *Homo Sacer* (1998). It intersects Agamben’s work transversally and does not attempt to treat his larger oeuvre. Significantly, my use of *technos* to refer to modes of analogue audiovisual inscription – as distinct from the textual inscriptions I associate with *bios* – relies upon my own theorization of technique (Spatz 2015) rather than the work of Heidegger, Agamben, or others who have worked with cognate terms such as Campbell (2011). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for inviting this clarification.

3. What I am saying here applies to alphabetic writing and print. To what extent it applies also to other technologies is a matter for further consideration.
4. Certainly, the turn ‘towards’ materialism and the fight that speculative realism picks with Kantian correlationism would not be thinkable without the original turn ‘away’ from matter that is grounded in the writing of the word.
5. I do not engage here the question of whether other species also share partially in *bios* or in what I will call *technos*. It is not at all necessarily to my argument to set the human species absolutely apart from others. On the contrary, I think that a better understanding of technique and technology in the human may be part of the turn to a richer species and ecological perspective.
6. The fact that the isolation of *zoê* does not imply its debasement is evident in the superficial similarity between the prison cell and the monastic cell. Both attempt a return or reduction to bare life, but only one of them is an act of violence.
7. For examples of illuminated video, please visit www.urbanresearchtheater.com.

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