

Watching God in the electronic noise: Philip K. Dick, Bill Viola, and the (video) art of speculative fiction

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Introduction

This study began as an attempt to make sense of a rather curious coincidence. In 1973, in Fullerton, Florida, Philip K. Dick is working on one of his most accomplished novels: *A Scanner Darkly*. In the narrative, a character named Tony Amsterdam experiences a mystical vision after an acid trip. God appears to him in the form of «showers of colored sparks, like when something goes wrong with your TV set» (Dick 2011: 241). This passage transforms the noise patterns caused by an electronic malfunction in a TV set into the visual medium of a mystical experience. However, noise patterns and screen malfunctions are also at the basis of abstract and conceptual video art in the late '60s and early '70s. It is not entirely surprising, then, that one night in the same year 1973, in Syracuse, New York, a young Bill Viola creates a work of video art featuring showers of colored sparks that are eerily similar to the ones seen by Tony Amsterdam. Viola will name it *Information*. It is the result of a never-before-attempted experiment on a video system—or rather, the result of a never-before-attempted mistake—that will soon become part of the canon of video art.

My aim is not to propose a philological relation between the novel and the video. I would rather, on the one hand, investigate the cultural substratum that the two works have in common vis-à-vis their construction and their use of abstract video, since it is upon such a

substratum that this bizarre coincidence depends. On the other hand, I aim to explore how the use of screens and telecommunication technologies in a work of speculative fiction can mediate the religious, the sacred, and the mystical.

The first two sections of this essay examine Tony Amsterdam's experience in the context of *A scanner darkly*, discussing its relation to mysticism, to other episodes in the novel and to Dick's biography. In section three, I interpret *Information* as a self-reflexive work of meta-video, proposing to read its aesthetic effect as the result of an electronic *ouroboros*: a circular video system in which input and output are coincident. Section four bridges the two works by reading them in the light of Jeffrey Sconce's notion of 'electronic elsewhere' (2000) and John Durham Peter's reflections on the idea of communication (1999). Finally, section five proposes a parallel between the semiotics of visual perception in *A scanner darkly* and the semiotics of Viola's abstract video art.

Making sense of video, making sense through video

Dick wrote the first draft of *A Scanner Darkly* from February to April 1973. Two years later, under the supervision of editor Judy-Lynn Rey, the novel underwent a thorough revision (Sutin 2005: 202). In those years, Dick was unanimously acclaimed as a member of the American pantheon of science fiction authors, but longed for recognition as a mainstream novelist. He envisioned *Scanner* as the novel that would have granted him such recognition. However, his ambitions were ultimately frustrated: *Scanner* was published by Doubleday as a science fiction novel in 1977.

Despite being set in the near future of a 1994 Los Angeles, Dick's novel is anything but futuristic in a science fictional sense. Except for the presence of a technologically advanced surveillance apparatus, *Scanner* represents the Californian subculture of which Dick himself was a member. Bob Arctor, the novel's protagonist, is a junkie addicted to a

drug called substance-D (Death)¹. But Bob is also an undercover narc agent: he goes by the name Fred and his mission is to trace back the production of substance-D to its source. In a move that is typical of Dick's fiction, Fred ends up spying on Bob (that is, on himself) by installing holo-scanners (video cameras) in the house where he lives with two friends and is regularly visited by his girlfriend Donna. As substance-D deteriorates Bob-Fred's mind, the two hemispheres of his brain stop communicating and he gradually becomes unable to distinguish between Bob the junkie and Fred the narc agent. Page after page, he is more and more aware of the collapse of his identity.

In desperate need of anchoring himself (or rather, his selves) to a source of objectivity, Bob-Fred interrogates the nature of the scanners' vision:

What does a scanner see? he asked himself. I mean, really see? Into the head? Down into the heart? Does a passive infrared scanner like they used to use or a cube-type holo-scanner like they use these days, the latest thing, see into me—into us—clearly or darkly? I hope it does, he thought, see clearly, because I can't any longer these days see into myself. (Dick 2011: 192)²

¹ Hickman (2009) sees *A Scanner Darkly* as one the most eminent examples of the 'drug dystopia', tracing the history of this subgenre of dystopian fiction from 1932 to 1980.

