Final manuscript of article forthcoming in *Screen* 62.4 (Winter, 2021).

Towards a New Model for Approaching Conflict Images: Glimpsing War through Hito Steyerl's Political Cinema

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Hito Steyerl's 2007 artist's film *Lovely Andrea* is organized around Steyerl's unlikely search for a lost erotic image of herself taken in the style of Japanese rope bondage (*nawa shibari*) in 1987, when she was a film student in Japan. Lasting for 30 minutes, the film is shot in a lo-fi documentary style and is replete with images appropriated from across time, space and media. Several of these remixed images are highly charged documents of conflict, and relate most prominently to the so-called 'War on Terror', though the film also refers to other global conflicts and inequalities, from gendered violence to transnational histories of policing and wartime imprisonment. Throughout *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl refrains from fully representing or contextualizing the violence she evokes: conflict images are deployed fleetingly, flashing up just long enough to be glimpsed. The film's decontextualized circulation of these images is evocative of the dislocated ways in which conflict images travel within the globalized media landscape, and their brief appearance is similarly redolent of the truncated looks that characterize this saturated terrain, wherein the viewer's gaze is pulled between information spread across competing media interfaces and browser tabs. It is this bombarded media environment, much maligned in discussions of violence and visuality, that Steyerl strives to negotiate as she broaches contemporary war.

This essay provides a theoretically informed close reading of Steyerl's confrontation with the War on Terror in *Lovely Andrea*. I make the case that the politics of the film's engagement with this conflict are located in its careful selection and assemblage of images into intricate formal patterns. Specifically I discuss how Steyerl draws conflict images and erotic images (along with several additional images pertaining to different contexts) into a network

of motifs forged around the body, rope (or stand-ins for rope) and bondage. These motifs provide insight into contemporary war through the subtle meanings generated by unexpected connections. I start by providing an expanded description of *Lovely Andrea* in which I contextualize Steyerl's lo-fi images and motifs. I then discuss how Steyerl's motifs relate to and depart from canonical debates about violence and visuality in aesthetic theory, suggesting that they move away from paradigms of ethics and empathy, as well as certain representational approaches, and I outline the motivations that propel these departures and the effects they produce. Through a series of close readings I point to the insights and disruptions yielded by Steyerl's images and motifs: how her motifs serve to 'disembed' embedded perspectives through their reframing of the War on Terror; how they subtly unravel the pornography–torture confluence that marked debates about War on Terror black sites; how they highlight and unhinge important tendencies in the operation of contemporary power, with particular reference to vertical and horizontal lines. I close with a final reflection on *Lovely Andrea*'s screening context in the art gallery, considering the possibilities and limitations of Steyerl's glimpsed conflict images and motifs in this viewing environment. Across this essay, I reflect on the politics of *Lovely Andrea*'s aesthetics. I flag examples of ambivalence, complexity and risk, but ultimately contend that the film contains a powerful new model for approaching conflict within contemporary political cinema: a model that employs form to break with ethics, empathy and certain representational traditions in order to better respond to the types of power, politics and mediation animating early 21st-century war.

The search for Steyerl's erotic image that drives *Lovely Andrea* instantiates a journey through the vast porn archives of the media age – through countless analogue magazines and image files stored on computer drives. In her signature blending of acuity and humour, Steyerl subtitles this quest 'A la recherche du cul perdu' ('In search of lost ass'), replacing Proust's

languorous temporal register with the rapid pace and bodily excess of the postmodern image economy. Those involved in the rope bondage industry – editors, rope masters, photographers, producers – are upfront about the millions upon millions of bondage photographs that exist, both in and out of circulation. This context renders Steyerl's pursuit of an image from the late 1980s a highly improbable endeavour, especially as she cannot remember any contextual information about the shoot, such as where the image was taken or the name of the photographer. In all likelihood the image should have vanished, and yet Steyerl eventually unearths it in a Tokyo sex archive. Like the many other bondage images that flash up on the screen throughout *Lovely Andrea*, the retrieved picture is dimly lit, grainy and shot in low-resolution. The image appears under the pseudonym 'Lovely Andrea' – a name Steyerl borrowed from Andrea Wolf, her best friend when she was 17, whose import to the artist's *oeuvre* I shall come back to. The excavation of Steyerl's erotic image is pointedly restaged for the camera in one of several sequences where the filmmaking process is exposed. This exposure forms part of *Lovely Andrea*'s lo-fi documentary aesthetics, in which an amateurish, unpolished effect is privileged above directorial slickness.

Steyerl's documentary framing of the bondage industry is characterized throughout the film by this imperfection. On the level of visuality, for example, the film's documentary images frequently resemble the grainy erotic photographs screened – they too are hazy and often dimly lit –at times creating the impression of *Lovely Andrea*'s convergence with the bondage porn genre. The framing Steyerl employs is sometimes faulty, with speakers appearing awkwardly on the edge of, or being partially cropped from, the frame. Sonic degradation accompanies these imperfect images, from the static heard during the film's opening sequence to the raw DIY sound of the feminist punk song by X-Ray Spex, 'Oh Bondage! Up Yours!', that functions as the primary sonic refrain. Steyerl's loose approach to narrative and information delivery adds another strand of these lo-fi aesthetics. The film, for instance, is bookended by the same

question: a member of Steyerl's film crew asks her what her film is about; on both occasions the artist refrains from answering. When the question is asked at the film's close, it has to be repeated due to problems with the lighting, which has the effect of entwining *Lovely Andrea*'s lack of narrative direction with the film's other formal imperfections. The information provided about the bondage industry similarly feels incomplete and haphazard. Through interviews and passing conversations with photographers, editors, producers and the film's main model-turned-translator, Asagi Ageha, Steyerl provides fragments of information about the bondage industry for her viewers. We hear about the industry's historical entanglement with the mafia, for instance, and about how in the 1980s women were tricked into having their pictures, and not paid. While these questions of gendered exploitation and consent linger in the background, Steyerl never fleshes out this ethical context. Nor does she provide much insight into her own past experience as a model, only affirming briefly, when prompted, that she too felt shame when being tied up.[1] The lo-fi style of Steyerl's documentary works to undercut any pretence of objectivity and distance, operating instead in the murky space of uncertainty and proximity that Steyerl sees as definitive of our contemporary relationship to documentary forms.[2]

Rather than representing the bondage industry in any comprehensive way, Steyerl is more concerned with the motifs that bondage sets into motion: the lines, shapes, patterns and perspectives that emerge in relation to the bound body and the rope. Most immediately, the repetitive knotting and weaving of the rope yields webbing and netted patterns that are recuperated by Steyerl as metonyms for the libidinally charged terrain of the internet and for 'networked' society more broadly.[3] The motifs set into motion by the erotic shots are extended by the appropriated images Steyerl remixes throughout *Lovely Andrea*, images drawn from across historical and cultural contexts but often featuring bodies and rope (or equivalents for the rope), or relating in some way to the overarching theme of bondage. Through these motifs Steyerl adopts a similar organizing principle to that used in the song 'Oh Bondage! Up Yours!',

which also brings different examples of bondage into association. Steyerl's motifs work to assemble meaning from a seemingly disparate, formless and varied flow of circulating images.

Photographs and footage linked to militaristic bondage and incarceration are central to *Lovely Andrea*'s motifs. Near to the start of the film Steyerl includes images that tether erotic bondage to Japanese samurai traditions, the history of policing in China, and the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war during World War II. References to War on Terror detainment mark the endpoint of this early image series (see figures 1 and 2). Images and sounds related to the War on Terror also appear later, for example in a sequence where Steyerl superimposes images onto the computer monitor and television screens of a bondage porn industry office. On a screen that initially exhibits a website containing many thumbnail images of bound women, Steyerl's spectators glimpse an image of the US Homeland Security Advisory system chart that announces the risk of a terrorist attack. When this image dissolves after only two seconds, spectators see one of the most iconic digital photographs leaked from Abu Ghraib flash up: the image of a hooded man standing on a box, with wires attached to his limbs (figure 3). Like the film's erotic photographs, this image is dimly lit and grainy.

