Linda Wallace

The art of Linda Wallace invites us to reflect upon our televisual environment. Day-time soap operas, classic cinema, European song contests, news broadcasts and the pervasive images of war and terrorism are juxtaposed and interspersed in both linear videos and multi-screen projections. Her work takes as its starting point the context of communications media which she describes as “a vast labyrinthine media-datascape”.[1] Our relationships with both the natural and urban environment, and with each other, are increasingly negotiated via electronic means. This is a world in which commercial television actively maintains conventional and homogenous categories around identity, politics and gender. In response, Wallace fragments, re-mixes and re-dubs the television image, introducing a spectrum of meanings back into the digital screen. This is not to say that she is attempting to reinstate a kind of ‘truth’. Rather, her project forges links between cultures as they are mediated in a televisual landscape.

Linda Wallace is an Australian artist who relocated to Amsterdam in 2004.[2] Her work has featured in many exhibitions in Australia, most significantly in the *2004 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. Her videos **lovehotel** (2000) and **eurovision** (2001) have both been screened widely in Europe and have received honourable mentions in several prizes (**lovehotel** received first prize at L’immagine leggera, Italy). The artist has been working with film and video for almost twenty years. She began in the medium of 16mm and super-8 in the early 1980s, and then moved into video and text based installations. It has been the supreme potential of digital media, however, that has provided Wallace with the tools she needs for complex and engaging works. A recent doctoral dissertation at the Australian National University in Canberra enabled the artist to be located in the Advanced Computational Systems Cooperative Research Centre. This has had a profound

[1] Linda Wallace, doctoral dissertation, *media material: artefacts from the digital age*, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, p.34.
[2] www.machinehunger.com.au

influence on her work. In 2005, Linda Wallace had an Artist-in-Residence project launch at the Netherlands Media Art Institute Montevideo/Time Based Arts in Amsterdam which was the culmination of a year long artist-in-residency.

The residency at Montevideo afforded the artist the unique opportunity to create a complex new work, **LivingTomorrow**, (2005). Displayed as three projections in the gallery, the imagery is composed of a kaleidoscope of green fields, blue skies, popular television and urban environments. These video fragments pivot in and around one another, alternating on each of the three screens. The imagery is cut up, mirrored, re-played and set into visual echoes across the space. In some passages, the video is like patterned fabric gently swaying in tune with the body (occasionally we glimpse the back of a woman's head covered in a headscarf). At other moments the picture reverberates like an interrupted broadcast signal.

The emerging narrative in **LivingTomorrow** pivots around three core scenes from the popular soap opera, the *Bold and the Beautiful*. The artist has inserted her own subtitles. All the female characters are now named Beatrix (after Holland's Queen) with the exception of a murdered woman named Wilhelmina (which is also the name of the Queen's grandmother). The episodes were taped in Australia and had, at the time of the exhibition at Montevideo, not yet been seen in Holland – they arrive from the future, hence the title, **LivingTomorrow**. A drama unfolds that shows a blonde American icon refusing the offer of marriage because, she says, she wants to wear a headscarf. There is also a murder, references to the war in Iraq, two marital engagements with the same woman, and deceptions within deceptions. Yet another layer has to do with the November 2004 murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh who espoused controversial views on immigration in Holland. This is juxtaposed with vast skies and fields, typical of Dutch landscape painting. Nothing is clear, continuous or resolved. Wallace presents us with a number of intersecting communities. Through the strategy of montage, one character can live inside another.

Amsterdam is presented as an immigrant city - a place of differences where diverse cultures and languages collide and interact. There is an image of the slogan for an IT company in the suburb of Bijlmer in Amsterdam that says, ironically, 'Living Tomorrow – Where Visions Meet'. Discussing the war in Iraq, the *Bold and Beautiful* character says they are "fighting networks with networks".[3] Pulsating throughout is the steady sway of the women walking through a market, wearing headscarves. The work suggests that we cannot consider ourselves to be separate from, or outside, this assemblage of visual symbols. In this work, the act of montage is in itself a metaphor for the act of displacement. The city is revealed to be a place of competing historical archives, different forms of montage and new cross-cultural networks.