² Bob-Fred's questions echo a passage from a speech that Dick delivered at the University of British Columbia in February 1972, exactly one year before beginning the work on *Scanner*: «"We see through a glass darkly," Paul in 1 Corinthians—will this be someday be rewritten as, "We see as into a passive infrared scanner darkly?" A scanner that as in Orwell's 1984, is watching us all the time? [...] This, for me, is too pessimistic, too paranoid. I believe 1 Corinthians will be rewritten this way: "The passive infrared scanner sees into *us* darkly" —that is, not well enough really to figure us out. Not that we ourselves can really figure each other out, or even our own selves. Which, perhaps, too, is good; it means we are still in for sudden surprises» Dick 1995: 208, italics in the original text.

A few pages later, Bob-Fred is diagnosed with irreversible brain damage resulting from the abuse of Substance-D. He makes sense of his condition through the words of Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12 («For now we see through a glass darkly» in the 1560 Geneva Bible³), a reference that haunts the narrative since its very title:

[A psychologist:] "It is as if one hemisphere of your brain is perceiving the world as reflected in a mirror. Through a mirror. See? So left becomes right, and all that that implies. [...]"

"Through a mirror," Fred said. A darkened mirror, he thought; a darkened scanner. And St. Paul meant, by a mirror, not a glass mirror—they didn't have those then—but a reflection of himself when he looked at the polished bottom of a metal pan. [...] And they didn't have cameras in those old days, and so that's the only way a person saw himself: backward.

I have seen myself backward. (Dick 2011: 220)

In the end, when he is close to brain death and no more capable of understanding what happens to him, Bob-Fred undergoes one last change of identity: he is now Bruce, a rehab patient hosted by the New Path Clinic. What Bruce doesn't know, is that the destruction of his brain was part of a broader police conspiracy, orchestrated by his girlfriend Donna—an undercover agent herself—and aimed at infiltrating New Path, because it is there that substance-D is being produced.

After Peter Fitting's classical study (1983), that interprets the schism Fred-Bob as embodying the conflict between "freaks" and "straights" in contemporary US society, critical readings of *Scanner* have tended to focus mostly on representations of paranoia and state surveillance⁴. In a recent article, Jennifer Rhee defines the novel as «a

³ The King James Version will add a comma after «glass».

⁴ Representations of police states and disturbing surveillance strategies had already been at the heart of Dick's previous novel, *Flow my tears, the policeman said* (written in 1970 and published four years later). Both themes can also be found in *Counter-Clock World* (1967), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Galactic Pot-Healer* (1969), and *Our Friends from Frolix-8* (1970).

scathing examination of surveillance, conspiracy, and drug addiction and their effects on the post-war subject» (2017: 134)⁵.

From a different perspective, Anthony Enns (2006) provides valuable insights into Dick's uses and representations of technology outside the domain of state surveillance. His analysis of *Scanner* shows how media technologies participate in the novel's construction of the concepts of mind, brain, and consciousness, tracing «Arctor's split subjectivity» back to psychologist Robert E. Ornstein's «notion of dual personalities existing within the same brain, which function as independent communication networks modeled on information technologies» (Enns 2006: 80).

None of these readings, however, has attached great importance to the specific role played in the novel by the representation of video, both as a medium and as a set of technologies. The focus on video as the instrument of a pervasive police state seems to have obscured another semiotic function of the medium: that of mediating the characters' mental states. I would propose, then, to read *Scanner* as an investigation into how electronic media, in general, and video, in particular, actively participate to the construction of experience and reality, while intersecting with and competing against parallel constructions elaborated by mental illness and drug-induced altered states of consciousness.

This is where Tony Amsterdam's vision of God comes in. Donna relates it to Bob during his last moments of lucidity, just before driving him to the New Path recovery center:

⁵ Drawing on earlier readings of *Scanner* by Freedman (1984) and Palmer (2003), Rhee argues that the novel's conceptual core resides in the representation of the loss of agency under the oppression of state surveillance, conspiracy, and drug addiction, and of its subsequent recovery through the practice of counter-surveillance. By ultimately becoming a living camera for the feds, Bruce regains the possibility to act in the world despite his deteriorated mental state.