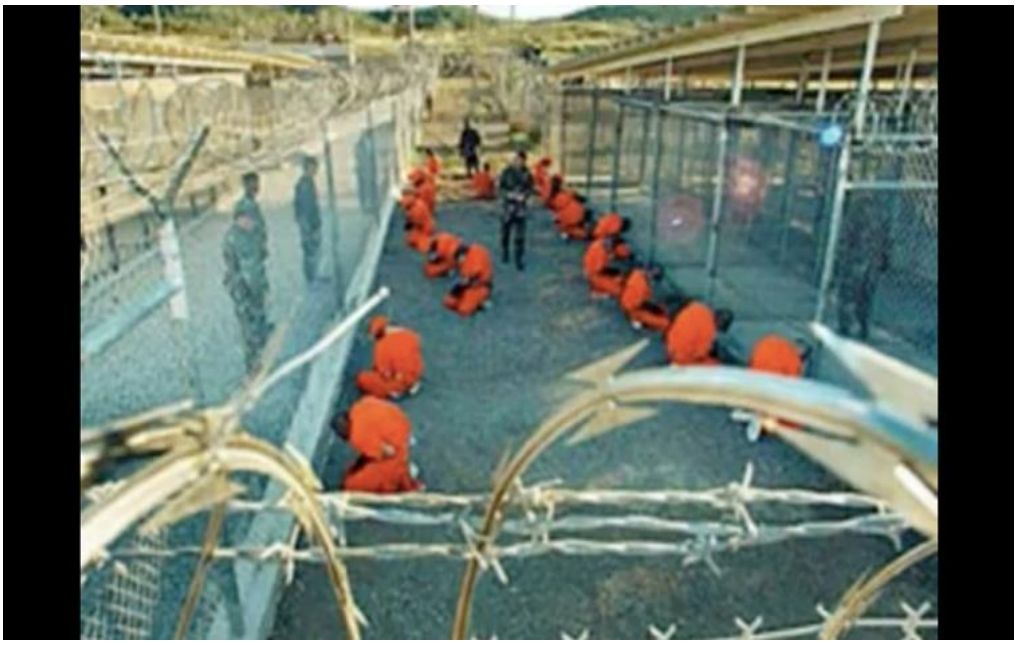

Figure 1: Still from *Lovely Andrea* (dir. Hito Steyerl, 2007) © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Figure 2: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Figure 3: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Comic book imagery also features prominently within Steyerl's web of motifs. The artist integrates televisual fragments from the late 1960s *Spider-Man* cartoon television series – material that in the years following *Lovely Andrea*'s release circulated in online meme culture – as well as *Spider-Woman* footage from the 1979–80 animated television series. This animated footage yields further images of body–rope interaction. Steyerl also appropriates more recent footage from a 'restricted' trailer for the action film *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002). War on Terror iconography makes a return here: the visual fragment Steyerl repurposes from this discarded trailer prominently displays the World Trade Center Twin Towers, and the second time the trailer is screened Steyerl combines it with a brief audio clip communicating the mass panic of the 9/11 attacks.

As these examples make clear, Steyerl repurposes conflict images from different media contexts. While the leaked Abu Ghraib hooded-man image is connected to the visual contexts of digital photography and online image circulation, and directly related to the War on Terror's black sites,[4] the discarded *Spider-Man* trailer is tied to cinema and the internet, where trailers are typically viewed. Indirectly, the images of the Twin Towers in this trailer bring television to mind, given how the World Trade Center was bound to this medium in the days following 9/11, when footage of its destruction was seemingly screened on a loop. Steyerl's selection and combination of media fragments evoke something of the climate of multifaceted mediation that has characterized the War on Terror. As Lisa Parks reminds us, the War on Terror occurred in conjunction with huge changes in the media landscape: 'on September 11, 2001 there was no Facebook, YouTube, Google Earth, Twitter, Samsung Galaxy, or iPhone', yet this situation changed swiftly in the following decade.[5] Parks draws on Roger Stahl's description of the period between 9/11 and the 2003 war in Iraq as the 'militainment bubble', a period in which 'audience attention, rallying effects, culture industry profit, and Pentagon interests aligned to produce a certain kind of consumable war'.[6] For Parks, as it has unfolded,

> the war on terror has been a multiple platform and intermedial war […] tailor-made for the media savvy citizen-consumer who could afford a cable or satellite TV subscription, knew how to surf the Internet, and [how to] use applications on a mobile phone […][7]

Lovely Andrea's appropriated images can also be contextualized in relation to Steyerl's much-cited essay on the 'poor image' of contemporary digital culture. Defined as 'a lumpen proletariat in the class society of appearances', the poor image is characterized by 'substandard' resolution, 'errant' movement, fragmentation, condensation or copying.[8] As discussed, *Lovely Andrea*'s appropriated images are often 'substandard', and the film's documentary images echo and subtend this lo-fi quality, creating further poor images.[9] The types of condensation and fragmentation present in the film additionally resonate with the categories of the poor image the artist enumerates in her essay, from the pornographic 'thumbnails' to the *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Woman* 'clips' and 'previews'.[10] Moreover, *Lovely Andrea*'s use of appropriated images is characterized by the 'remixing', 'dislocat[ing], transfer[ring], and displac[ing]' that define the poor image's circulation online. Steyerl ties the poor image to the genealogy of political cinema laid out by Julio García Espinosa in his canonical 1969 text 'Por un cine imperfecto'. Here, García Espinosa describes 'perfect' cinema as 'reactionary' and posits 'imperfect cinema' (a mode of cinematic production which becomes possible with the availability of affordable technology) as a non-elitist, popular art that is 'no longer interested in quality and technique'.[11] As Steyerl puts it, imperfect cinema is 'resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, and full of artefacts',[12] also an apt characterization of *Lovely Andrea*. By contrast to García Espinosa's revolutionary optimism about imperfection, however, Steyerl understands the politics of the digital poor image to be ambivalent. She notes how poor images, as they flash up on our screens, can be 'perfectly integrated' into contemporary 'information capitalism', which 'thriv[es] on compressed attention spans […]'; yet she equally stresses that poor images have the capacity to provoke 'new debates' and to prompt 'disruptive movements

of thought and affect' as they circulate.[13] While I place greater emphasis on the political possibilities of *Lovely Andrea*'s aesthetics, the film is animated by this complexity. On the one hand, Steyerl's frenetic deployment and linking together of poor images mirror the pernicious contemporary attention economy; on the other, her motifs catalyse important dislocations and offer flashes of insight about the power, politics and mediation undergirding early 21st-century war.

In the terrain of contemporary political art, Steyerl's motifs resonate with aspects of what Nicolas Bourriaud has identified as the 'art of post-production'. Bourriaud writes that since the early 1990s an increasing number of artists have produced artworks engaged in 'the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts', in a manner that significantly expands past political strategies of appropriation and Situationist *détournement.*[14] Like a DJ or programmer, he writes, the art of post-production 'responds to the proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age' through acts of remixing 'available forms'.[15] These artworks 'configure knowledge […] by [producing] original pathways through signs', by '[imagining] the links […] between disparate sites'.[16] Steyerl's remixing of images similarly finds precedent in the appropriative techniques of earlier artworks (for example, her animated superhero and superheroine fragments call to mind a predecessor like Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* [1978–79], a video identified by T. J. Demos as 'a crucial forerunner to the art of postproduction');[17] *Lovely Andrea*'s punk references – the X-Ray Spex soundtrack and the Ramones T-shirt Steyerl dons in the interview sequences – evoke something of the punkish inheritance of *détournement*; and Steyerl's motifs function by drawing unexpected links 'between disparate sites' in the manner Bourriaud describes. Despite these similarities, however, the complicity as well as potentiality that Steyerl's essay locates in circulating poor images means her stance does not entirely fit with Bourriaud's more optimistic vision.[18] A second contextual reference point is David Joselit's theory of the 'epistemology of

the search' in the era of Google, and his claim in *After Art* that 'what now matters most is not the production of new content but its *retrieval* in intelligible patterns […] in economies of image overproduction connectivity is key'.[19] Joselit contends that '*after* art comes the logic of networks where links can cross space, time, genre, and scale in surprising and multiple ways'.[20] I am interested in how aspects of the image selection and connection described by Bourriaud and Joselit function in the specific case of artistic confrontations with war, and how this mode of broaching conflict could impact upon debates about violence and visuality in aesthetic theory.

