

## **Bodies in digital context** (Feng-Mei Heberer)

### Intro

What I wish to negotiate in my paper is a notion of the body in two different visual and media approaches. Where does the body end, and where does it start? How can we understand the body in relation to different and specific media (technology)? These are the guiding questions of my analysis.

In her autobiographical documentary *Somewhere Over the Cloud* (2006), Taiwanese filmmaker Hsiao Mei-Ling thematizes how new digital media not only affects but also effects the human body. Raising her daughter in Taiwan, a place historically marked by political struggles over national ownership, Hsiao records the daily communication between the daughter (from age 1 to 4) and the French father living in France via the web(cam). What is mediated in blurred, oftentimes stagnating and thus rather still than moving images through the chat program, i.e. the body of the father as well as that of the daughter, comes to be disturbingly incompatible with the figures that meet in 'real life' and spend 'real time' together during the holidays. And while the film itself resembles more and more an experiment running out of control (and very much questions the role of the maternal body and gaze here), the parents have to face their daughter's estrangement and traumatic breakdown one day in an encounter with 'the real'.

Whereas *Somewhere* can certainly be read as the expression of Taiwan's disturbed and alienated national identity in relation to motherland/Mainland China, I will focus here on the question of how to understand reality and the body not so much in the context of national politics and identity but rather within the context of digital technology and virtual reality. This is not to assume a universal notion of bodies and media detached from cultural specificity or else as universal entities that later (and separately) enter into/are inscribed by a specific (political)

context. My argument here is on the contrary, that the body is from the very beginning (in) a relation of entanglement. However, I will restrict my discussion in this paper to the digital/virtual/technological aspect of this entanglement as addressed by the documentary itself; to its countering as well as confirming of theoretical approaches to the body I use in this paper; and finally to the (in)distinct modes of visual technologies (here specifically the video camera and the webcam) and the specificity of film/video.

American media scholar and queer activist Alex Juhasz' work posted on YouTube is much lighter in attitude compared to Hsiao's documentary. The longing for 'real' bodies (however these might be defined) seems to be replaced here by a playful, mocking attitude. I approach Juhasz' *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* (but will also look at her other works both on- and offline) as a refusal to submit to the idea of a primary and i.e. exclusive body as well as visual technology/medium. Juhasz uses YouTube which she herself compares to a "postmodern television set facilitating the isolated, aimless viewing practices of individuals while expertly delivering eyeballs to advertisers" (2009: 147) to yet inscribe a politically queer body within the commercialized entertainment platform, and to thus create and make visible a "NicheTube": "I call NicheTube [...] where a video immediately falls off the radar, underserved and unobserved by YouTube's system of ranking." (146)

Without wishing to plea for one or another body and/of work, it becomes obvious, that to think about bodies *in* relation to digital media – may it be the digital video camera, the webcam or the Internet – implies no less the bodies *of* digital media. How these different bodies are entangled, identical, incompatible or even exclusive and how they hereby produce their own theory of bodies will be examined throughout my paper.

## Part I

### Original shifts as/of mixed reality

“[T]echnology is never merely used, never merely instrumental. It is always also incorporated and lived by the human beings who create and engage within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are not only cooperative and co-constitutive but are also dynamic and reversible”. (Sobchack 2004: 137)

In Hsiao's own description, *Somewhere Over The Cloud* is a work in which “the boundaries of life, distance, language, identity and nationality are reexamined from the perspective of Elodie”, her daughter. The mother's filming becomes the revelation of the daughter's discovering move towards the world and herself, and all of this condensed in Elodie's dealing with a computer chat program. *Somewhere* transmits to us an original shift – or rather multiple shifts – in perspective: the daughter's perspective on a world brought into the home and reached out to via a computer screen/web cam, and always already mediated (to us) by the maternal gaze of the camera. Understanding reality, so called 'real life', as the physical space one lives, moves and interacts in (thus the term physical reality) versus virtual or digital reality as the world imaged through digital technology, one could come to conclude that two worlds, namely real and physical versus virtual and digital/technological, clash against each other in the documentary, and that this clash or confusion is the very reason for the daughter's breakdown at the end of the film.<sup>1</sup> However in her refusal to be physically close to the father, to be touched, addressed, looked at by him, the notion of a primary or prior physical reality (followed, reproduced, mimicked by a digital reality) is suspended. Elodie's experience has become that of a primary virtual reality of images that can be stopped in turning the computer off and that the father's physical presence and behavior at home does not correspond to (follow, reproduce, mimic) anymore. What I wish to argue then is that both physical as well as virtual reality shape the experience of Elodie's world- and self-making,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms virtual and digital rather generally and as interchangeable here, with the former referring more to the visual image on screen and the latter to the technological apparatuses (webcam, computer etc.). In this context my employing of technology is always understood as digital technology.

that the two cannot be claimed identical and yet appear to be always already entangled. Instead of opposing each other, they find themselves in a relationship of what Sobchack termed a “chiasmatic reversibility”: They “do not simply – or only – oppose or reflect each other.”