She thought then of a guy she had known once [Tony Amsterdam], who had seen God. [...] He had seen God in a flashback after an acid trip; he had been experimenting with water-soluble vitamins, huge doses of them. The orthomolecular formula that was supposed to improve neural firing in the brain, speed it up and synchronize it. With that guy, though, instead of merely becoming smarter, he had seen God. It had been a complete surprise to him.

“Did he say what it was like?”

“*Sparks. Showers of colored sparks, like when something goes wrong with your TV set. Sparks going up the wall, sparks in the air. And the whole world was a living creature, wherever he looked. And there were no accidents: everything fitted together and happened on purpose [...]. And then he saw a doorway. [...] Outlined in vivid red and gold light, he said. As if the sparks had collected into lines, like in geometry. And then after that he never saw it again his whole life, and that’s what finally made him so fucked up.*” (Dick 2011: 240-241, italics mine)

Behind the door created by the colored sparks, Tony Amsterdam sees the shores of ancient Greece: «[Donna:]“There was moonlight and water, [...] and a shore, a beach of an island. He was sure it was Greece, ancient Greece. He figured out the doorway was a weak place in time, and he was seeing back into the past» (*ibid.*: 242). In Tony Amsterdam’s mystic state of consciousness, God appears in a visual form whose description is mediated by the malfunction of a TV set. As I will try to show, such malfunctions lie at the foundation of the practice of abstract and conceptual video art.

Between hallucination and mysticism

Before analyzing Tony’s experience and the similarities that link it to the world of video, certain caveats are in order. Two questions, in particular, need to be addressed: in what sense can Amsterdam’s experience be defined as mystical? And why should we pay all this attention to a story pertaining to a character about whom we know

nothing and related by a character whose job ultimately consists in lying to others? In other words: why should we take this account seriously?

We can start answering the first question by observing that the account of Tony's experience made by Donna seems to meet Bernard McGinn's classic definition of mysticism: «a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it» (McGinn 1998: 26). McGinn, however, formulated his definition in a vast yet precise context: the study of Christian mysticism. In order to broaden its scope, it could be integrated with the transversal definition that William A. Richards provides at the beginning of his psycho-medical study of entheogens:

this term [mysticism] denotes a form of consciousness that vividly remains in the memory banks of those who witness it (or claim to die into it and be reborn afterward) [...]. All of the great world religions have words that point toward this highly desired and valued state of spiritual awareness, such as *samadhi* in Hinduism, *nirvana* in Buddhism, *sekhel mufla* in Judaism, *the beatific vision* in Christianity, *baqá wa faná* in Islam, and *wu wei* in Taoism. Although there may well be room for infinite variations in the nature and descriptions of individual reports of these experiences, [...] the research with psychedelic substances surveyed in this book strongly supports the reality of a common core of characteristics [...] which reliably includes descriptions of (1) Unity, (2) Transcendence of Time and Space, (3) Intuitive Knowledge, (4) Sacredness, (5) Deeply-Felt Positive Mood, and (6) Ineffability. (Richards 2015: 23)

It may be worth noting that both McGinn and Richards prefer defining mysticism in terms of consciousness («a special consciousness», «a form of consciousness») rather than in terms of experience, so as to emphasize its fundamentally *mental* nature⁶.

⁶ «It is my conclusion that these incredibly beautiful, awe-inspiring, and, for some, terrifying experiences are best understood not as being “within the drugs,” but rather as being *within our own minds*» Richards 2012: 25, italics

On the other hand, the state of consciousness in which Tony finds himself could be compared with the shamanic spirit flight as interpreted by Mircea Eliade (2015), who «contends that the true shaman's trance is the visionary ecstasy of spirit flight, or the shamanic journey. In this trance state, the shaman's soul journeys into the spirit realm and the shaman sees or has visions of ascending and descending to other worlds» (Pratt 2007: xxxiv). Yet, in her introductory essays to *An Encyclopedia of Shamanism*, Pratt contends that the shamanic journey must present a number of further characteristics in order to be defined as such from an anthropological perspective. The journey, Pratt argues, occurs within the frame of a highly formalized ritual; it presupposes the ability to experience states of trance and ecstasy while remaining in control of the experience itself; and, even more importantly, the spirit flight is always performed in order to serve someone—be it the whole community or an individual client—, by accomplishing a very practical task in the spirit world⁷.