Before discussing conflict in further depth, I want to note that the poor images brought into Steyerl's motifs have several additional political functions that serve as important accompaniments to her confrontation with war. One such function relates to *Lovely Andrea*'s reflexive negotiation of art's relationship to the production of value. This is apparent, for example, in a sequence where Steyerl appropriates cartoon footage from episode 13, 'The Great Magini', of the 1979 *Spider-Woman* animated television series, which features New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The gallery's newest painting is about to be unveiled to an eager audience, seated at dining tables in their evening finery, gazing towards the covered image. They are told by the tuxedoed cartoon figure introducing the painting that it is a '10 million-dollar masterpiece', before he sweeps away the white sheet covering the image and we see *Lovely Andrea*'s central poor image – Steyerl's reclaimed bondage photograph – superimposed within the cartoon frame (figure 4). Initially, by framing the relationship between mass gazing and high worth, this appropriated footage evokes Jonathan Beller's arguments about the ways in which looking produces value under capitalism:

> our gazes accrete on the image and intensify its power. Take, for example, the case of a work of Vincent Van Gogh. The 50 million-dollar fetish character is an index of visual

> accretion, that is, of alienated sensual labour resultant from the mass mediation of the unique work of art. All that looking sticks to the canvas and increases its value […][21]

Steyerl's deployment of her erotic poor image, however, complicates this picture. On one level her erotic image undercuts the production of value staged in the cartoon sequence, insofar as she substitutes a prized, 'unique' painting for one low-resolution pornographic photograph. On another level this substitution flags the ongoing contextual bind of *Lovely Andrea*'s relationship to 'the labour of looking' that Beller describes, for Steyerl's previously worthless erotic picture accumulates new worth when it becomes the central image of her acclaimed film. This gallery sequence is significant to my discussion of war because Steyerl has repeatedly criticized political artworks that represent suffering elsewhere but fail to interrogate their own relationship to capitalism and capitalistic inequality. Committed to the legacy of institutional critique, the artist writes of how such artworks are celebrated in the gallery – a space she characterizes as 'a flagship store of Cultural Industries' – but may well have been funded 'by the most predatory banks or art traders', and the conditions of their exhibition are likely bound up in 'city marketing' and 'social engineering' strategies and supported by the 'hive' of unpaid labour that sustains the gallery system.[22] In her discussion of the documentary form, Steyerl employs a word associated with War on Terror reporting to describe our contemporary entanglements with capitalism as a form of 'embedding',[23] a term denoting a hemmed-in, predetermined viewpoint (in the context of war reporting, embedded perspectives are prescribed by the military and the state). We might also think of art's entanglements with capitalism in these terms. In light of these critiques, the gallery sequence is an important supplement to Steyerl's confrontation with war in *Lovely Andrea*: she mobilizes her erotic poor image to probe her artwork's own embeddedness in capitalism at the same time as she broaches the violent inequalities inflicted by war.

Figure 4: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin.

I have suggested thus far that Steyerl's strategy of approaching the War on Terror through glimpsed images drawn into motifs is guided by her desire to work through the bombarded media terrain, evoking and reorganizing it. I now turn to the question of how Steyerl's aesthetic approach resonates with and departs from major tendencies in artistic engagements with war and violence, contextualizing her motifs in relation to debates about representation and discussing how they depart from paradigms of ethics and empathy. Representation has long been a contentious term in theoretical discussions about violence and visuality. The most prominent 20th-century framework barring the visual depiction of violence is the unrepresentable/unimaginable ethical impasse that characterized influential texts in the decades following the Shoah, and which is exemplified by Jean-François Lyotard's reformulation of the sublime and his writing on the *différend*.[24] Steyerl, as I shall show, has been highly critical of contemporary representational strategies in documentary cinema, but

her critique is not aligned with this ethical focus on the unrepresentable, a perspective which has by now received much criticism. Giorgio Agamben and Georges Didi-Huberman, for example, have both challenged the unrepresentability paradigm. Agamben begins his book on testimonial writing from Auschwitz with the contention that a commitment to the unrepresentability of violence is akin to 'adoring in silence, as one does with a God' and functions to glorify the Shoah.[25] In his discussion of the four photographs clandestinely snatched by one of the Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz who was forced to assist with carrying out the atrocities there, Didi-Huberman argues that the unrepresentability framework cannot account for the complex and partial flashes of truth delivered by these surviving 'shreds' of film, and that ongoing defences of the unrepresentability and unimaginability of violence are guilty of dismissing attempts to represent undertaken in extraordinary circumstances.[26]

Moving away from the notion of the unrepresentable, Steyerl highlights paradox and complexity in a similar manner to Didi-Huberman. She suggests that poor and even destroyed images can point to *something* real and provoke imagination about violent events in the face of significant lacunae. For example, in the most extreme scenario the artist writes that 'even if its content is destroyed [a] charred 35mm roll shows what happened to itself as it went up in flames, doused with unknown chemicals', and thus speaks to a violent event through its very material form.[27] Unlike the materials discussed by Didi-Huberman and Agamben, however, the War on Terror images that Steyerl remixes across *Lovely Andrea* are not produced by victims of atrocity; the glimpses of 'truth' and 'reality' they provide are linked to the viewpoints of the military, the culture industry and the US government. For example, as Judith Butler avers in *Frames of War*, the leaked Abu Ghraib images perpetuate an embedded vision because 'the camera angle, the frame, the posed subjects, all suggest that those who took the photographs were actively involved in the perspective of the war, elaborating that perspective, crafting, commending, and validating a point of view'.[28] The hooded-man poor image

appropriated by Steyerl contains an explicit reminder of this viewpoint, for on the right-hand side of the frame spectators can glimpse one of the torturers, digital camera dangling from his neck.

Steyerl has often criticized representation for political rather than ethical reasons. In her essays she has questioned the ongoing political value of artistic strategies rooted in representation, for example suggesting that in past decades art has expanded its representational scope to include previously excluded subjectivities and spaces, but that political disenfranchisement and economic disparity have escalated in tandem with this increased visual representation.[29] In contrast to the argument championed in cultural studies during the 1980s and still operative in much political art today, Steyerl contends that there is thus no causal link between artistic and political representation; that the relationship between the two is at best 'uneven'.[30] In relation to atrocity specifically, Steyerl has also expressed concern about the problematic power dynamics underpinning documentary representations, averring that documentary's attempts to 'redeem' testimony from spaces that are difficult to access can be appropriated within a 'liberal-humanitarian' documentary mode that inadvertently fuels violent interventions. In her words, 'the misery-voyeuristic picture forms developed by this "redemption" idea are among the most potent documentalities of the present and legitimise both military and economic invasions'.[31] Alongside these representational crises and complicities, Steyerl has suggested that 21st-century power is becoming increasingly 'post-representational'. By this she means that power has moved towards 'artistic gesture[s] of abstraction' and that politics 'have become aesthetical as such, as they work (through) the senses'.[32] Steyerl elucidates these claims with reference to a particular War on Terror image: the US Homeland Security Advisory System chart, which links the colour red to a 'severe' risk of a terrorist attack. For Steyerl this chart evokes the ways in which a 'politics of fear' works through aesthetic forms. Drawing on the work of Brian Massumi, she characterizes the terror

alert system as an instrument that 'synchronise[s] the affects', arguing that through this alert system the need for explanation and intellectual interpretation is sidestepped: 'just flash a colour at the people […] and modulate their moods […] power addresses itself straight to the senses'.[33] This chart is present in *Lovely Andrea*, as mentioned, and can be glimpsed on one of the bondage industry office monitors (just before the leaked Abu Ghraib image appears), alongside a cartoon clip playing simultaneously on an adjacent screen which features an airline pilot directing two running policemen into his plane, towards something unseen. These glimpsed images replicate the affective 'flash' that distributes fear in the years after 9/11.