Rather, they more radically in-form each other in a fundamentally non-hierarchical and reversible relationship of commensurability and incommensurability that, in certain circumstances, manifests itself as an oscillating, ambivalent, and often ambiguous or 'undecidable' experience. (Sobchack 2000)

My intention here is then less to analyze and psychologize Elodie's relation to her father in the context of physical and virtual reality, but rather to think through her responses to the digital technology as documented in *Somewhere* the limits of (understanding) our bodily selves: In which way does the film context reframe the relation of physical and virtual reality and what consequences does this entail for our understanding and experience of embodiment?

Approaching virtual reality (digital technology) not as an autonomous world experience in itself, but as a prosthetic device that expands our embodied experience of as well as within a world and thus addresses and actualizes “the primacy of the body as ontological access to the world”, Mark Hansen (2006: 5) understands reality to be always already “mixed” instead of separated into two: “*all* reality is mixed reality.” (5) The webcam as well as the laptop in *Somewhere* are a part of Elodie's environment, a piece of the apartment furniture, a toy to play with, a means to communicate with daddy, and a tool for experimenting and coming to know one's visual and bodily perception.<sup>2</sup> Mixed are not only the different functions of the digital apparatuses but their very identification and relation to oneself, the ways they make the body move and perceive and thus “reality”: Elodie trying to grasp the webcam with her hand and to see whether there is anything inside it resembling the images appearing on the computer screen of the

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<sup>2</sup> As Andreas Kitzmann puts it: “[W]eb-cams form part of the material and informational infrastructure and thus bear some comparison to the telephone or even electricity. Web-cams are always there, always on, and thus part of the environment itself.” (2004: 51) In *Somewhere* the possibility and necessity to 'turn off' the technological apparatus (the webcam, the computer, the video camera) seems to play a more significant part though and incites a thinking about responsibility, caring and particularly the child's body and psyche.

father and, in another window, of herself; her closing of the computer to make the father disappear with whom she does not feel like talking today; the running towards the computer screen and trying to feed the father's image with a donut (the father responding with appreciative munching)... And while these images are very much the documentation of a child exploring the world through sensory motor responses, experiencing the limits of the world (image) along with its own (body) limits, they provide a helpful allegory for a notion of "mixed reality". The webcam as a material object (not yet built into the computer) is approached not in separation to the (virtual) images on screen, but in a yet not clarified continuation with them as well as with the computer. The father's body too appears to be connected to the machine(s), indeed to be inside the computer, as an image, transmitted by the webcam. Watching her father while watching her own image on screen – slowly exploring the possibilities of alternating the image according to the movements to or away from, her handling of the webcam – Elodie finds herself not only *vis à vis* but very much "[with]in a techno-bio-integrated circuit." (Hayles 2009) However, this is a circuit characterized by the "labyrinthine continuousness of the fold" (Murray 2008: 11) rather than cyclic repetition; where virtual reality appears as a folding, a supplement, an expansion of physical reality (and in their chiasmatic reversibility: where physical reality appears as a folding of the virtual) rather than its coinciding or opposite part. As a haptic expansion of how I perceive and move through the world, the "digital fold" (24) of my physical reality names my own folding with(in) world:

haptic means 'able to come into contact with.' As a function of the skin, then, the haptic – the sense of touch – constitutes the reciprocal *contact* between us and the environment [...] it is also related to kinesthesia, the ability of our bodies to sense their own movement in space. (Bruno 2002: 6)

The expansion of precisely the skin and the environment Bruno mentions, of my "natural – that is, embodied, perceptuomotor – interface with the world," (Hansen 2006: 3) finds its culmination

here in the transnational family, physically distributed in Taiwan and France; that emerges as necessarily transmedial, digitally distributed in computer, web and video camera images. Murray's use of the term "cross-cultural identification" (2008: 20) as the experience of the self through and as more than one body, medium, and culture could not be more fitting here.<sup>3</sup>

It would be interesting in this context to examine Elodie's encounter with the digital image of the chat program as another (maybe even 'the new?') form of Lacan's mirror stage, i.e. the experience of the self as autonomous and one based on an original splitting/doubling/folding (image).<sup>4</sup> Without the intention and the space to delve into Lacanian psychoanalysis here, Lacan's understanding of the imaginary as an illusory (mis)identification does provide us with the idea of an original mixed reality as well – for the experience of the wholeness of the self (the body) is effected by one's own image. The imaginary translated into the necessity of not only visual, but also haptic and kinesthetic imaging for self-experience and identity (to enter the symbolic in Lacan's terms) reveals the digital to be just a further expansion, folding, of our original mixed reality (i.e. the body in and as its image):<sup>5</sup>

If [...] mixed reality specifies how 'media determine our situation' [and the literal as well as metaphorical mirror can be understood as such a medium], it does so in a way that foregrounds, not [...] the autonomy of the technical, but precisely its opposite: the irreducible bodily or analog basis of experience which, we must add, has always been conditioned by a technical dimension and has always occurred as a cofunctioning of embodiment with technics. (Hansen 2006: 8f.)

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<sup>3</sup> I understand Murray's "cross-cultural identification" in relation to what he calls "the wired network of psychosocial interconnectivity" where "the *in-between* of seemingly opposed technologies, cultures, and philosophies combines with the *possession* of affect and material" (2008: 20). Identification then is not a conscious act of a coherent subject anymore, but the experience of subjectivity as always already in relation to, as a folding: "the fold is the machinery of intersubjectivity and inter-activity [...] 'The fold multiplies (itself) but (is) not (one).'" (6)

<sup>4</sup> Compare Lacan 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Hansen revises the Lacanian mirror stage/image through Merleau-Ponty and emphasizes the crucial role of the sense of touch in an embodied experience of the self. Comp. 2006: 53-59.

