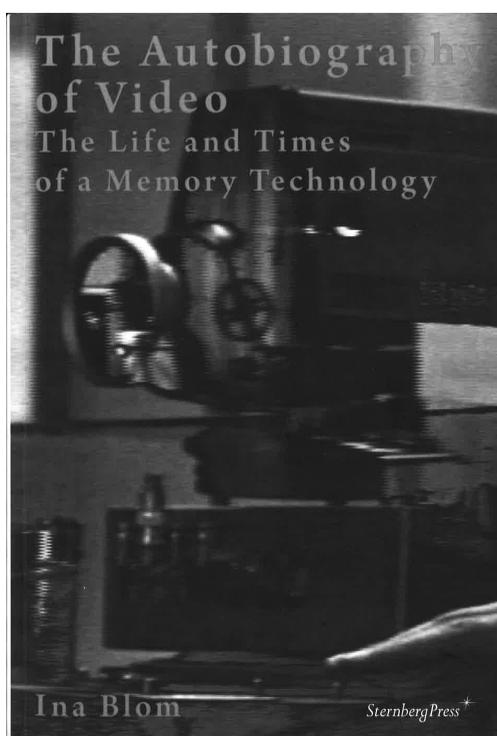


Peter McDonald

Book Review: Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology*



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When video sat down to write its autobiography, it might well have taken Pinocchio as a guide. Ina Blom's *The Autobiography of Video*, sets out to bring early video art of the 1970s and 80s to life, or rather life to video. The book is part media philosophy and part history of the many ways that video was and can be seen as alive, as having a life and agency of its own. Thinking about video, just

like thinking about the uncanny resemblance of puppets, leads to ontological questions about the mimesis of human subjectivity, but like Pinocchio, video also seems to have a secret life of its own. Throughout, Blom tries to destabilize the boundary that separates the artificial from the lively. She performs the magic of making video into a writer, a life-form, a self-reflexive viewer.

The Autobiography of Video has many tricks for opening up a grey zone between machine and life. One of the most impressive of these is simply the vague feeling of life that many artists—such as Nam June Paik, or Bill Viola—attest to in their work and writing. It is an intuition that is hard to recapture, but one whose stubborn mysticism Blom does not shy away from. Another trick is to think through the cybernetic, ecological, and biological discourses that both influenced video artists and simultaneously took the processes of scanning, signal processing, and electromagnetic storage as inspiration. In one particularly symptomatic anecdote, Blom describes the re-discovery of a small aquatic creature, *Copilia quadrata*, whose strange eyes use the same scanning principle as video. Until video was available as a metaphor, this “televisual eye” was not understood as an eye at all. The story comes full circle in Peter Campus's *Double Vision* (1971), which emulates the vision of *Copilia quadrata* with a series of camera maneuvers and signal processes. At times video is associated with life as genetic memory, as water, as feedback mechanism, and as non-human embodiment.

However, this is not just a historical study of the metaphors and events that tied video to life processes. Blom also draws on a wide-ranging set of

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theoretical texts to make the case for a lively object world, ranging from the post-humanism of cyborg theory, to the non-humanism of speculative realism and actor-network theories, to the anti-humanism of German media theory. Strands of Deleuzian thinking are important throughout, as are Marxisms that break down a binary between consumer and consumed. All of these are ways of putting pressure on the concept of life in the service of decentering human subjectivity as the measure of video. Blom pushes us to attend to the language of signals and speed that video uses to tell its own story.

Refocusing on the technical aspects of video is necessary because the critical history as it has been written casts video as a medium for self-documentation and exploration of identity, which Blom recounts in the book's second chapter. Seen in its worst light, video embodies all the childish destruction of Pinocchio—paranoid in its monitoring practices, mendacious in its manipulation of images, and above all narcissistic. Film is anchored in place, and so “authorial control—the touchstone of autobiography—is necessarily divided or shared” between the acting and directing subjects¹. Video has no strings, it can be turned back on the camera operator herself, and thus opens up to what Rosalind Krauss identifies as a “capitalist culture of the self.” This is the story of video art that Blom wants to displace, and by reframing the question in terms of video's affordances, she brings an incredible range of topics into relation with the medium's technical capacities. Pinocchio's bad habits are thus reframed—not those of a naughty child, but a properly wooden creature.