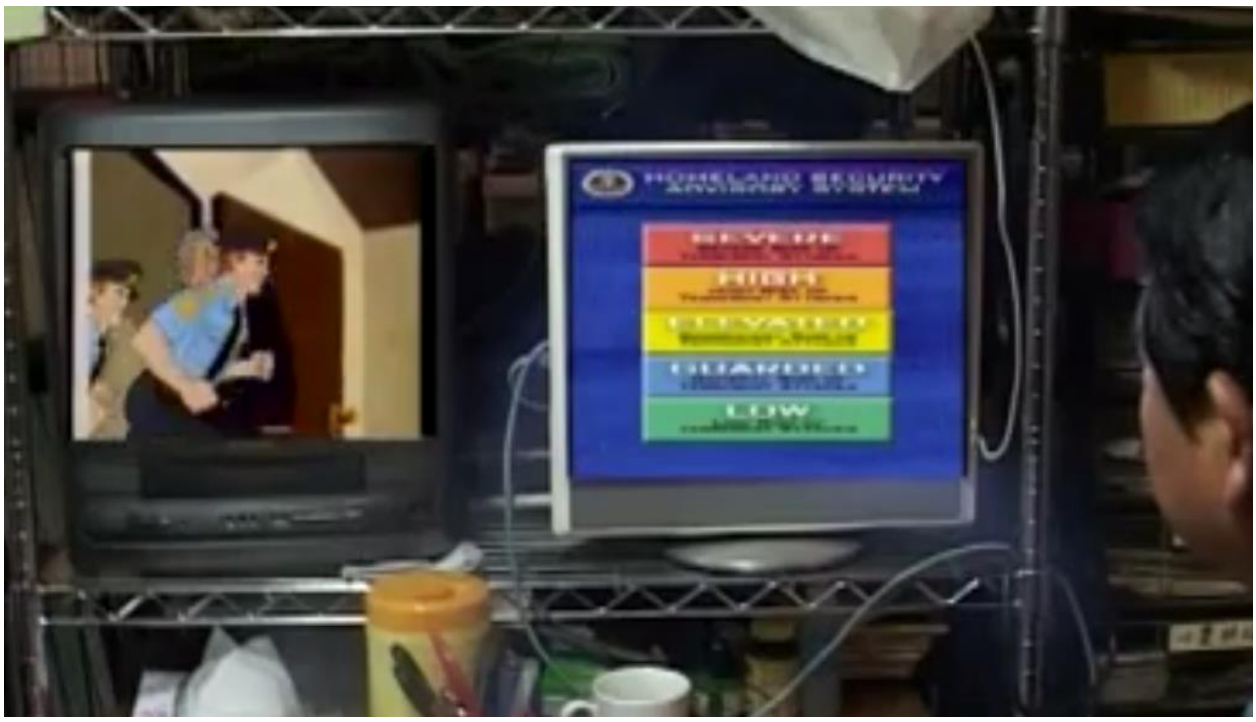

Figure 5: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Steyerl writes that contemporary documentary art 'with its focus on a politics of representation, has not yet paid sufficient attention to this change' in politics.[34] Contemplating how documentary practice might best respond, she repeatedly emphasizes strategies rooted in form and formal experimentation. She posits, for example, that abstract or blurred documentary

choices may be most effective, because such images echo the representational declines of contemporary politics.[35] She turns to abstraction in *Lovely Andrea*'s companion piece, the installation *Red Alert* (2007). Situated as a hypermodern extension of the monochrome tradition in painting, *Red Alert* comprises three large rectangular monitors that glow in a singular colour (red). Drawing inspiration from the artworks of Alexander Rodchenko and Kazimir Malevich,[36] the installation channels the intense affects attached to the colour red in the present. As a number of critics have observed, the red of *Red Alert* sheds its old associations with revolutionary internationalism:[37] today red relates to the terror alert warnings of the US Homeland Security chart and to the red light of the sex industry; for Steyerl, red also relates to the 'pornographic' quality of a globalized media economy reliant on shock and sensation[38] (themes also central to *Lovely Andrea*).[39] Unlike *Red Alert*, *Lovely Andrea* is not a non-representational work, yet the model it contains for approaching conflict also operates through an intricate use of form, as I have argued. Rather than opting to represent war in any sustained or comprehensive way, the politics of *Lovely Andrea* are found in the formal motifs that Steyerl constructs by linking together poor images (images which also evoke a certain blurring). While *Red Alert* works to conjure powerful commonalities, united by the colour red, *Lovely Andrea*'s motifs produce insight and disruption through a subtle interplay of likeness and difference, an interplay that calls attention to heterogeneity and misalignment as well as convergence.

Steyerl's placement of the leaked hooded-man photograph offers an example of the disruption that her motifs enact. As mentioned, this Abu Ghraib image is the last in a series of superimposed images that appear across the internal monitor screens of a bondage industry office. Some of the images this photograph is positioned alongside also invoke the War on Terror, such as the US Homeland Security chart. But beyond this context, the hooded-man photograph is placed in relation to other key images summoned into motifs across *Lovely Andrea* as a whole: footage of Ageha being tied up and performing; thumbnail images of other

bondage models, and one enlarged image of a bound, semi-nude model; footage from the music video of Donna Summer's 1983 disco hit 'She Works Hard for the Money', showing lines of seamstresses moving their heads back and forth (bondage here being linked to gendered labour, the sewing thread a stand-in for the rope); and brief clips from the *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Woman* animations, showing tied-up cartoon figures and Spider-Man swinging across the Manhattan cityscape. While underscoring the embedded viewpoint lodged in the Abu Ghraib photographs, Butler proposes that a strategic reframing of these images of torture can undermine this embedded perspective and provoke renewed thought about framing.[40] By drawing the Abu Ghraib image into a network of transnational motifs forged around the body, the rope and different types of bondage, Steyerl produces such a disruption on the levels of perspective and framing. Or, more accurately, Steyerl *dis*embeds the hooded-man photograph, if we take 'disembedding', following Anthony Giddens, to describe 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space'.[41] At the sequence's close, Steyerl swiftly enlarges the Abu Ghraib image, at which point the torturer formerly visible on the right-side of the photograph is almost entirely cropped out, a subtle disappearance mirroring the change in perspective enacted in the sequence as a whole.

However, while *Lovely Andrea* shares with Butler a commitment to dislodging the problematic embedded frames through which spectators received leaked military images, Steyerl's use of form departs from Butler's overarching ethical aim (that of widening the apprehension of grievable life). The possibilities for both ethical apprehension and empathetic attachment are undermined by the (rapid) speed with which Steyerl screens the Abu Ghraib photograph in this sequence. Put simply, we are not given much time to reflect on the gravity of the image. Ethical and empathetic modes of viewing are further undercut through the specific linkages underpinning Steyerl's motifs: some of the images brought into relation with the Abu

Ghraib photograph interrupt empathetic feeling because they appear entertaining and seemingly trivial. The sense of triviality and distraction is furthered through the soundtrack that plays as spectators glimpse the superimposed images in this sequence – the *Spider-Man* theme song. To understand Steyerl's departure from ethics and empathy, it is useful to consider how ethics in particular have come under scrutiny in debates about the War on Terror. As part of his critique of the ethical turn, Jacques Rancière suggests that the international humanitarian war waged following the 9/11 attacks was justified and sustained by an ethics rooted in the 'absolute right of the victim that has no rights'.[42] Alongside this politico-military dynamic, Rancière discusses artworks and aesthetic reflections that partake in the ethical turn in their recourse to the unrepresentability paradigm and in their devotion 'to the never-ending grieving of the irremediable catastrophe'.[43] In Rancière's view, rather than providing a meaningful political challenge – a challenge that, for him, would be rooted in a specific kind of disagreement, or 'dissensus' – contemporary formulations of ethics express a 'consensus' that 'empties out' politics.[44] Despite voicing some early concerns about the ethical turn herself, Butler's post-9/11 writing has been criticized along these lines for embracing ethics in ways that 'occasion a flight *away* from politics'.[45]

Arguably Steyerl departs from ethics and empathy in her reframing of the hooded-man image in order not to disrupt one problematic frame (the embedded viewpoint), only to arrive at something resembling another (the humanitarian-ethical frame propelling the War on Terror). Her comments about the ways in which documentary representations of suffering can buttress violent interventions provide indirect support for this assessment, given the resonance of her claims with these philosophical critiques of ethics and humanitarianism. Of course, despite the problems associated with contemporary ethics, Steyerl's aesthetic choices are not entirely without risk. *Lovely Andrea* might have reformulated rather than abandoned ethical praxis, a task of particular importance in the present. Through the specific ways they forestall

ethics and empathy, Steyerl's motifs also risk diluting the gravity of the Abu Ghraib image by association. However, as I shall now demonstrate, the images placed in relation to the hooded-man photograph are not always as trivial as they first appear, and the new associations forged through Steyerl's motifs generate complex insights about the types of power, politics and mediation animating the War on Terror.