For **LivingTomorrow**, Linda Wallace created a video archive of images which were transferred into Mpeg2 files that then (in the artist's words) 'peel away' from the database into a screen triptych.[4] The work exists as data – that is, the computer sends the image to the projector directly. The process of 'peeling' that she refers to is the mode by which the image literally reaches us. The way the files are selected to play, and in which order they play, and to which projector, is a function of the database program itself. We can also consider the word 'peeling' metaphorically. To peel is to reveal, to unearth another layer of information. To peel has a dual meaning – it also suggests the act of stripping, the act of separation. The metaphor of peeling cuts to the heart of the digital archival paradox: where does the video archive begin and end and where does the interface to it begin and end? They are in a symbiotic relation which is forever re-

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[3] For this phrase, Wallace referenced Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri*, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (The Penguin Press: NY 2004) p.58; John Arquilla, Professor of Defence Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, and a consultant on terrorism for the RAND Corporation: "It takes a network to fight a network", cited by Seymor M. Hersh in 'THE COMING WARS: What the Pentagon can now do in secret', *New Yorker Magazine*. http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050124fa_fact (accessed April 2005)

[4] The archive is accessed via a database program organised into three 'channels' or folders: left, right and centre, corresponding to the three projections in the exhibition site.

forming.

The work is designed to be 'streamed' over the Internet at a time when broadband technology can handle the size and complexity of the files. As such, the work could be played in real time as it is downloaded over the Internet as opposed to storing it as a local file first. But even when we look at the work in situ in the gallery environment, there is a sense of images being 'streamed' to us – 'streaming' in the sense that there is a sense of a steady flow, with no beginning, middle or end; 'streaming' in the sense of a beam of light from another location and another time. **LivingTomorrow** is a streaming montage.

Sergei Eisenstein wrote in his 1923 manifesto *The Montage of Attractions* that meaning would be at its most powerful through the juxtaposition of conflicting images and scenes. The technique of montage is the combination, repetition and overlap of images. At its height in Europe during the period 1919 – 1942 in both photographic and cinematic practice, the notion of synthesising visual fragments has continued to influence artists working with the moving image. The films of Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein encapsulated a search of an art that could dynamically express the industrial age. Today, digital montage is dynamic in space as well as time. Lev Manovich commented in 2001 that in digital media,

> the logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialised, distributed over the surface of the screen. In spatial montage, nothing need be forgotten, nothing is erased. Just as we use computers to accumulate endless texts, messages, notes and data, and just as a person, going through life, accumulates more and more memories, with the past slowing acquiring more weight than the future, spatial montage can accumulate events and images as it progresses through its narrative. In contrast to the cinema's screen, which primarily functions as a record of perception, here the computer screen functions as a record of memory.[5]

[5] L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (A Leonardo Book The MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass, London, UK 2001) p.325.

In 2005 ‘spatial montage’ is possible on the interactive television screen. The introduction of digital television means that the viewer can choose to watch parallel fragments of a sporting event or a news broadcast.

The ways in which the image is both stored and accessed have undergone significant change in the digital era. Today the image is ‘networked’ in a virtual environment. The term network can mean many things. A technical definition involves two or more computers that are connected with one another for the purpose of communicating data electronically. More relevant here is a metaphorical understanding of a network: the simultaneity of different images and sounds and the methods by which these diverse media elements are combined and connected. The “epoch of simultaneity” was a term used by Michel Foucault: “we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed…our experience of the world is less of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein…”.[6] Such is the fine editing and timing in Linda Wallace’s work, that one has the sense that every image is connected to every other image. The images intersect as part of a complex televisual skein.