## Techno-bio-integrated circuit I: digital body (breakdown)

“It all comes down to interconnected bodies: subatomic bodies, the linked bodies of our computers, our own bodies that act in sympathy with them, and the social body in which we all partake.” (Marks 2002: 177)

The digital apparatus affects and effects Elodie's moving through and interacting within physical space at the same time that the image exceeds its visual and virtual realm in the appearance of physical traces, indices – the sound of French jokes made by the father, the orders (“go and give daddy your donut”) mother and grandmother give off-screen (both in terms of the computer screen as well as the film screen), and not least the halting of the image itself.

Pixelation, visual and aural distortions and deferrals, the chat program's or computer's breakdown – all of these technical malfunctions appear in *Somewhere* and not only document the past and present imperfectness of digital technology but very much disturb and exceed the computer's moving body image as an isolated and invisible mediator of bodies. Digital's own body comes to appear if not to overlay its transmitted (halted, lost) content and reintroduces the reality and materiality of forgotten technology. To paraphrase Laura Marks, digital technology's “virtual body becomes physical as soon as one pays attention to the hardware-software platform on which it was built.” (2002: 159) Once more the virtual appears not to be disconnected from physical reality but rather in a necessary connection, a folding, of different bodies at stake here that condition the virtual image to (mal)function. They exceed the categories of identification of (human and non- or posthuman) bodies,<sup>6</sup> since they do not substitute the image content, never become visible themselves in the virtual image. These bodies are themselves “invisible as the

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<sup>6</sup> “I understand the 'human' and 'posthuman' to be historically specific constructions that emerge from different configurations of embodiment, technology, and culture.” (Hayles 2009) In a similar vein, Barad states: “Refusing the anthropocentrism of humanism and antihumanism, *posthumanism* marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the 'human' and its others are differentially delineated and defined. [...] Posthumanism doesn't presume the separateness of any-'things,' let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets human apart.” (2007: 136) Rather than elaborating on the notions of human, non- and posthuman, I employ the terms here to direct attention to the very categories we use to identify and restrict the very identification of bodies. For a helpful discussion of the posthuman especially in relation to technology compare also Hayles 1999.

ground or fold of the visible itself” (Zourabichvili 1996: 190), yet allow the father's and daughter's body to appear, move and communicate: “mixed reality as the condition for all real experience in the world today [...] opens a domain of 'transcendental sensibility' [...] This transcendental domain, paradoxically, is entirely within the empirical world, though invisible” (Hansen 2006: 8). Understanding the transcendental here as the invisible (i.e. folding) conditions that materialize the visible/virtual as well as sensory motor/physical realm does not mean to anchor the “techno-bio-integrated circuit” within a unified origin that precedes and causes this circuit to function. Rather, the transcendental refers to “interconnected bodies” reaching from electrons over hard- and software, the social institution of a French-Taiwanese family and the individual bodies of its members, to a global economic (labor) system that produces digital technology to allow for virtual reality.<sup>7</sup> Physical and virtual reality thus appear in a chiasmatic reversibility – the virtual is no less physical as the physical virtual(ized) – where the digital assumes a body indifferent to or rather questioning the paradigms of presence, biology, the human that usually come to define and claim a 'legitimate body'. Indeed, technology's failure to mediate the body (information) we wish to receive, disrupting and hereby making visible the “techno-bio-integrated circuit”, reveals “our [bodies'] shared fragility, corporeality, and mortality” (Marks 2002: 177). As Marks continues, “technologies age and die just as people do” (191). In this regard, the digital is very much analog to our own bodies.

### Techno-bio-integrated circuit II: human body (breakdown)

And yet is the chiasmatic reversibility of physical and virtual/digital more than just analog in that the two are inseparable, inseparably “mixed”/folded. As *Somewhere* shows us, one cannot simply

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<sup>7</sup> Compare also Laura Marks (2002: 191): “Here the bodies indexed are the material bodies of subatomic particles; the physical bodies of platforms and servers; the bodies of software that are dematerialized into commodities or rematerialized as social goods; the tired bodies of programmers”. The list could go on and on.

turn off the computer and presume to be 'back in real life'.

After years of online and offline communication, the constant ruptures of two continents and languages, welcomings and farewells, Elodie begins to distance herself from her father. It begins with restraint, indifferent and then refused online chatting, and culminates in hysterical repulsion after his actual arrival in Taiwan. Any attempt to approach the daughter ends with uncontrollable screaming and crying, her body turning and running away.<sup>8</sup> The father, it seems, has become for her a “*body-in-code*” (Hansen 2006: 20), a body image evoked by digital technology's conditioning of embodied virtual experience (what Hansen calls “body schema”, 20). His physical appearance which cannot (dis)appear like an image anymore but remains unchangeably and exclusively present comes to distort Elodie's relationship to the world (the relationship to her mother threatened by a contest, as Hsiao assumes) as well as her own location (manifested by her body perception and reaction) within this world. The virtual has become physical here, not only in the father's being-there, but also in the translation and continuity of Elodie's embodied virtual experience (via webcam) as a prosthetic experience of self and world, into physical reaction. The virtual is real, physical, in Elodie's running away from the father, in her hysterical outburst and breakdown, in the body emerging as access to the world. In this regard, it is less a matter of stating in *Somewhere* a confusion or clash of the virtual and the real – following the assumption that the two are 'naturally' separated. The film rather claims the impossibility to make a clear cut distinction between physical and virtual reality and instead a “mixed reality paradigm [which] *foregrounds the constitutive or ontological role of the body in giving birth to the world.*” (Hansen 2006: 5) This is not to declare the exclusiveness of an original body that at some point enters a mixed reality but a redefinition of the relation between physical