Pornography and torture have long shared a close and polemical relation in cultural debate, a confluence that once again came to the fore in public discussions surrounding the War on Terror's black sites. The Abu Ghraib image archive in particular was described repeatedly in the press as exhibiting sadomasochistic pornography yoked with voyeurism.[46] Sexual violence has also been central to a number of artistic confrontations with the War on Terror. For instance, Cuban-US artist Coco Fusco's multi-media trilogy 'Bare Life Study #1' (2005), 'Operation Atropos' (2005), and 'A Room of One's Own' (2006) examines the training of female interrogators and the prominent role played by women in enacting sexual torture methods against detainees, while Colombian artist Fernando Botero's paintings of the Abu Ghraib images foreground the sexually humiliated bodies of the incarcerated. *Lovely Andrea* demonstrates an awareness of these discourses in its linking of poor images of erotic bondage and torture. While repeating motifs, forged around the bound body and the rope, align these poor images, however, such alignments do not produce straightforward amalgams and often call attention to critical differences.[47] By unravelling connections between pornography and torture, *Lovely Andrea* subtly challenges prominent readings of the power operating in terror's black sites, readings which tend to collapse the distinctions between torture and pornography.[48]

Through its approach to selecting and framing images, *Lovely Andrea* highlights corporeal exteriority, positing a view of the body as composed of lines, shapes, angles and patterns, forms that are facilitated and extended through bodily contact with ropes. One way in

which these bodily patterns emerge is through postures conveying ‘stress’ and ‘balance’. In Steyerl’s film these terms are deployed visually and verbally to describe the knotted bodies and motions of the erotic models and their suspended bodily shapes. For instance, the repeated ‘hanging shots’ of the bound self-suspension model convey balance, whilst close-up shots that focus on a tightly knotted area of skin convey tension, pain and stress. In relation to the Abu Ghraib archive, W. J. T. Mitchell characterizes the hooded-man photograph as *the* iconic image denoting military interrogators’ use of ‘stress’ positions on detainees. The electrical wires connected to the man’s arms, Mitchell explains, would also normally be attached to additional parts of the body, including the genitals. If the bound figure moves in any direction he will be electrocuted; he is forced to balance in an uncomfortable position.[49] In emphasizing stress and balance, Steyerl therefore creates an unexpected connection on the basis of the bodily lines, shapes and postures found in disparate poor images of bound figures.

An emphasis on body as form has precedent in Steyerl’s work, as illustrated by her film *November* (2004), which focuses on her friend, Andrea Wolf, who became a revolutionary fighter for the Kurdish liberation movement. Wolf was extrajudicially executed as a terrorist in Turkey and resurrected as a martyred image for the Kurdish resistance forces. Peppered throughout *November* is footage taken from the first film Steyerl ever made, a work starring Wolf. The scenes show a battle between women and men which, Steyerl explains through voiceover, involves strict codes about bodily movement and about the use and non-use of weaponry. Inspired by Russ Meyer’s 1965 cult exploitation film *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, a ‘tacky’ film (in Steyerl’s words) that portrays women engaged in fighting sequences whose ‘poses’ are reminiscent of sex positions, the choreographed fighting of Steyerl’s early film replicates popular forms of sexualized fight performance. The film also draws highly coded manoeuvres from other stylized fighting traditions, most notably the martial arts. In this footage, an embodied grammar of lines, shapes and positions is privileged above plot,

narrative, subjective representation and character 'interiority'. Extending this approach towards rope bondage, and contemporary torture and war, *Lovely Andrea* summons a 'grammatical' system of bodily postures, combinations and repetitions, one precedent for which is found in the literary pornography of the Marquis de Sade. Roland Barthes speaks, for example, of a Sadeian 'erotic code' or pornographic 'grammar' comprised of recurring postures and 'cut-up and combined figures', and notes that Sade's texts 'deduct, combine, arrange, endlessly producing rules of assemblage'.[50] In their reading of *Juliette*, Adorno and Horkheimer also highlight the combinations, variations and coordination that characterize Sade's schematic approach to depicting sexuality.[51] While the content of *Lovely Andrea* is distinct, Steyerl's approach to bodily form similarly privileges a logic of grammar and codification.

As I have suggested, while postural motifs – this bodily language of codes and repetitions – provide a sense of continuity between images, these parallels do not produce an indistinct convergence. Chapter 1.a of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema*, and Didi-Huberman's reading of this work, provide a useful point of comparison through which Steyerl's upsetting of easy fusions can be conceptualized. In the part of *Histoire(s)* I want to bring into focus, two images, one violent the other erotic, appear next to each other: an image taken at the end of April 1945 by George Stevens, on the first rolls of 16-mm colour film provided to him by Kodak, of dead bodies on the Buchenwald-Dachau convoy; and a photographic still featuring Elizabeth Taylor with her lover Montgomery Clift from the Hollywood film *A Place in the Sun* (1951).[52] Visually these images are connected, Didi-Huberman emphasizes, through bodily form: the left-tilted head of the victim of the Dachau photograph, positioned as if still crying, finds a parallel in Clift's right-tilted head, which bears a facial expression that suggests he has been 'soothed into permanent happiness'.[53] The uncomfortable bodily similarity, or reverse mirror, that this creates is undermined by the different emotions suggested by the lines

on each face. On the one hand, Didi-Huberman points out that these images speak to oppositional experiences that co-exist within history: the intimate pleasures that take place against a backdrop of atrocity. On the other, underpinning the postural similarity that connects these strikingly different images is a contextual–historical link: the images are shot by the same individual, Stevens.[54] As Didi-Huberman puts it, 'what this montage allows us to think is that the differences brought into play *belong to the same history* of war and cinema'.[55] In *Lovely Andrea* the contextual link undergirding comparable bodily forms is their shared media contexts: the 'restriction' announced by the erotic and torture images is linked, metonymically, to histories of censorship and image restriction.[56] Returning to the example of Godard, Didi-Huberman concludes that the filmmaker's work exemplifies how considered use of montage is rooted in the act of 'tearing' resemblances 'by producing them', in provoking thought about '*differences* while creating relationships between things'.[57] This notion of tearing resemblances aptly describes the effect produced through Steyerl's motifs: the unravelling of fusions through the compilation of bodily lines that echo each other.

Steyerl unhinges the embodied similarities cast on the basis of 'stress' and 'balance' in multiple ways. One important disruption occurs through the introduction of seemingly oppositional words, such as 'freedom/force' and 'independence/dependency'. On one level these terms connect to the experience of self-suspension described by the main erotic model. Ageha points to a liberatory feeling that works in conjunction with her constant attachment (through the rope) to something else. This and other similar proclamations do not discount the violence of the bondage industry, which, as mentioned, is alluded to in interviews.[58] But the key point is that Steyerl allows for nuance and contradiction in the way Ageha relates to the bondage industry, allowing feelings of enjoyment and liberation in instances where consent to be viewed is given to coexist with histories of gendered violence. Such paradoxes are clearly incommensurable with the experiences of the indefinitely detained prisoners of the War on

Terror, the freedom/force dichotomy marking US black sites in a strikingly different way. The imprisoned are humiliated by the 'force' of US military power (and the forced taking of images of torture), a force justified by the desire to protect US 'freedom' whatever the cost. The words used in Steyerl's film thus work in conjunction and tension with poor images of bound bodies, promoting thought about dissimilitude.

Lovely Andrea's motifs are also accompanied by an overarching affect – shame. Shame, spectators are told, is central to rope bondage's particular sexual excitement. Shame and shamelessness were also terms frequently employed in discussions of the Abu Ghraib archive after its leaking. As Butler explains, these photographs attempted 'to blackmail those depicted with the threat that their families would see their humiliation and shame, especially sexual shame'.[59] Susan Sontag writes that the experience of viewing the leaked photographs is a 'shameful' one and that these images index 'the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality'.[60] Steyerl employs both sound and image to undercut the affective amalgam built around shame. She links the mention of shame with a clip of Shirley & Company's upbeat performance of their 1974 international disco hit, 'Shame, Shame, Shame', the lyrics of which articulate a celebration of giving into the joy of dancing in the disco. A third expression of shame is thus brought into the equation through a festive song rooted in a contagious beat. This lightness and humour interrupts the affective immediacy of the erotic images and their sexual shame, and is also at odds with the violent shame of US black sites. Throughout the clip of Shirley & Company's performance, Steyerl has created a censoring pixelated oval shape to swing back and forth across the stage, blotting out the band members. The joke here highlights the misalignment taking place under the banner of shame: censorship is triggered by Shirley & Company's use of the word shame, but here it is not linked to erotic display. The example of 'shame' once more shows the difference, polyphony and clashing meanings that accompany Steyerl's linking together of images of tied-up bodies.