If it's true that, during his journey, Tony actually feels transported to another 'world' (the shores of ancient Greece), his 'spirit flight' lacks all the other traits that would make it a shamanic journey: he watches in awe without having any precise task to accomplish and has no control over his state of consciousness. On the contrary, such lack of mastery appears to be typical of mysticism, in general, and of Christian mysticism, in particular. In its being irrevocably unique, utterly overwhelming and absolutely impossible to replicate, Tony's experience seems to be attainable only through the inscrutable workings of some

mine). On the relation between entheogenic substances and mysticism, see also Smith 2003. For advances in the field from the perspective of neuroscience, see Cole-Tuner 2014.

⁷ «Not every journey is a shamanic journey, [...] because entering into a journey does not fulfill the criteria for a shamanic trance state. Human beings enter trance, have deep lucid dreams, and experience other unexplained spontaneous events. It is their nature. What distinguishes someone as a shaman is whether the individual can do anything with the trance state and, more important, whether or not he or she can do anything for others» Pratt 2007: xxxiv.

sort of divine grace. In sum, we can consider Tony Amsterdam's vision as being mystical according to Richard's transversal definition, while being connoted in a Christian sense. Even so, another question remains: even if the account matches specific definitions of mysticism, why should we take in serious consideration a simile between the apparition of God and a broken TV set?

I would propose two answers: the first one is based on the novel's internal semiotics; the second one refers to significant elements of Dick's biography that find a fictional re-elaboration in *Scanner*. From an intra-narrative perspective, one can remark that Tony Amsterdam's vision is not the only drug-induced encounter with the divine that occurs in *Scanner*. Two chapters before, a dear friend of Bob-Fred's, Charles Freck, experiences an ultramundane vision as the consequence of a failed suicide attempt through overdose:

The capsules were not barbiturates, as represented. They were some kind of kinky psychedelics [...].

The next thing he [Freck] knew, a creature from between dimensions was standing beside his bed looking down at him disapprovingly.

The creature had many eyes, all over it, ultra-modern expensive-looking clothing, and rose up eight feet high. Also, it carried an enormous scroll.

"You're going to read me my sins," Charles Freck said.

The creature nodded and unsealed the scroll.

Freck said, lying helpless on his bed, "and it's going to take a hundred thousand hours."

Fixing its many compound eyes on him, the creature from between dimensions said, "We are no longer in the mundane universe. Lower-plane categories of material existence such as 'space' and 'time' no longer apply to you. You have been elevated to the transcendent realm. Your sins will be read to you ceaselessly, in shifts, throughout eternity. The list will never end."

[...] Charles Freck thought, At least I got a good wine. (Dick 2011: 195-196)

It is easy to recognize the almost solemn gravity of Donna's account when contrasted to the ruthlessly grotesque tone of this vision, a tone achieved through the ironic juxtaposition of opposites. The «creature from between dimension» unmistakably evokes H.P. Lovecraft's⁸ terrifying mythologies; at the same time, it is rendered ridiculously human by his «ultra-modern expensive-looking clothing». Freck finds himself outside space and time, in the supposedly solemn atmosphere of the last judgment, only to realize that he is just hallucinating. The only sensible thing to do, at this point, is drinking wine until the final judgement is over.

However, there is another, more important reason why the reader should consider Tony's vision as something more than a mere hallucinatory trip gone a little too far. As it was said before, *Scanner* was written in 1973 and thoroughly revised in 1975. But in 1975 Philip Dick was not the same person who had written the first draft two years before. Because in February and March 1974, Dick himself had experienced a series of visions and auditions commonly referred to as "2-3-74". He would then spend the rest of his life, from 1974 to his death in 1982, trying to make sense of these experiences⁹. The results of this

⁸ An author to whom Dick plays heartfelt homage in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* by using the adjective "eldritch" (defined as «weird, ghostly, unnatural, frightful, hideous» by the *OED Online*—last accessed November 2018), probably the most distinctive of Lovecraft's style, as the title character's surname.