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<sup>8</sup> Whereas Elodie's breakdown and the notions of virtual and physical reality should be discussed in the wider frame of transnational family, long distance relationship and not least of single parenthood (motherhood), I will have to narrow down my discussion here to the relation between digital technology and virtual and physical reality.

and virtual reality: where the physical body is constituted in the physical experience (visual, haptic, sensory motor) enabled and conditioned by virtual reality.

The arrival of the father (and I will borrow less from psychoanalysis here) brings about a disturbance, a 'remixing' that is really an exclusion of the reality Elodie embodies. He turns from body-in-code – a mixed body, experienced as at once the father's image and/as the basis for Elodie's body schema – into the physical presence of an exclusive body that deletes its image and interrupts and unsettles Elodie's body (schema). It entails the destruction of Elodie's physical reality; and the daughter's appearance in excess of herself.

As a body in rage, a body beyond articulation and identification, an uncontainable, uncontrollable body, Elodie has to her a certain uncanniness: as if she hosted the spirit of an other; as if she was possessed by a supernatural force at once exceeding her body yet only able to emerge through it; as if she had lost any sense of direction and relation to world and self, and in a way her own body. Murray approaches possession as the other's supplemental inscription, the self's entanglement and folding with an other that displaces notions of borders and belongings (2008: 16): "to have or to possess is to fold" (Deleuze in Murray 2008: 117). Unable to contain and control itself or the other, "the Subject is confronted by the nonlocalizable exteriority of serialization" (122), where serialization is not repetition but the inscription that subverts oneness in exteriorizing the inside and internalizing the exterior – "inside-out, outside-in." (62)

The hysterical breakdown brings to the fore an otherness, a virtual (experience of embodiment) inscribed into Elodie's body as the body schema that locates her within the world. It is the memory of a body that cannot forget; a virtual that emerges in and as physical reality even in its being neglected by the return of the father and the forgetfulness of the machine. It emerges in and as her body's resistance to the imposition of another reality, in and as her excess. The

virtual can only appear in the physical body at once resisting in and exceeding its own materiality.

What is uncanny in Elodie's encounter with her father then is the return and reversibility (not clash) of one physical reality to another physical reality, of virtual reality as always already inherent within a self-exceeding physical reality – “inside-out, outside-in.”

Against this backdrop, the local shaman session seems to be just right to resolve the crisis and to support the narrative of the virtual in/as physical body. As a traditional folk ritual based on the belief in incarnation, shamanism embraces the excessive body of Elodie. It responds to the body with(out) image and schema not in imposing the reality of physical oneness, but rather in addressing and calling back its spiritual/virtual realm, “the domain of 'transcendental sensibility’”. Without pretending to know the specificities of Taiwanese shamanism,<sup>9</sup> I do see similarities to the idea of the avatar as an embodied appearance that links the spiritual/virtual ritual of folk religion to the digital/virtual world in the film.<sup>10</sup> The shamanic treatment allows for reality to appear as mixed and folded, for an absence (past) to appear as a presence within physical reality: “the crossing/passage/ellipsis gives show to (*faire voir*) the creative slippage” (Murray 2008: 55) of the body; and hereby seems to release the body's excessive resistance to integration and identification. As a recurring motif in *Somewhere*, excess does not simply dissolve then, but rather emerges as a structural element of the film itself.

### The film body (circuit)

*Somewhere* is more than just a documenting work. It enacts its own excess and hereby assumes

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<sup>9</sup> Much deeper involvement with Taiwanese shamanism is necessary here – specifically in relation to Mainland China's shamanism to grasp its political character as well. However, my very basic statements are made after a reading of Miller 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Sue Ellen Case's elaboration of the avatar in its spiritual origin and more contemporary performance in virtual reality. As the incarnation of “an 'absence' rather than a 'presence’” (2006: 166), the avatar “configures practices in the separate traditions of spiritualism, performance, and techno-experience [and] also configures their interface.” (163).

and exposes its own body (circuit): in depicting the digital body's breakdown, by which it is mirrored, yet never fully given; in showing Elodie's uncanny screaming and running and hereby contesting the limits of visibility. To paraphrase Hayles, "it is only against the background or possibility of non-pattern that pattern can emerge" (2009). The film body emerges as the connectedness between the recording video camera and the images we come to see as viewers.<sup>11</sup> It emerges within the foldings of the "techno-bio-integrated circuit" it renders visible and opens up to the viewer no more separate from the chiasmatic reversibility of digital/virtual and physical bodies but involved and operational (i.e. affected and affecting) in perception and haptic response.<sup>12</sup> "[A]s the finite self caught in the movement of the crossing", of differentiating bodies, "the viewer is here [herself] positioned in the undulating fold of the in-between" (Murray 2008: 54); not the center of vision, but a body in the circuit that exceeds every center.