These examples show how Steyerl subtly refuses the pornography-–torture convergence that characterized debates about the power operating in Abu Ghraib, even as she places poor images of erotic bondage and torture into relation. While links are drawn on the basis of repeating bodily lines, shapes and postures, by allowing erotic performance greater ambivalence and repeatedly evoking misalignment, *Lovely Andrea* shows that it would be a mistake to conflate the two types of bondage entirely. Steyerl's construction and tearing of resemblances here has wider implications for *Lovely Andrea*'s network of motifs. Some of the film's interview sequences homogenize different experiences of bondage: one bondage producer (named Steve) proclaims that bondage exists everywhere, and he employs bondage as a romanticized metaphor for a general condition of interconnectedness. Steyerl's motifs disrupt such flattening, allowing differences to emerge within a web of connections.

Further insights into the power that animates contemporary conflict are introduced through the appropriated images of *Spider-Man*, insights that are also troubled and reworked as these superhero images are drawn into *Lovely Andrea*'s broader web of motifs. In the *Spider-Man* footage, vertical and horizontal lines are particularly notable. Vertical lines materialize through shots of the Manhattan skyline. At times, the camera angle extends this verticality, for instance in the *Spider-Man* cartoon series clips when spectators watch Spider-Man swinging down from the Statue of Liberty as the camera, positioned below, tilts upwards towards the sky to capture the cartoon hero's aerial descent. In another clip taken from the cancelled *Spider-Man* action film trailer, the World Trade Center towers are used as major sites for action: a flailing helicopter falls between the Twin Towers and is caught in Spider-Man's net, which bridges the buildings (figure 6). Both the net and the smashed window of the helicopter cast webbing patterns that mirror those created by the rope in *Lovely Andrea*'s erotic footage, further extending the digital metonymy. As the trailer continues, Spider-Man clings to a skyscraper

and perceives the city from the sky: in his reflective lenses, on which the camera zooms, spectators glimpse a refracted image of the Twin Towers and the captured helicopter that hangs between them, suspended against a convex horizon. As mentioned, the second time this refracted view of the towers is seen, Steyerl combines it with a fleeting audio clip of panicked voices in the midst of the 9/11 attacks.

Figure 6: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

The lines Steyerl 'finds' in the selected *Spider-Man* clips – the vertical buildings and perspectives coupled with the refracted, curvilinear horizon – are reminiscent of tendencies in art history that she has discussed in her writing. In her essay 'In free fall: a thought experiment on vertical perspective', Steyerl argues that over the last two centuries there has been a surpassing of the horizontal line as a formal feature of historical art. This horizontal line, Steyerl contends, privileged the linear viewpoint of navigation and posited itself as 'natural, scientific, and objective'.[61] Citing examples from J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship* onwards, Steyerl charges that the horizontal line has been increasingly 'tilted' and 'troubled' in art across recent centuries.[62] With advances in technology in the 20th century, and

since the advent of aviation in particular, this disrupted horizon has also been supplemented by vertical lines and perspectives that assume political import in the contemporary moment. As examples of contemporary verticality she cites the aerial views provided by Google Maps or drones, as well as multiple 'views from above' found in entertainment images, informational footage and militaristic imaging.[63]

As the reference to Google Maps makes clear, vertical power exists within the internet, often imagined in horizontal terms. Commenting on the digital interplay between verticality and horizontality, Parks writes of how

> vertical concepts of hierarchization and stratification continue to govern the ways people imagine and exercise power, even as technophiles celebrate a horizontal and rhizomatic Internet and its supposedly radical and revolutionary potentials to transform top-down political, economic and cultural relations.[64]

It is not just that verticality exists within the internet, Parks continues, but that the internet has been a space through which patterns of vertical power have become more pronounced: 'the Internet seems to have become a rationale for intensifying and extending vertical forms of strategic power. The more horizontal freedom, the more vertical control.'[65] These observations chime with the lineation that characterizes *Lovely Andrea*, for the vertical lines that are prominent in the *Spider-Man* clips emerge within a broader visual landscape in which the web is repeatedly thematized.

While several authors, from Rey Chow to Eyal Weizman, have written about vertical power, Parks's work is particularly relevant to my discussion of the *Spider-Man* clips because of her focus on the War on Terror and its mediation.[66] In a descriptive passage that resonates with the perspectives found in the *Spider-Man* footage, Parks defines the 9/11 attacks as a 'vertical event', calling attention to the ways the attack's orchestration was made possible by the commandeering of 'electromagnetic spectrum, air, and orbit', and noting that cameras on

the ground in New York City 'tilted up to capture the mid-air collisions' as 'television networks transmitted scenes of air filled with thick clouds of smoke and debris live via satellite to news outlets worldwide'.[67] Many commentators likened 9/11 to the attack on Pearl Harbour during World War II, but Parks suggests a comparability to the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957, an event that produced shock with its demonstration of 'Soviet aero-orbital domination'.[68] Parks's central claim is that 9/11 and its mediation undermined US vertical hegemony, and as a response in the following decades the country endeavoured to reassert power through vertical tactics: by 'controlling orbit, air, and airwaves using satellites, aircraft, and broadcasting […] to regulate conditions on the ground'.[69] Steyerl's remixing of pre-9/11 *Spider-Man* footage in a post-9/11 context gains additional cadence when Parks's reflections are taken into account. The reframed *Spider-Man* clip becomes prescient of a vertical power, already under creation during the 20th century, that was shortly to be challenged and reasserted. Following Parks's reading of media culture, the original *Spider-Man* action footage that Steyerl remixes should not be thought of as a 'representation' of verticality but rather as a visual text that is both symptomatic of, and actively participating in, the construction of vertical lines and viewpoints.

It is particularly apt that Steyerl should recuperate Spider-Man as a figure tied to both pre- and *post*-9/11 US vertical hegemony. As a moralistic figure standing in for boundless good, Spider-Man easily lends himself to comparisons with the triumphalist humanitarian logic surrounding the War on Terror. He is poised precisely as a figure of 'infinite justice' to be deployed against 'absolute evil', a 'preventative justice' that 'puts itself above any rule of law' and 'which attacks all that triggers or could trigger terror' (to draw on the terms Rancière employs in his critique of President Bush's rhetoric).[70] Spider-Man's position beyond juridical norms is echoed spatially through his surpassing of the law of physics: part of his superpower lies in his ability to defy gravity; his ability to fly, float and hover, suspended in a vertical

viewpoint, without falling. In her writing, Steyerl associates such 'floating' with the possession of power.[71] In addition to yielding lines, Spider-Man provides colour, inserting further strokes of red into *Lovely Andrea* through his iconic clothing. Spider-Man's costume combines red with blue, replicating colours featuring prominently on the US flag and thus cementing Spider-Man's position as a patriotic figure. This patriotism is further established through Spider-Man's connection to iconic US buildings in the clips that Steyerl selects (buildings tied to 'Liberty' and 'World Trade'). Red, as discussed, now also relates to terror warnings and the politics of fear. Forming part of a visual landscape that includes the US Homeland Security chart, and connected with audio-clips evoking distress during 9/11, Spider-Man's red gains new affective undertones in *Lovely Andrea.*

The vertical lines cast by the Manhattan skyscrapers in the *Spider-Man* clips are mirrored by the Tokyo skyline, framed in some of *Lovely Andrea*'s interview sequences. This doubling forms part of the film's wider spatial dislocation, wherein images associated with the War on Terror – here Manhattan's skyline – are dislodged from their spatiotemporal context and placed in relation to Tokyo's bondage industry. Significantly, only Ageha and Steyerl are framed against the Tokyo skyline.[72] When Steyerl's essayistic writing is taken into account, one could speculate that the artist's own placement in relation to Tokyo's vertical buildings evokes the vertical power the artist attributes to the art world – though nothing in the framing confirms this meaning. In addition to the vertical buildings, another component that stands out is the artist's Ramones T-shirt (also worn in *Abstract* [2012]). This clothing hints at the film's partial inheritance of punkish *détournement*, which here would arguably relate to Steyerl's disruption of the verticality–power relationship that the *Spider-Man* clips articulate, a disruption I return to shortly. Ageha's association with Tokyo's vertical structures provides further evidence of Steyerl's refusal to frame her simplistically as a victim, as someone stripped of power, thus injecting uncertainty into the verticality-power relationship.