In the context of ‘streaming’, ‘spatial montage’ and the ‘epoch of simultaneity’[7], it is instructive to recall an earlier work by Wallace entitled **eurovision** (2001). The montage at play in **eurovision** offered the artist a conceptual prototype for video streaming over a high bandwidth connection. In reality, the work compiled a number of fragments into one linear piece of footage, but in theory Linda Wallace proposed, “literally separate image streams [in the most technical meaning of the term], discreet units of footage streaming ‘into place’ over the internet and into one frame (or one screen).” [8] She says that **eurovision** was “compositional

[6] M. Foucault, *DIT et ecrits: Selections*, vol. 1, (New Press: NY 1997) cited by Manovich, ibid. p.325.
[7] Lev Manovich makes the connection between spatial montage and Foucault’s epoch of simultaneity ibid., p.325
[8] Linda Wallace, doctoral dissertation, p.52.
http://www.machinehunger.com.au/phd/index.html

research – how to devise templates and compositional strategies for such multiple streams into the one frame – streams which would in fact be being called from a database and 'slot into' templates or otherwise unique compositions".[9]

In this work the screen is divided up into many smaller rectangular segments playing fragments of appropriated imagery – songs performed by the Russian, Swedish, French and German participants in the Eurovision Song Contest of 2000; fragments of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967); 1950s and 60s Russian space program footage and images from the Louvre. Composed as elegantly as a Russian Constructivist painting, it reminds me of the design of El Lissitzky's *Cabinet of Abstraction* (Sprengel Museum, Hannover) from 1928, a room for art which aimed to give viewers choices of works to view at any one time through a system of sliding and overlapping panels.

In contrast with the developments in Europe towards a united entity with a singular currency and singular constitution, **eurovision** projects a splintered, incongruent vision of European culture. It has been highlighted by Anna Munster that the focus on Bergman's subplot about the witch and the knave in **eurovision** "deal[s] with the way in which social groups produce outsiders" and that this focus is reflected in the formal composition of the work which "investigates narrative outside of a centralised coherence or structure".[10] Moreover, the work was made in Australia, a nation that is often considered to be on a cultural periphery, 'outside' of the European 'centre'. As in **LivingTomorrow**, the use and choice of fragment comes to be about cultural and social displacement.

In the television media, such experiences are broadcast daily: a migrant in a new country; a refugee on the ocean; the arrival of the uninvited visitor to a new environment. How such visitors are welcomed is a key issue of our time. This is

[9] Linda Wallace, ibid.
[10] A. Munster, eurovision, *::testpattern:: video works by linda wallace*, (machinehunger: Brisbane 2004) p.16

the broad social context for the work. In the sphere of contemporary art, it is instructive to recall the number of exhibitions in recent years that deal with the global consequences of migration, difference and displacement. These exhibitions have examined the ways in which aesthetics and ethics are encapsulated in a work of art. Since 9/11 and, more particularly in Australia the Tampa crisis (a boat carrying refugees was refused landing on mainland Australia and a media frenzy and constitutional crisis ensued), there have been many other exhibitions that have revealed a renewed political force in Australian art. Internationally, the exhibitions *Documenta XI* (2002) *Emergencies*, (Lyon France 2005), *Cordially Invited*, (Netherlands 2004), *Instant Europe* (Italy 2005), *The Government* (Vienna 2005), *Terminal Frontiers* (UK, 2004) have all dealt with the politics of the moment in one way or another. Much of the best art in these kinds of exhibitions is not espousing a moral or didactic position. Rather, the work can at times be humorous, uncanny, and even invoke a sense of both fear and hope.

A key image in **LivingTomorrow** is the headscarf. It also appears in a previous work, **entanglements** (2004) which draws on news broadcasts of the war in Iraq and the 'war on terror'. In the exhibition at Montevideo, the screen is partially veiled by translucent white fabric. It is both a curtain and a metaphor for the layers of interpretation that lie between us and the documentary footage on the television screen. Silk pillows and a silk panel are also included in the installation, and viewers are invited to sit on a domestic couch to view the projection. The silks are printed with video stills, amongst them the black-clad female terrorist collapsed on a seat after the military stormed a Moscow theatre in late October 2002. Like an icon, the pillow is located on a high shelf. The application of this image to a domestic item, and its relative stillness in the context of the televisual 'noise' on screen, renders it all the more harrowing.

