Power Plays
by Christopher Rohde

Power Plays is an online selection of videos that look at how new technologies, particularly media technologies, are currently diversifying and accelerating, having an increasingly dominant presence in our lives and developing at an ever-increasing pace. The four artists featured in this programme, Rehab Nazzal, Bear Witness, Josée Dubeau and Ryan Stec, investigate the mediated landscape around us through a variety of approaches including animation, live image mixing, re-appropriated videogame imagery, and docu-journalism. These works all call into question the degree to which technology can be empowering for both individuals and communities, while also reflecting critically on its limitations and the structures of power and control in society that continue to dictate how technology is used, by whom, and for what.

A Night at Home (Rehab Nazzal**,** 2009, 4 min.) was shot in the Jenin area of Palestine during a night-time invasion by Israeli occupation forces. Nazzal was there with her children to visit her mother when violence erupted in the middle of the night. Because she had her camera with her, Nazzal was able to capture the scene. The video shows only pinpoints of light against the night sky as bombs explode and gunshots are fired not far away, while we hear the frightened voices of Nazzal, her mother and her son question what is happening amid muffled, chaotic sounds of shooting and sirens. *A Night at Home* functions both as a *cinema verité* document of the ongoing military occupation of the West Bank and a critique of media technology's ability to empower. Nazzal problematizes the popular notion that camcorders and video-enabled mobile devices are 'revolutionizing' how news is reported (by individuals) and what news is reported (that which is politically repressed), allowing for the free distribution of uncensored information and the democratization of the media.

New technology does often provide a personal perspective we are not accustomed to seeing in the news, and a way to document and expose the tragic loss of life and human rights violations happening in Palestine that continue to be under-represented by mainstream media. However, Nazzal shows that although it can be a means of self-determined expression and journalistic documentation, media technology can also be limited in its power of representation. The irony of *A Night at Home* is that the screen is almost completely black, the 'action', so to speak, nearly invisible and indecipherable. We literally cannot see that which is supposedly more available and accessible through technology. The obscured imagery implies that media does not always and automatically capture reality 'perfectly', and also suggests that while a portable video camera might be able to go anywhere, the person holding it may not have the same power of mobility, and might therefore only have a restricted view. Despite the image's limitations, however, Nazzal does capture the emotional experience of being in Jenin that night powerfully. In a way, the lack of clear sight enhances the sense of the fear of the unknown, the tension of sudden violence, and the dread of waiting for it to happen again. It also contrasts with the types of images of the conflict we are more accustomed to seeing in mainstream news, and by offering an abstracted and fragmented view, *A Night at Home* upends our normative mode of viewing and asks us to interpret what we are seeing, and not seeing, in a new way.

The Story of Apanatschi and Her Redheaded Wrestler (Bear Witness, 2008, 6 min.) is a remix video that re-appropriates imagery from the film *Winnetou und das Halbblut Apanatschi* and the video game *Virtual Fighter 5*. Like many of Bear Witness' videos, it shows off the artist's VJing skills, cutting together short successions of action and sound to create rhythmic and musical patterns. *The Story of Apanatschi*, like *A Night at Home*, addresses the politics of representation and the under-represented. Through his choice of source material, Bear Witness demonstrates how images of Aboriginal people have been historically controlled by others, and that before media technology was available to a broader demographic of people, Aboriginal people did not possess the power to create film and video images of themselves. The images of North American Aboriginal people on display in *The Story of Apanatschi* are drawn from a German Western and a Japanese videogame, and in a cringe-inducing bit, the Western features a scene where a white character is "dressed up like an Indian girl." However, this sequence also shows that

appropriation can be a two-way street. The makers of *Winnetou und das Halbblut Apanatschi* may have tastelessly appropriated Aboriginal culture, but thanks to the availability of media tools, now Aboriginal people can critically re-appropriate it back. Increasingly widespread access to editing software has given a new generation the ability to not only create new representations, but also question old ones.

Bear Witness' style of editing and image manipulation goes beyond cutting between images to 'reanimate' the footage, making the people on-screen into marionettes that move and speak the way he sees fit. His control over their actions is always implicit, especially in the *Virtual Fighter* sequence, where scenes of fighting moves are transformed into a choreographed dance routine. By repeating certain images over and over again and cycling them in loops, Bear Witness invites the viewer to re-examine them and think more deeply about representation in popular culture, in terms of images of Aboriginal people and more generally. *The Story of Apanatschi* subverts and undermines stereotypical depictions of both the "Indian princess" and the "Indian warrior," exposing them as constructions. However, to an extent, the artist also seems to identify with the warrior to some degree, relishing in images of this powerful character, to put it bluntly, kicking ass, focusing on his triumphant gestures of victory, and returning several times to the on-screen game title "YOU WIN." It gives the video a sense of optimism, but more importantly it shows us that we are free to identify with whatever images we choose to, regardless of how they are socially inscribed.