Figure 7: Still from *Lovely Andrea* © Courtesy: the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin

Within *Lovely Andrea*'s web of motifs, the *Spider-Man* clips find their closest parallels in the *Spider-Woman* footage. Skyscrapers and webbed patterns created by the rope feature prominently in both, casting further vertical and horizontal lines. However, through Steyerl's editing choices the lines found in the *Spider-Woman* footage are entwined with questions of gender and power rather than War on Terror imagery; in turn, verticality gains different meanings. Before discussing lineation, I should note that Spider-Woman is not a straightforward emblem of female power. She is gifted with supernatural powers and is relatedly imbued, as Demos has evocatively pointed out in relation to Wonder Woman,[73] with a 'power of transformation' (through a rapid spinning motion both women change their identity, in Spider-Woman's case metamorphosing from journalist to superheroine). Her tight-fitting costume, however, means she appears as another circulating image of commodified female sexuality in *Lovely Andrea*, and her sexualized appearance is of a piece with the framing

of female action figures Steyerl critiques in *November*. Steyerl plays on these multiple meanings.

At times, through Steyerl's motifs, Spider-Woman is linked to images of erotic models in a contrasting manner. In the superheroine's transformational spin, she hovers in an upright position as rope wraps tightly around her body, casting blurred and dizzying horizontal lines that create the impression of speed. Some of the erotic bondage photographs Steyerl screens also show spinning female bodies cocooned by rope, but with one important difference: the models hang upside down, which implies they have more in common with the victims ensnared in Spider-Woman's web than with the superheroine herself; the latter's uprightness places her at the opposite pole of a vertical power line. Elsewhere, however, Steyerl's motifs draw affinities between female figures along both horizontal and vertical lines. The second time that Steyerl screens the animated art gallery footage from the *Spider-Woman* cartoon, for instance, she extends Spider-Woman's power of transformation towards the frame. Spider-Woman, proclaiming she has a 'rope trick of her own', directs the bio-electric rays emanating from the palms of her hands towards Steyerl's poor image (which has replaced the gallery's stolen painting) and substitutes Steyerl's picture with footage of Ageha. Like Steyerl, Spider-Woman pulls the directorial strings, as it were, intervening in the gallery show. When read from the perspective of lineation, her bioelectric rays, whilst enacting this image substitution, also cast a horizontal line that creates points of contact between degraded images of women. Spider-Woman, herself an appropriated poor image in Steyerl's film (and, historically speaking, a feminized copy of Spider-Man), 'touches' Steyerl's and Ageha's poor images with her horizontal rays. This re-bonding is accompanied by the 'sonic poverty' of X-Ray Spex's lo-fi anthem. Here, provisional horizontal bonds are woven between circulating poor images of women.[74] Connections between Spider-Woman and Ageha also occur through verticality. Ageha's interview against the Tokyo skyline is interspersed with footage of her performing

self-suspension and with images of Spider-Woman gliding through the sky. As Ageha performs, Steyerl turns her camera upside down, producing the impression that Ageha, like Spider-Woman, is floating in a vertical axis, defying gravity. We watch these vertical impressions alongside Ageha's discussion of being her own rope-master (like Spider-Woman). Yet her verticality also departs from that linked to Spider-Woman and, especially, to Spider-Man, for self-suspension is not rooted in a relationship of domination in which power is asserted over others.

Parks writes that the question of 'how to sustain an oblique or diffractive perspective in relation to [vertical] optics remains a key issue'.[75] While evoking verticality, Steyerl's camerawork in the sequence described above also confuses it. By turning the camera upside down she effectively suspends the difference between above and below. Moreover, if one follows the lines cast by the rope, both in Ageha's performance and elsewhere, tidy lineation becomes further disrupted. The twirling, twisting, swinging motions of the rope repeatedly destabilize the vertical and horizontal lines called into view. Steyerl links the troubling of line to the 'free fall', which for her carries certain possibilities. In free fall, Steyerl notes, 'the horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries […]', whilst 'perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.'[76] Ageha's self-suspension functions as a metaphor for a kind of arrested free fall: a performance in which lines and viewpoints are evoked and also suspended, 'twisted' and frayed.

It is important to reiterate that the conflict images (and other appropriated images) drawn into Steyerl's motifs often flash up only briefly, allowing us what might best be described as a glimpse, a partial and imperfect view. By way of a coda, I want to note that this glimpse is potentially redoubled by *Lovely Andrea*'s art gallery screening context, and this also carries

implications for the political possibilities of the film's aesthetics. Unlike the cinema auditorium, which invites the audience to contemplate a film for its duration, the museum does not require sustained engagement with cinematic work as spectators are free to wander between installations at their leisure. As Steyerl describes it, the gallery is a 'cacophony' in which 'installations blare simultaneously while nobody listens', with the consequence that 'what would be seen as an act of betrayal in cinema – leaving the projection while it lasts – becomes a standard behaviour'.[77] Spectators, she adds, are pulled in multiple directions by vying artworks, and so as they circulate in the gallery they 'effectively [co-curate] the show' by 'actively montaging, zapping, combining fragments':[78] that is, by collecting and combining fragmentary impressions. With important contextual differences, the gallery environment resonates with the attentional multiplicity, 'surfing' and brief views that define the media landscape that *Lovely Andrea* evokes.[79]

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag cautions against engaging with conflict images in gallery environments because of the 'distraction' engendered by these spaces. Sontag ends an extended meditation on photographs with the assertion that the power of war images exists in their ability to haunt us, yet she places several conditions around this statement. Initially she claims that it is better to view images in a book at home than in a gallery, because 'up to a point, the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking'.[80] She ultimately suggests, however, that the photobook has limits: in the final analysis, 'a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel.'[81] Sontag's privileging of books and written narratives above the gallery space constitutes part of her wider reflection on how conflict images have long reached the public through an overwhelming attention economy.[82] Exhibited on a loop in a gallery, *Lovely Andrea* grapples with the distracted viewing context that Sontag critiques. The contingency of the spectator's

glimpse in the gallery setting brings with it clear restrictions, in the sense that important sequences are more likely to be missed. While *Lovely Andrea* does not escape this possible limitation, arguably the film may fare better in the gallery viewing environment because its confrontation with conflict proceeds not through a linear, climactic narrative, which would require enduring attention, nor through the affective haunting described by Sontag, but through glimpsed poor images assembled into motifs. Spectators may still glean provocative flashes of information about war through Steyerl's unexpected linkages, even if they only drop in for part of the film's screening. Indeed, *Lovely Andrea*'s aesthetic choices reveal a belief in the political potential of aesthetic glimpses, and this promise of the glimpse is a particularly apt strategy within the gallery context.[83]

In *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell asks, 'Is there a *Guernica*, a masterpiece of artistic reflection on a historical atrocity, lurking in the artistic responses to Abu Ghraib, the war in Iraq, or the War on Terror?'; a question to which he responds promptly, 'Probably not'.[84] In forging motifs around transnational images of bodies, rope and bondage, *Lovely Andrea* provides a model for approaching conflict images in political cinema that is tailored to the specific political and media contexts surrounding the War on Terror. Steyerl's motifs work within the bombarded multimedia landscape through which images linked to conflict circulate, at once mirroring and reorganizing this terrain. This approach is highly significant when one considers that the media terrain continues to be treated with suspicion in theoretical discussions of violence, mobilized as an example against which ongoing defences of the unrepresentability of violence are mounted.[85] *Lovely Andrea*'s motifs also depart from the main categories that have characterized debates about violence and visuality in aesthetic theory, bypassing paradigms of empathy and ethics and moving away from the unrepresentable and from certain representational documentary strategies in order to better respond to the tendencies and transitions in the power, politics and mediation propelling the War on Terror. I have discussed

three examples of the subtle insights and disruptions produced through Steyerl's motifs: how they work to disembed embedded perspectives; how they subtly complicate the pornography-torture convergence that was central to discussions of US black sites; and how the vertical and horizontal lines they cast evoke and unhinge critical developments in the operation of power. Shaped by a complex, 'masterful reflection' on the specificities of early 21st-century war and its mediation, *Lovely Andrea* invites spectators to glimpse information about conflict in the subtleties of the aesthetics of our militainment age.