Always in excess of itself, the documentary does not fail in breaking down though, but only emerges in absorbing the bodies that cannot be hold and contained (including our own), the bodies that exceed the image and hereby bring to the fore – bring us into "contact" with – the limits of the film body.

The body is a primordial and active source of resistance; indeed, it is as resistance – as the 'living expression of something simultaneously organization and obstacle to its organization' – that the body forms the source of excess supporting all levels of constitution (or individuation), from the cellular to the cosmic. (Hansen 2006: 15)

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<sup>11</sup> Vivian Sobchack speaks of the film as a body to the extent that it perceives (records), expresses its perception (projects) and thus conditions meaning (on the screen): "the camera its perceptive organ, the projector its expressive organ, the screen its discrete and material center of meaningful experience." (2004: 152) However I extend the body of the film (video) here to the "techno-bio-integrated circuit" as discussed before as well as to the viewer within this very circuit.

<sup>12</sup> Hansen employs the term operational to refer to the shift from the passive observation of an external image to the internalization of an image for creative self-identification: "When observation ceases to be consumption, imaging takes its proper place within the organism's primordial operation as a general condition of phenomenization." 2006: 19) However visual perception is, for Hansen, not the only means for identification. Rather, the body's motility, the body schema, is based on the haptic/tactile, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic body experience with technology. For a wider discussion of an embodied phenomenology of the viewer – which has to fall short here due to the limits of this paper – compare Hansen 2006 and Sobchack 2000.

While only emerging in revealing its own limits, the film body of *Somewhere* still appears to be the one medium, the one body – not in oneness, but very much the one – embracing “all levels of constitution (or individuation), from the cellular to the cosmic”; holding to it the virtual of physical reality as much as the physicality of the virtual.

Rather optimistic in theory (not least inspired by Hansen) yet arguing around the issues of digital and human bodies' failure and excess as the becoming visible of their corporeality as well as dislocation, I do not wish to turn the documentary into a pure (allegorical) play of thought though, but to at least point to the problems it incorporates and documents itself: What does it mean for a new born generation to grow up in an environment structured by digital media? And how can we respond to and take on responsibility for that generation within this environment? A discussion of bodies – virtual, physical, the child's, the mother's – has to consider the broader social level as well as the concrete – should I say physically real? – context: What do we make of the fact that *Somewhere* feels very much like an experiment, not only filmic but also in terms of the daughter's, the husband's, the whole family's reality? How do we identify and judge Hsiao as both mother and filmmaker, and where are our own priorities and normative assumption we become exposed to (for example about the maternal body) in these questions?

Clearly inciting the questions of morality in the context of (single) motherhood and the limits of a film work/-maker in contemporary society, and furthermore – as elaborated so far – allowing for a thinking of bodies other than enclosed, biological thus 'real' entities, the documentary becomes a work of theory itself; maybe even more so in making us face the failure of using theory to contain 'real life'; our constant need to return – as the questions above show – to *the real* body (of Elodie) which in the end seems to escape and exceed the limits of theory as another form/folding of virtual reality.

## Part II

### Framing Juhasz

Looking at Alex Juhasz' on- and offline work, I wish to continue a discussion on (the limits of) bodies and media within a digital environment. Whereas *Somewhere* ultimately – and maybe inevitably as a work of film – privileges the film body as the medium that comes to handle its own excess and the limits of visibility; and whereas it makes us eventually refer and thus get back to the idea of the real, the authentic body, Juhasz seems to be much more interested in decentralizing both the notion of an original body and medium. Always blurring the boundaries between activist, academic and filmmaker (and not least private person), Juhasz produces her work in different media (written texts both on- and offline, films and videos, vlog and blog posts) and intermingles multiple styles and forms of address (e.g. holding/posting a lecture/class on YouTube). The YouTube video *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* features mother Juhasz with her two kids in the living room trying to follow up the dance steps of popular African American rapper Soulja Boy. As we come to see throughout the video, the living room scene is filmed with a camera put right next to a macbook which plays Soulja Boy's YouTube dance instruction. Seemingly motivated at the beginning, Juhasz' son Gabe loses interest in imitating the dance steps as soon as the instruction video starts. Daughter Moni follows her mother along for a moment until she too becomes bored with the difficulty of the dance. Making the kid's two Small Paul/Frank dolls dance instead for a while, the three finally abandon their original project and enter into a conversation about the (potentially) alluring effects of YouTube, where Juhasz addresses her own teaching of a class about the video sharing side. Juhasz' vlog seems to lack any alluring component itself though and to resemble the majority of petty, self-indulgent and boring posts she criticizes in her own writing (2009a). Throughout her various on- and offline

publications about the site, Juhasz repeatedly comes to one conclusion: YouTube bears no political character. Though it does hold the potential to “[open] up closed bodies of knowledge by shattering the layperson/expert dichotomy based on rules and rituals that once regulated access” (2008: 300), the video platform has and creates its own new restrictions of accessibility. Juhasz enumerates corporate ownership, and popular and commercial value that determine the vlogs’ visibility (2009) as much as the lack of categorizing and differentiating the mass of “isolated and solo fragments” (2008: 308): “as YouTube explodes numbers, it minimizes elsewhere: a theory of theories; a politics; a sense of history; and a community.” (310)