The idea of freedom of choice also informs *Jeux* (Josée Dubeau, 2012, 13 min.), although in a more sardonic and less overtly politicized fashion. This experimental video is composed of eight playful vignettes, in which performers Véronique Guitard and Hugo Gaudet-Dion act out a series of constructions and deconstructions of the domestic environment. *Jeux* was filmed and animated using pixilation, and apart from a sequence shot covertly at IKEA, entirely in a studio. In the first sequence, the bare space of the studio is filled up with home furnishings, piece by piece, until a living room set is constructed. The furnishings are all of the cheap, assemble-it-yourself IKEA variety, emphasising the constructed nature of not just the cinematic *mise-en-scène*, but of the middle-class home and lifestyle in a broader sense. Once complete, the home scene looks just as fake and sterile as the IKEA showroom from which the furniture was selected. This satirical, Brechtian gesture is complemented by the hyper-acceleration of time provided by the pixilation technique. In addition to playing up the comic element of Guitard and Gaudet-Dion's performances, the pixilation acts as a metaphor for the accelerated speed of life in the modern age, and for the ease of modern living and convenience, empowered by and mediated through technology.

Far from being an uncomplicated endorsement of modern life, however, *Jeux* aims to show the compartmentalized, empty laziness of modern culture. Once the living room is set up, we see the couple playing games, playing with children's toys, and wrapping presents - the activities of a complicit and privileged culture squandering its free time. Dubeau captures the sense of wasted potential and implicates technology's role in a sequence where Guitard and Gaudet-Dion photograph each other at close range with various cameras, which are similarly treated like toys, used more for the novelty of their zoom lenses than to construct any kind of meaningful self-expression. This scene emphasises the idea that although technology can bring things closer and make them more accessible to us, it does not automatically empower, or challenge structures of power in society. Dubeau questions the agency we have when our tools of expression are coded as consumer products, and when we use technology as part of our leisure time.

dead end job (Ryan Stec, 2004, 6.5 min.) explores a similar idea about leisure and creativity. Much like Bear Witness, Stec brings his experience as a VJ to this video, applying live image mixing techniques to security camera footage. *dead end job* dates back to when Stec worked at the front desk of Arts Court, monitoring the surveillance cameras. As the title implies, this job involved a degree of boredom and frustration. To make the video, Stec used the surveillance system's remote controls to manipulate the directional movement and zoom of the cameras, scanning the interior and exterior landscapes of the building, while simultaneously processing

those images on a digital video mixer. He did this surreptitiously one night, while ostensibly 'on company time.' This action conflates both the space and time of 'work' and 'leisure,' and muddies the distinctions between one's 'performance' as an employee and 'performance' as an artist, between productivity and creativity, work and art-work. It ironically implies that Stec's role as a VJ does not simply constitute 'leisure,' just as his job of monitoring the security cameras has an aspect of performance.

As the video continues, Stec goes on to problematize this dynamic further. Rather than unambiguously celebrating this opportunity to express himself artistically while at work, Stec self-critically questions his own status of power and privilege in his roles as both security guard and artist. At one point in the video, Stec locates a homeless man sitting and drinking on the lawn adjoining the parking lot. He zooms in on the man and applies graphic effects to the image, underlining the fact that the man is not aware of being watched at the time, and that Stec has the power to not only observe (and potentially report) him, but to turn him into an imagistic spectacle. The dynamic of control here between observer and subject becomes clear, implicating not only the employee/artist but also the viewer in this unbalanced power relationship. *dead end job* endeavors to remind us that the way we work, the way we express ourselves, and the way we view cultural objects are all coded with structures of power that we often take for granted.

Overall, while the four artists in *Power Plays* each have vastly different approaches, they all share a common interest in digging deeper into the meanings behind our relationships with technology and images in contemporary society. Whether it is the politics of war, of racial stereotyping, of middle-class consumerism, or surveillance, these artists investigate how we can try to intervene in modern culture, break from established patterns of seeing, and try to make a difference.

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