⁹ «Be forewarned that Phil's experiences during this time simply do not fall into a neat, overarching pattern [...]. They include moments of doubt, panic, and anguish such as to make them seem all too human. But there are also times of startling sublimity, not to mention sheer breathtaking wonder. They neither prove that Phil was crazy, nor do they establish the existence of a Saint Phil. In fact, the 2-3-74 experiences resemble nothing so much as a wayward cosmic plot from a Phil Dick SF novel — which is hardly surprising, given who the experiencer was» Sutin 2005: 209.

eight-year-long hermeneutic effort are four novels¹⁰ and an immense collection of notes and letters: the so-called *Exegesis* (Dick 2002).

From a philological perspective, the *Exegesis* represents an invaluable resource for mapping the two phases of *Scanner's* elaboration. In the case of Tony's vision, we may not be able to trace the simile with the malfunctioning tv set back to one of the two phases; but we know that the mention of Tony's experiments with water-soluble vitamins is the fictionalized re-telling of a home-made experiment that Dick conducted on himself in 1974:

[After the first experiences of 2-3-74] Phil was living in a psychic cauldron. What better way out than to turn up the heat? He'd read of new psychiatric research indicating that massive doses of water-soluble vitamins improved neural firing in schizophrenics. Phil speculated that, for an ordinary person, such vitamin dosages might heighten synchronous firing by the two brain hemispheres, thereby enhancing both left-brain practical efficiency and right-brain imagination. In *Psychology Today* Phil found a "recipe". [...] The end result, as stated in the *Exegesis*: "both hemispheres came on together, for the first time in my life". (Sutin 2005: 212)

Thus, in a biographical perspective, the account of Tony Amsterdam's vision incorporates an account of Dick's own experiences referring to life-changing events of overwhelming magnitude. This further demonstrates that the account should not be disregarded as unreliable or negligible, but rather examined as a key site for the construction of meaning in the novel. I will try to explore it, from a comparative perspective, through the lens of abstract video art.

¹⁰ *Radio Free Albemuth* (written in 1976 and appeared posthumously in 1985), *VALIS* (w. 1978, published in 1981), *The Divine Invasion* (w. 1980, p. 1981), and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (w. 1981, p. 1982).

Information: an electronic ouroboros

While Philip Dick is intent on writing *Scanner*, Bill Viola is a young student at the University of Syracuse, New York, on the other side of the US. He is at the very beginning of his career as a video artist and his aesthetic research seems parallel to that of Nam June Paik¹¹: both create conceptual works of meta-video in an attempt to explore the visual ‘matter’ of their medium—what video is ‘really made of’. This is exemplified by Viola’s *Cycles* (1973), in which «a large window fan is used to interrupt the scanning process of a broadcast tv image». As a result, «the fan alternatively masks and reveals select frames of television, and simultaneously demonstrates the illusory nature of the image as a beam of rapidly scanning light» (Ross - Sellars 1997: 42). This manipulation of the TV image clearly reminds the prepared TV sets presented by Paik in Wuppertal ten years before¹². Viola’s early fascination with self-reflexive video art is also imbricated with his interest in structuralism¹³, performance, and body art. This is evident in *Tape I* (1972), an «attempt to stare down the self» that perfectly encapsulates Viola’s early poetics of video:

A camera, with its live image displayed on a monitor next to it, is seen viewing its own reflection in a mirror when a man enters the room. He sits in front of the mirror, breaking the line of sight and thus becoming both the subject and the object of a self portrait. (*Ibidem*: 40)

Within this context, *Composition “D”* and *Information* (both created in 1973) can be seen as the culmination of the research that Viola devoted

¹¹ For a comprehensive catalogue of Paik’s oeuvre, see Hanhardt 2012.

¹² On Paik’s exhibition and its founding role in the history of video art, see Neuburger 2009.

¹³ «When I [Viola] started making videos I was caught up with the current issues of the day, structuralism being probably the most dominant. This was in the early 1970s. A lot of my work ostensibly started out by trying to prove something, much like a scientist» Nash - Viola 2015: 155.

to abstract video¹⁴ in his student years, in an «attempt to reach the fundamental state of the video signal» (*ibidem*: 41) through the manipulation of video hardware and the tv set. According to Viola himself, this culmination coincided with the beginning of a radically new aesthetic research:

After I went through an early infatuation period with the technology, I obliterated it—literally and metaphorically—in 1973 in a piece I called *Information*. I've chosen to work with images of the real world, camera images, recorded outside on the streets or in the mountains, images that obviously are representations, and those issues are now very current. (Nash - Viola 2015: 156)