After laying out the theoretical stakes in the introduction, and how she is intervening in the criticism in Chapter Two, each subsequent chapter teases apart a sense of video liveness. Chapter three deals with the vocabulary of color, intensity, and affect that video borrowed from painting; Chapter Four deals with video's attunement with global and environmental perception. Chapter Five deals with the multiple and conflicting senses of time that video makes use of and Chapter Six investigates the role of video in moving the artist out of the studio and into the media lab. Chapter Seven reflects on video's winking relation to television, which it itself watches; and the eighth and final chapter investigates the kind of intimacy available through

video's temporal distortions. This list of chapters, however, does little justice to the range of materials in each—for example, the chapter on painting moves from a look at video artists' usage of painting as a structuring metaphor, to works that focus on brilliant and intense light, then to the fundamental darkness of the screen, before synthesizing these two poles in the flicker films of Tony Conrad and Peter Kubelka. Blom's method brings together perhaps two dozen such modes of experimentation, blasting open the narrative of video's history.

Throughout all this, the question of video's life gets stretched quite thin. The different theoreticians of life are brought in momentarily and strategically, and there is no accumulation or coherence. Different video artists conceive of liveness in sometimes contradictory ways, or in ways that stretch credulity. One of the book's most characteristic structures is to present an idea of video's relation to life as a mere thought experiment, something we just might be able to believe, and then in the next sentence or paragraph treating that belief as fact. There are dozens of times where the hypothetical tone of phrases like “so to speak,” “it is almost as if,” “if only in the sense that” and “it was at least possible to imagine” silently drop their doubt.

Coupled to the cumulative sense of a reservation over the applicability of life to video, is the ambiguous sense in which the word “video” gets used throughout the book. At different times “video” designates one of at least six different things: *the ideas and actions* of artists using video, a *medium* defined by its *technical properties* (in opposition to film), an *aesthetic effect* produced by several kinds of apparatus (including synthesizers), a historical *collection of artworks*, a *medium* defined by its *social role* (in opposition to television), and a *conjunction of human and machine*. All of these are valid points of view, but the text slips between them, and uses that slippage to support its idea of video as an agent, and an autobiographical subject. Both the slippery meaning of video and the accumulated hesitations around life start to add up over the book, and introduce static into the larger picture.

As a result, *The Autobiography of Video* feels less like the history or media theory that a reader might expect, and more like the labor of someone who loves video art and wants to see the complexity of the medium recognized. Blom succeeds in this,

breaking from the established conversation around early video art almost entirely. It is the paradox of the book that even while the guiding trope of life is never quite convincing, it nevertheless holds together the various works and sutures them to the technical workings of video.

Peter McDonald is a PhD candidate in the department of English at the University of Chicago. His work examines the role of play and games in American culture across the 20th century. In addition to his academic work, he has worked as a game designer and media artist, most recently with the Game Changer Chicago Design Lab.

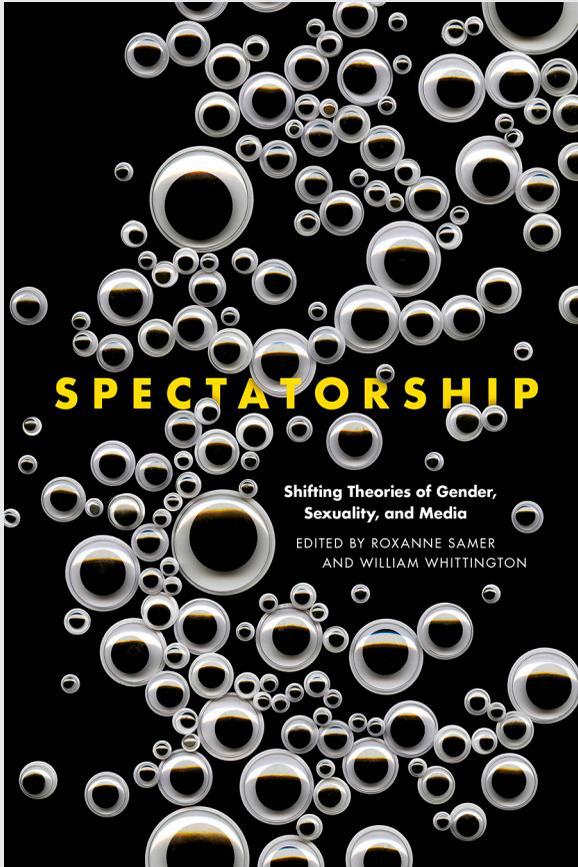
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1 Ina Blom. *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology*. (New York: Sternberg Press), 34

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