If I include Juhasz' own writing here it is less to just reiterate her own perspective. Rather, my intention is to trace the production and distribution of different kinds of (media) visibility she opens up and engages in to “be productively queer” (2009a): to establish a unified body of work that is unified only in its aim to address and establish a queer community (audience), to introduce multiple “[n]ew ways of seeing” (2008: 309) for multiple (queer) possibilities of identifications through the (intermingling) use of different media.<sup>13</sup> In her own words:

Any political movement with a media component needs self-aware writing that creates a social, political, intellectual and aesthetic context and structure for understanding new media work, for connecting it to other work, present and past, and then, most critically, for relating the work on display to contemporary claims and acts bent upon changing the world. (308)

How can we understand *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* against this backdrop?

### Vlogging the original

If her aim is to be productively queer (to allow for the visibility and community of queer people), Juhasz' vlogging seems counterproductive given her own assessment of YouTube. And yet does

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<sup>13</sup> While Juhasz discusses (lacking or potential) activism on YouTube in relation to queer activism and community, I will here put less emphasis on the idea of a queer community. Instead, I will examine more broadly the ways in which political activism as a way to speak for and change the visibility of marginalized groups could be enforced on YouTube via Juhasz' work.

*Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* offer a much more complex dynamic in its reference to popular culture.

Judging from the video itself, the motivation to try out the Soulja Boy Dance stems less from the children's enthusiasm (rather absent) than the mother's instructive direction. And even then, the video is less about (reproducing and mediating) dancing bodies than about a falling into something else, a deviation from the original dance instruction video. The three never even begin with, interrupt in the middle of, or start laughing about their own failed attempt to come up with a posture as 'cool' as the invisible original (we have to imagine). It is in this context that we can speak of playful, unsubmitive, resistant bodies.

In contrast to what Peters and Seier have characterized as the home dance video of YouTube (2009: 188) – dancing to the song of (and often like) a superstar – the Juhasz family in *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* takes its superstar reference less seriously and expresses a certain indifference towards it:<sup>14</sup> Not following the video instructions at all, the children instead start to play with Frank and Paul to the rhythms of the dance song, and later on, and again initiated by their mother, switch into a talk about the vlogging platform itself; Soulja Boy Dance is forgotten. What we see feels more like a mimicking of typical YouTube home dance videos then, with bodies joyfully resisting or breaking with the (serious) mimetic movements so typical of the latter. Suspending the popular dance video as the point of reference, *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* initiates a shifting of origins, where we come to forget the Soulja Boy Dance as an impossible origin, too. Available only in muffled sound, in the visible bodies unwilling to reproduce, in the off-space pointed to in the participants' look slightly turned away from the camera, we come instead to experience an invisible body, what I'd like to term the digital body

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<sup>14</sup> While Peters and Seier stress the remediating and potentially subversive aspect of the home dance video - “they might be understood as equally private *and* public, actually existing *and* utopian, performative *and* transgressive spaces” (2009: 199) – these vlogs are nevertheless characterized by a certain sobriety about imitating an original; and about the original as main point of reference.

here. This is a body we can only grasp in its resistance to appear as one, in the gap of the “absence-as-presence”, what in *Somewhere* I discussed as the failure to function as a bodyless expansion of (i.e. just a medium for) our senses. The digital body is not the invisible dance video, but a body that is invisible in itself only in so far as it materializes through its connectedness. It is a collective body which never appears as a whole at one time, and therefore challenges the notion of visibility (as what makes a whole body).

In the middle of *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* Juhasz approaches and picks up the camera and turns it toward the macbook on which we come to see the (original) Soulja Boy Dance video. The initial point of reference here appears as (just) another YouTube video, as (just) the same kind of video we are watching now (in watching *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance*). Suspending any idea of firstness, mirroring each other in simultaneity, exposing the potential of mutual referral, of each video becoming the other's origin, the two videos emerge as flickering signifiers: “A signifier on one level [of perception] becomes a signified on the next higher level. Precisely because the relation between signifier and signified at each of these levels is arbitrary, it can be changed within a single global command.” (Hayles 2009)<sup>15</sup> The camera comes to document its own future (dis)appearance and its embeddedness within the circuit of filming vlogging, vlogging filming (vlogging filming vlogging filming)... The video we see becomes visible only in its own deferral, i.e. in its connectedness to other (media) bodies (the non-dancing bodies, the YouTube video, the digital camera, the Internet) that are always already inscribed into the video without either originating or following it but rather doing both at once.

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<sup>15</sup> Hayles introduces the notion of the flickering signifier in the context of information technology and virtual reality where she sees a shift from Lacan’s floating signifiers in language to a flickering of signifiers taking place. (Comp. 2009) The difference between the two lies for me in the abandoning of a binary distribution of signifier and signified and instead the introduction of an arbitrariness (randomness) where each signifier can become another’s signified and vice versa. Hayles stresses also the shift from an absence/presence-relation towards a “pattern/randomness dialectic”. 2009.