His concerns for video-performativity and the conceptual aspects of video¹⁵ will not disappear, as demonstrated by works like *Il Vapore* (1975), *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-79), or *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (1983). However, from the early '80s to today, they will be progressively absorbed into an overarching research that will deploy along two intertwining axes. The first will revolve around the re-elaboration of Renaissance painting—from *The Greeting* (1995), inspired by Pontormo's *Visitation*, to *The Passions* (2003). The second will be centered on the investigation of the relation between life and death and on the exploration of water and fire as intermediate elements between these two poles¹⁶. From *Nantes Triptych* (1992) to *Ocean Without a Shore*

¹⁴ On the notion of abstract video, see the essays collected in Jennings 2015.

¹⁵ On these aspects of Viola's poetics, see Fargier 2014.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive overview of Viola's production, see the catalogue edited by Hanhardt – Perov (2015). Other major exhibition catalogues include, among others, Ross – Sellars 1997 and Neutres 2014. On the dramaturgical aspects of Viola's works, see Valentini 2009. Viola's re-elaboration of Italian art from the early Renaissance to Mannerism was recently explored in the exhibition *Bill Viola. Electronic Renaissance* (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi; see Galasino - Perov 2017). On religion and spirituality in Viola, see the essays collected in Townsend 2004 and Bernier 2014.

(2007), from the monumental *Going Forth by Day* (2002) to *Martyrs* (2014), Viola's reflections on life's two extremes will be catalyzed by his avid interest in both Western and Eastern spirituality and mysticism. His works of video art, not unlike Dick's later writings, will emerge from and interact with a rich, syncretistic corpus of religious knowledge.

However, *Information* is far removed from the spiritual concerns that will animate Viola's later production: like many other video works of that period, it was created by pure accident. To understand the aesthetics that this work unfolds, one must know exactly in what the accident consists of:

Information is the manifestation of an aberrant electronic nonsignal passing through the video switcher in a normal color TV studio, and being retrieved at various points along its path. It is the result of a technical mistake made while working in the studio late one night, when the output of a videotape recorder was accidentally routed through the studio switcher and back into its own input. When the record button was pressed, the machine tried to record itself. The resulting electronic perturbations affected everything else in the studio: color appeared where there was no color signal, there was sound where there was no audio connected, and every button punched on the video switcher created a different effect. (Viola 1995: 30)

Viola's mistake causes the formation of «patterns of noise and interference» (Hanhardt 2015: 26) on the color TV screen. The resulting video image consists in something analogous to Tony Amsterdam's visual description of God: «showers of colored sparks, like when something goes wrong with your TV set». Even if the video's title is anything but semantically close to the mystic or the supernatural imagination, Viola describes the effects of the electronic perturbations as eerily disquieting. In particular, the fact that color and sound appear when they are not supposed to do so recalls certain *topoi* of the medial uncanny (Sconce 2000, Botting 2015): the electronic apparatus seems to be animated by a living force of its own.

In *Information*, Viola's unintentional manipulation of the apparatus formed by the video recorder, the switcher, and the TV set becomes a work of meta-video, a self-reflexive exploration of the 'nature' of video. However, what sets apart *Information* from other works of meta-video is the fact that it achieves self-reflexivity through literalization: the recorder tries to record itself. The input and the output are perfectly coincident, thus generating a "nonsignal" that runs in circles, endlessly recording-replaying itself. A snake that bites its own tail. An electronic *ouroboros*.

Viola's use of the term "nonsignal" is particularly accurate: the electronic signal produced by the recorder is actually devoid of information, or rather, it only carries the command "record". In order for the signal to become information-rich, the recorder should be connected to a video source. But the device is erroneously connected to itself, so the "nonsignal" is transformed into a flux that recycles itself without acquiring any new information. What the viewer sees on screen, is the erratic pattern of noise resulting from the elaboration of this empty "nonsignal" by the cathode-ray tube.

Nevertheless, Viola decides to paradoxically name *Information* a video showing nothing but noise, that is, a video made only of phenomena that *interfere* with the transfer of information. But the paradox is only apparent: no title could be better suited to a work of meta-video. By naming a pattern of noise *Information*, the video is made to signify its very absence of information. The nonsignal does not acquire meaning through the electronic information that it should normally carry: it signifies itself and only itself, and the noise pattern on the TV screen stands as its visual signifier. An empty signal that records itself: the *degré zéro* of video.