In his studies about the changes in music across the 'Black' Atlantic, Paul Gilroy has asked, "how do we think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes

which, though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been changed, either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through networks of communication and cultural exchange?"[11] In the context of **entanglements**, we can ask, how is the headscarf transformed by its passage through television news media? How 'entangled' does it become? The headscarf can be a symbol of race, identity, gender and faith. Elizabeth Wilson suggests that dress "links the biological body to the social being, and public to private…dress is the frontier between the self and the not self".[12] But the headscarf does not necessarily link private to public. It also disguises, it can be a mask and it can insist on privacy. In recent years, the image of the headscarf has had to bear the weight of enormous symbolic power - largely because of its circuit in the media. If as a symbol, it is always in transition, then its identity is always altering. As a media image, the headscarf is caught up in what Vilém Flusser terms a 'global image scenario':

> instead of representing the world, [images] obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world 'out there', which meanwhile itself becomes like an image - a context of scenes, of states of things…The technical images currently all around us are in the process of magically restructuring our 'reality' and turning it into a 'global image scenario'.[13]

Flusser's comments remind us that Linda Wallace deals with images, not reality. And yet, the final scenes of **entanglements** bespeak a pain that somehow cuts through. A man screaming in agony as he carries his dead child is almost too difficult to watch. It is followed by the newsreader Mary Kostakidis: the normally composed and reassuring face that appears night after night on Australian SBS

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11 P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness,* (Verso: London, NY 1993), p.80.
12 E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, (Virago: London 1987 (1985)), p.2-3.
13 V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (Reaktion Books: London 2000), p.10

news is frozen still with an expression of both concern and distress. Curiously, her stillness takes on the same iconic status as the female Chechen terrorist. The lounge room setting of **entanglements** highlights a point made by media theorist Stanley Cavell who characterises "the material basis of television as a current of simultaneous event reception. Its materiality is immaterial in that its broadcast moment is more or less simultaneous with its moment of reception, joining its viewers together in an electronic nonspace".[14] **entanglements** suggests that our very participation in the televisual environment speaks of a need for us to take some kind of responsibility.

In many ways, the 'epoch of simultaneity' is conducive to shifting responsibility to the next person – a network, in its worst configuration, allows participants to absolve themselves of decision making. The electronic network is a dematerialised space. It has created new kinds of behaviour. From an idealistic perspective, the electronic network provides the opportunity for developing communities to emerge and evolve. But sceptics ask what kind of communities are they? It has been suggested that in cyberspace "there is on-line communion, but there are no residents".[15] Participants do not have to put down roots.

Given that the digital artist is inevitably caught up in one network or another, be it television, the Internet or networked databases, a critical response needs to be apparent. Otherwise, the work is governed by the implicit rules that reside in this network of global imagery. Linda Wallace's work both invites and welcomes recognition of cross-cultural assemblages of imagery. This complexity is signalled by the use of the break, the interval, the interruption and the fragment. Most importantly, these video works are experiential. Though not interactive, they

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[14] Linda Wallace cites this reference in her doctoral dissertation. Stanley Cavell cited in Norman M. Klein *Audience Culture and the Video Screen* in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (eds) *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, (Aperture in association with Bay Area Video Coalition: New York 1990) p.392

[15] Kevin Robbins, 'Cyberspace and the World We Live In', (1996) David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (eds) *The Cybercultures Reader*, (Routledge: London and New York 2000) p.89.

are environments for a lived experience. The videos provide a space for emotional and intellectual engagement with contemporary culture as it is mediated through the spectrum of the televisual.

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