The shift from chronological order and coherent subjectivity towards “the folds of intersubjective and cross-cultural knowledge” (Murray 2008: 9) means the sharing of world in the simultaneity of “impossibilities” (Deleuze in Murray 2008: 20), the simultaneity and connectedness of realities which cannot be assigned a clearly and uniquely defined relation (as, for example, succeeding, complementary, opposite) but hold to them the potentiality of new appearances.

While Soulja Boy’s dance (as a loose reference) and name (in the title) certainly influences the visibility and circulation (the popularity ranking) of Juhasz’ video,<sup>16</sup> the latter becomes for others (like me) actually a way to engage with or simply learn about the Soulja Boy Dance, too. Although the numbers of hits and views structure the visibility and accessibility of videos, the relation between Soulja Boy’s dance (44 million views) and the Juhasz family’s dance (13 000 views) does not necessarily turn out to be unidirectional. Juhasz appropriates the two genres most popular on YouTube – the home (dance) video and the commercial/professional (dance) video – to insert her own “NicheTube”. Neither identical nor opposed to the videos of the main genres, *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* provides a linkage to them: Listening to the kids describe their favorite YouTube video towards the end of *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* – Gabe mimicks a pants switching vlog whereas Moni is intrigued by the animated *My spoon is too big* – makes me start researching for the videos they do indeed imitate (with body and voice) this time. Their physical imitation, even if in the form of a resisting or failed imitation of the dance, brings me into action. The vlog initiates a movement towards other vlogs and at once makes visible and actualizes a connectedness between different videos throughout the vast database that Juhasz claims to be absent otherwise (2008: 310). This connectedness is not a prescribed network, for each new video brings about a new set of (potential) video threads to be followed and actualized. But it is a first “connecting [...] to other work, present and past” that

<sup>16</sup> Compare WillHeinke’s comment on YouTube, 1 year ago, which expresses a similar estimation: “I’m surprised to see that it has over 3000 [now more than 13 000] views. I guess Soulja Boy = views on Youtube.”

engages us with YouTube, that somehow teaches us to experience surfing YouTube, and most importantly makes us realize (in both senses) a particular (un/connected) visibility. To be precise, there are two visibilities at stake, which are nonetheless linked.

### Faking

“And there is no law that says we can't start fake and end real.” (Juhasz 2006: 1)

The suspension of a singular and fixed point of origin goes along with the becoming visible (actualization) of a network, a connectedness of different bodies, videos and media. *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* engages in a strategy of the fake, which Juhasz has employed and written on in earlier works before. Here, faking means not so much pretending to be (the) real rather than calling attention to the representation and reference of what is claimed to be (the) originally real. It implies representing in “(un)doing” (Juhasz 2006: 11) the very representation/reference and points to its own structure of making sense and belief, of not only transmitting, but producing authenticity. It is, in Murray’s words, “*faire montrer, faire voir, faire lire.*” (2008 : 53) The fake is thus not to be defined in contrast to the real but very much as the making visible of how what is supposed to be primary, real, origin, comes to appear and can be questioned as such. In the context of documentary film, Juhasz elaborates:

fake documentaries are fiction films that make use of (copy, mock, mimic, gimmick) documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and the social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance. (Juhasz 2006: 7)

Against this backdrop, *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* appears to be indeed a work of fake. Mimicking an origin, it makes visible a linkage to rather than a subordinating reproduction of its reference and hereby introduces the potential to reverse and even subvert the order of appearance. And it does so in actualizing the viewer who, in turn, actualizes a virtual network in

searching/tracing/linking YouTube. In a way then, *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* engages in what Jane Gaines has termed political mimesis.

According to Gaines, political activist documentaries engage in political mimesis to make the viewers move and change their own surrounding. The films address the viewers' visceral perception in showing acts of violence and injustice, producing "affect in and through the conventionalized imagery of struggle" (1999: 92) that stirs them to take action and responsibility for and in their own (off-screen) world. However, while I do not wish to compare Juhasz' video to the documentaries Gaines discusses, I do see a similarity in motivating the viewer to act on and change; less on a social level 'out there' but instead on a virtual and much more playful and interactively intertwined level that determines the way we perceive and connect (to) different bodies, too. Linking videos not linked yet and discovering clips hidden so far allows for the momentary emergence of a collective, of an architecture that is neither random nor predictable but could be the first step towards Juhasz' claim for queer visibility and community on YouTube. "Collective knowledge is difficult to produce without a map, a structure, and an ethics." (2008: 306) Our linking maps and hereby makes appear both what is visible and what is invisible in its invisibility.<sup>17</sup> It makes both appear as fake and thus open for questioning and rearranging, distributing and collecting. And it makes both appear as real in the potential to be actualized.