In the light of these observations, one can affirm that God appears to Tony Amsterdam in the form of a conceptual work of video art. But what is the actual point where Tony's vision meets Viola's video? In the next section, I will try to demonstrate that they meet in the notion of 'electronic elsewhere'. This cultural construct, in turn, can catalyze the re-conceptualization of a shower of sparks from a broken TV set into a mystical experience.

A common ground: staring into the electronic elsewhere

I would contend that, by materializing a non-signal trapped in an electronic *ouroboros* on a TV screen, Viola succeeds in providing visual consistency to the notion of 'electronic elsewhere', developed by Jeffrey Sconce (2000) in his study of haunted media in order to account for the cultural transition of specters and other entities from the realm of the supernatural to the realm of telecommunications based on electricity¹⁷.

Sconce's compelling study starts from the observation that electricity has always been culturally conceptualized not as a mere source of energy residing in this world, but rather, as a vital force existing in an immaterial dimension, parallel to our own: the electronic elsewhere, whose particular declinations have evolved following the evolution of telecommunications and information technology. As a consequence, from the telegraph to the internet, electronic media have become the perfect cultural tool for enabling contact with ultramundane dimensions inhabited by the spirits of the dead, by aliens from other galaxies, and by every sort of supernatural creature.

What exactly is the status of the worlds created by radio, television, and computers? Are there invisible entities adrift in the ether, entire other electronic realms coursing through the wired networks of the world? Sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunication often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form.

[...] In media folklore past and present, telephones, radios, and computers have been similarly "possessed" by such "ghosts in the machine," the technologies serving as either uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds. (Sconce 2000: 4)

In the light of Sconce's cultural analysis, it could be argued that Tony Amsterdam's experience of a video-God stems from the construct

¹⁷ I have applied the framework outlined in this chapter to a comparative study of video in horror film and video art in Petricola 2018.

of electronic elsewhere. At the same time, the episode represents a significant expansion of Sconce's framework in a new direction, shifting it from the supernatural to the sacred. While Sconce prefers to focus mostly on the electronic elsewhere(s) inhabited by the dead and on the transcodification of human consciousness into an electrical flux, *Scanner* shows that the electronic elsewhere can also become the vehicle of the sacred and the mystical¹⁸.

However, as we have seen both in Tony Amsterdam's vision and in the analysis of *Information*, in order to transform a tv screen into a magic door towards an electronic elsewhere, one must manipulate it, sabotage its everyday pragmatics, interfere with its standard functioning. How can we account for this necessity from a cultural perspective? I would like to answer this question by drawing on John Durham Peters' history of the idea of communication (1999). At the end of a chapter entitled "Kafka and the telephone" (202), he briefly addresses the issue of electrical breakdown and its potential epistemological consequences:

The common world may be habitual and sound, but breakdown allows all the primal uncanniness to return. In a blackout, or the telephone's suddenly going dead, or the static caught between the stations, we discover the gaps, not the bridges. (Peters 1999: 205)

¹⁸ Texts thematizing the divine are not absent from Sconce's reflection. However, the divine is never addressed as an element entertaining a relevant and specific relation to the idea of electronic elsewhere. From Sconce's perspective, God's use of radio communication in films like *The Next Voice You Hear* (1950) and *The Red Planet Mars* (1952) is the expression of cultural anxieties related to radio's power to invade «the domestic sanctity of the entire American public» (Sconce 2000: 108). As concerns television, the analysis of televangelist Robert Tilton, who «frequently invites viewers to touch the TV screen to make 'direct' contact with the healing power of his cathode hand», proves how «broadcasters create and exploit the medium's illusion of simultaneity» and how «this sense of immediacy has made the 'living medium' a prime conduit for the 'living world'» (*ibidem*: 174).

In the light of Peter's observations, Sconce's electronic elsewhere can become accessible to our perception only when its presence ceases to be a-problematic and obvious. It then takes the form of a gap, a void, a tear in the fabric of what we call 'reality', a cognitive discontinuity that problematizes our perception of the world as an organic continuum. Only by interfering with the standard use of telecommunication devices we can transform them into gateways towards other planes of reality. This is why the electronic substance of video becomes visible to Viola only when he accidentally causes a malfunction in a recording studio. This is why Tony Amsterdam compares his vision to a malfunction in the TV set.

Video-God and the video-mind

In the previous section, I have argued that a mystical vision in a novel by Philip K. Dick and an early work of video art by Bill Viola are brought together by their stemming from a set of common cultural premises centered on the notion of 'electronic elsewhere'. I will now try to examine a second possible connection between the two texts, another path that leads from Tony Amsterdam's video-God to Bill Viola's video art.

This path becomes visible when relating the «showers of colored sparks» to the experience of another character in *Scanner*, namely, the inventor of one of the novel's very few science-fictional gadgets: the scramble suit. By transforming the whole body of the person that wears it into an unrecognizable video surface, it represents an object of crucial importance for thematizing the role of this medium in the narrative. What matters most, here, is that the invention of the scramble suit is the result of a psychedelic experience:

The scramble suit was an invention of the Bell Laboratories, conjured up by accident by an employee named S.A. Powers. He had, a few years ago, been experimenting with disinhibiting substances affecting neural tissue, and one night, having administered to himself an IV injection considered safe and mildly

euphoric, had experienced a disastrous drop in the GABA fluid of his brain. Subjectively, he had then witnessed lurid phosphene activity projected on the far wall of his bedroom, a frantically progressing montage of what, at the time, he imagined to be modern-day abstract paintings. [...] [W]hen Kandinsky paintings began to harass him, he recalled that the main art museum at Leningrad specialized in just such nonobjective moderns, and decided that the Soviets were attempting telepathically to contact him. (Dick 2011: 38)

This passage can be put in relation to the analyses in the above sections in a number of ways. First of all, the scramble suit is invented by mistake: Powers seems to participate to the same atmosphere of enthusiastic fervor towards video technologies that animated Bill Viola's research in the early 1970s. Secondly, Powers works for the Bell Laboratories, which played a leading role in the creation of today's notion of information¹⁹. Thirdly, Powers' visions are identical to Amsterdam's to the extent that they are both the result of experimentation with substances supposed to improve neural efficiency. Even more importantly, in describing Powers' visions, the narrative is once again re-elaborating Dick's own experiences:

This time I saw perfectly formed modern abstract paintings, which I later identified from art books as being of the type Kandinsky developed. There were literally hundreds of thousands of them; they replaced each other at dazzling speed (Dick 2002: 96).

Dick has distributed key elements of his recent life, charged with high emotional value, to both Powers and Amsterdam. The two episodes, then, are clearly connected.

The novel describes Powers-Dick's visions as occurring in the form of phosphene activity, that is, of visual perceptions that originate within the eye itself as a consequence of brain stimulation: they do not depend on the perception of a source of light external to the subject. In this sense,

¹⁹ On the history and evolution of information theory, see Gleick 2011.

phosphene activity is fundamentally different from 'normal' visual perception: manipulated by disinhibiting substances, Powers' brain generates electrical impulses; his eyes, like cathode ray tubes, transform them into abstract images. In Powers' phosphenic experience, the brain-eyes system appears to be governed by the same semiotics regulating the recorder-TV set system in Viola's work: a neural *ouroboros* in which the brain-recorder and the eyes-cathode ray tubes exchange information without the catalyzing action of light, resulting is a closed circuit that generates abstract images. But this explanation could also go the other way around: if Power's experience and Viola's video system can be conceptualized as analogous, the logic governing *Information* is nothing but the logic of phosphene vision.

In conclusion, as Donna's account invites us to endlessly speculate over the true meaning of Tony Amsterdam's experience, so Bill Viola invites us to decipher countless potential images and meanings in *Information's* patterns of noise. In both cases, an irreducible margin of mystery remains there to haunt us. It is probably what Philip Dick would have wanted:

We should be content with the mysterious, the meaningless, the contradictory, the hostile, and most of all the unexplainably warm and giving—total so-called inanimate environment, in other words very much like a person, like the behavior of one intricate, subtle, half-veiled, deep, perplexing, and much-to-be-loved human being to another. To be feared a little, too, sometimes. And perpetually misunderstood. (Dick 1995: 208)

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