### The digital body

As Wikipedia reveals, Soulja Boy gained fame in publishing his songs and videos online using such platforms as YouTube. The possibility to provide access and visibility, distribute and circulate that comes with YouTube thus goes hand in hand not only with a suspension of the unique original as starting point. YouTube itself emerges as the means to create Soulja Boy('s *original* popularity). The idea of the original as an invisible reference outside (offline, offscreen)

<sup>17</sup> Compare Murray's elaboration on cartography as that which "simultaneously signifies place and shows itself representing space" (2008: 60); in other words, which represents while exhibiting its act of representation.

becomes redundant in that the video platform constantly (re)produces its own origins within a specific regime of visibility. Origins and references do not fade to subsist then. They do not become fake as mere simulations that could infinitely and arbitrarily replace each other. But it becomes a question of directing attention towards the origins produced within and by a database such as YouTube and to look at the dynamics that determine what to see (and what not) and what succeeds (and not); and above all how this links to what Gaines in writing about film and political mimesis has distinguished (from the bodies on screen) as the bodies of the audience. Because, as Juhasz proves to us in *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance*, our bodies are not separable from the virtual database anymore. We are determining in/visibilities the moment we watch a video online. Our bodies then become origins themselves; but reversible, flickering origins that are always already in connection to (incited by) and embedded within a larger circuit of real and virtual bodies and digital media (the latter being no less real) – what I have called the digital body before. Instead of understanding political mimesis then as a way of imitating the bodies on screen, mimesis here comes to imply a folding, a contact, a materialized connection. As Laura Marks states, “Mimesis presumes a continuum between the actuality of the world and the production of signs about that world.” (2002: 115) We fold ourselves (according to our world) while each folding within world entails the folding of world, too.

Juhasz’ video calls upon us to initiate “productive fake” and to be “productively queer”, to keep raising questions of power relations and politics that go hand in hand with in/visibilities, and to consciously insert our own bodies into the seemingly neutral yet structural and strategic database. The digital body in my mind is not the body of YouTube. It is the queer potential – both fake and real – that lies within this site and that is potential only in not being realized (again in both senses). As Laura Marks states in relation to digital video but applicable to my understanding of the digital body here: “it is a strikingly queer body, in the sense that queer

theory uncouples the living body from any essence of gender, sexuality, or other way to be grounded in the ontology of sexual difference.” (2002: 152)

It appears to be less a question then of what makes linking *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* to popular references subversive; and rather a question of making visible the conditions of possibility of appearance, the restrictions and the potentials, that go beyond the visible body. Juhasz’ attempt to make visible this potential across different media and forms (as Marks’ quote shows, theory is necessary to think the queer body here), to unify, i.e. to embody it in distribution, not only allows for broader audience and access; but also turns the queer digital body analog to a queer collective body, to the body of a queer community she envisions. The digital body as a queer body – queer in being potential (rather than ‘one’) and in being potentially subversive (to the ‘one’) – becomes a model, another fake, for political activism and community today: to gather and connect in order to appear beyond norms of visible bodies, to appear collectively, linking, but not as one. Fake then turns out to be that which allows us through “the perpetual thought and networked distribution of impossible worlds” (Murray 2008: 25) to return to the realities of our bodies.

### Conclusion

There have been many different bodies at stake throughout this paper. Often overlapping in their notions, I will here briefly try to summarize the main ideas that underlie them, and thus point to the similarities as well as differences of Hsiao’s and Juhasz’ work. Both incite a thinking of bodies in relation to digital media as well as of (im)possible theoretical engagements with them. They appear very similar in the idea of a body that exceeds its visibility and has to be understood

in a larger circuit of foldings – whether it be (the digital body of) a techno-bio-integrated circuit or a performative network of linking and relating to vlogs. However they also divert from each other in that *Somewhere* comes to umbrella the entanglement of bodies for us whereas *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* makes us disseminate and move towards other videos, bodies, texts. We become distributed, folding, throughout the net and various media here, but we also connect, fold, and make visible and real a body only potential so far. In a way then both approaches (Hsiao’s film body and Juhasz’ potential body) come to include us and appear through our body’s becoming<sup>18</sup> as part of the film body (circuit) or the networking digital body. A return to the real body then is characteristic to all of the works, but with the real body here understood in multiple ways: Elodie’s suffering body, the body of a queer community, my own body as I watch and write.

I do not think that my discussion here has led to a final outcome of what a body is and means, but rather explored an approach to speak of the relations of our bodies to and i.e. in a digital/virtual context. It has touched as well on their restrictions and chances on several levels, the level of theory, pedagogy, personal (lived) experience, and political activism; the latter of which should be continued and deepened with more questions in mind: Does *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance* serve as an adequate model for political activism and deviate from the YouTube videos Juhasz criticizes herself? Can we understand Hsiao’s work as more than just a curious and exploitative experiment with her own daughter?

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<sup>18</sup> I refer here to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of *becoming* (1987) – referred to in relation to the viewer by Murray 2008: 54 – as a form of being that is inclusive, immanent and involving. *Becoming* means constant shifting and resettling of oneself within the movements that actualize specific contacts and relations to other subjects. Moreover, *becoming* denotes the simultaneity of possible and differing functions and identities within a singular body – e.g. a material, a figurative body – that is thence already a collective body itself; it is not least collective in sharing the condition of *becoming* with other bodies.

A possible meeting point for these questions that likewise follow and further a negotiation of the body could be found in a discussion of the representation of mothering and the negotiation of the maternal body that is at stake in both works: How can we reframe an understanding of political activism and video in relation to lesbian motherhood (Juhasz) and biological/adopted/racially different children as playfully and incidentally depicted in *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance*? How do we face the assumption that women – and even more so single moms – are supposed to prioritize motherhood and the caring of children over their own (filmmaker) career, an assumption that easily emerges in watching *Somewhere*?

I would like to end with these questions in mind; questions that might facilitate an understanding of both works, *Somewhere* and *Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance*, as works of political activism that (virtually) speak for the real body.

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