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[1] Steyerl's relationship to the bondage industry is ambivalent. As someone who has engaged in bondage modelling, Steyerl's experience is connected to Ageha's, but to some extent Steyerl mirrors the circle of men involved in shooting and producing the bondage images, given that she too is involved in recording and collecting many images of erotic bondage (albeit for a different purpose).

[2] See Hito Steyerl, 'Documentary uncertainty', *Re-visions*, no. 1 (2011), <http://re-visiones.net/anteriores/spip.php%3Farticle37.html> accessed 31 August 2021. Steyerl introduces her thoughts on documentary uncertainty with an anecdote about footage broadcast by a CNN correspondent using a mobile phone camera during the US invasion of Iraq, where 'due to the low resolution, the only thing to be seen were green and brown blotches, slowly moving over the screen'.

[3] The 'networked society', as sociologist Manuel Castells defined it, denotes the new global social order that emerged from the 1970s onwards, 'made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communication technologies'. See Castells, 'Informationalism, networks, and the network society: a theoretical blueprint', in Castells (ed.), *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: Edward Elgar, 2004), pp. 3–45.

[4] The leaking of the Abu Ghraib images was greatly aided by the digital format of the files, given that the digital camera is 'linked very intimately to a global network of collective perception, memory, and imagining via email and postings on the Internet', as W. J. T. Mitchell writes in his analysis of the leaked image archive. See Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 124.

[5] Lisa Parks, *Rethinking Media Coverage: Vertical Mediation and the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 5.

[6] Qtd in ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 32. Steyerl has written many essays about art and politics that provide a rich resource with which to think about her aesthetic choices, but they are often explicit in their arguments and views in a way that her artwork is not. While drawing on her writing, I also flag examples of how her essayistic work and *Lovely Andrea* depart from one another.

[9] In an interview about a 3D model of the hooded-man image currently being sold online, art historian Julian Stallabrass draws a similar connection between the Abu Ghraib photographs and Steyerl's idea of the poor image. He notes that they were 'mostly taken on cheap, portable digital cameras, which back then had only two or three megapixels' resolution', and the images 'taken in the jail in poor lighting were low res and grainy'. Qtd in Alan Warburton, '"Hooded Prisoner" in 3D – a discussion between Julian Stallabrass and Alan Warburton', *Unthinking Photography* (2019), <https://unthinking.photography/articles/hooded-prisoner-in-3d-julian-stallabrass-alan-warburton> accessed 31 August 2021.

[10] Steyerl writes of how the poor image transforms 'films into clips, contemplation into distraction', in *The Wretched of the Screen*, p. 32.

[11]Julio García Espinosa, 'For an imperfect cinema', trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html> accessed 31 August 2021.

[12] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, pp. 39–40.

[13] Ibid., pp. 42, 44. Steyerl adds that poor images can be progressive, reactionary, or simply spam: the networks through which 'poor images circulate […] contain experimental and artistic material, but also incredible amounts of porn and paranoia' (p. 40).

[14] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York, NY: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), p. 13.

[15] Ibid., pp.13, 16.

[16] Ibid., pp.13, 18.

[17] T. J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* (London: Afterall Books, 2010), p. 84.

[18] For a detailed discussion of the legacy of appropriative and post-productive strategies in the context of immaterial labour, see Demos, *Dara Birnbaum*, which addresses Tom McDonough's criticisms of Bourriaud's theory on the basis that its utopianism does not fit in the context of contemporary capitalism, and then contests this assessment by pointing to *possibilities* as well as complexities for appropriative art (pp. 95–99). Demos also briefly locates Steyerl's deployment of 're-montage' in *November,* and her interest in affect, as successors to the appropriative approach seen in Birnbaum's influential video.

[19] David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 55–56. In his discussion of reframing, Joselit posits appropriation as one example; in his description of

capturing, he points to an ‘archival, documentary, or bluntly accumulative’ ‘impulse’ (pp. 34–37).

[20] Ibid., p. 89. Joselit identifies a movement in art and architecture towards a ‘network aesthetics premised on the emergence of form from populations of images’ (p. 43), a sentence that chimes with the function of Steyerl’s formal motifs in *Lovely Andrea*. He perceives ‘image power’ (understood as ‘the capacity to format complex and multivalent links through visual means’) to stem ‘from networks rather than discrete objects’ (p. 94).

[21] Jonathan Beller, ‘The cinematic mode of production: towards a political economy of the postmodern’, *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 44, no.1 (2003), p. 101.

[22] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, pp. 62, 94–100. Cinema does not fare much better: ‘Cinema today is above all a stimulus package to buying new televisions, home projection systems, and retina display iPads. It long ago became a platform to sell franchising products – screening feature-length versions of future PlayStation games in sanitised multiplexes.’ Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 145.

[23] Steyerl, ‘Documentary uncertainty’.

[24] As Stuart Sim puts it, for Lyotard ‘the sublime lies beyond our power to understand, as Auschwitz must also be considered to do […] Auschwitz must be seen to resist explanation’. Sim (ed.), *The Lyotard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 26.

[25] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1999), pp. 32–33.

[26]See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Jacques Rancière, in his challenge to the ethical turn, offers another powerful critique, asserting that the place of the ‘non-representable’ in art is a corollary to the role of ‘terror’ in politics, for both are categories that create an ‘indistinction between right and fact’. Rancière, ‘The ethical turn of aesthetics and

politics', *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, vol. 7, no.1 (2006), p. 12.

[27] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, p.1 56.

[28] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 65.

[29] Steyerl adds that in the internet age technologies for self-representation have also exploded (through selfies, Instagram, YouTube channels, and so on), yet this change has not catalysed greater political representation either. Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, p. 38.

[30] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, p. 170.

[31] Her use of 'redemption' here differs from Didi-Huberman's conceptualization of the term in *Images in Spite of All.* Hito Steyerl, 'Documentarism as politics of truth', trans. Aileen Derieg, *Transversal Texts* (2003), <https://transversal.at/transversal/1003/steyerl/en> accessed 31 August 2021.

[32] Steyerl, 'Documentary uncertainty'.

[33] Ibid. Brian Massumi uses organic lexicon to describe how this process works. He writes that the 'perceptual cues' that the security chart enacts are indicative of a sociopolitical environment in which the US government is 'wirelessly jacked […] into each individual's nervous system', to the effect that 'the whole [US] population' becomes 'a distributed neuronal network registering en masse quantum shifts in the nation's global state of discomfiture […]'. Fear is hence 'a body-aimed dispositional trigger mechanism', a reaction that leaves no room for interpretive processing. Massumi, 'Fear (the spectrum said)', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2005), pp. 32–33.

[34] Steyerl, 'Documentary uncertainty'.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Of this artistic tradition, Steyerl highlights two tendencies: whilst Alexander Rodchenko's monochromatic work portended 'the death of painting' – the end of a genre – Kazimir

Malevich's 'White Square on a White Field' (1918) sought to express 'the essence of art' by employing monochrome to create 'pure feeling'. Hito Steyerl, 'Mind wide shut: art in the age of fear', *Transform* (2007), <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1210774009.html> accessed 1 June 2019.

[37] T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 88. Demos also highlights the importance of form to Steyerl's documentary aesthetics, writing that her work is 'characterised […] by a heightened consideration of video's formal organisation, built on a keen awareness of the uncertain status of truth and meaning' (p. 75).

[38] See Steyerl's interview at *Documenta 12*, <https://vimeo.com/68195540> accessed 31 August 2021. Here Steyerl also emphasizes the significance of form to her work.

[39] Flashes of red are also recurrent in the film. In addition to the Homeland Security terror alert system mentioned earlier, red is seen in the curtain behind Steyerl's poor image and in Spider-Man's uniform.

[40] Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 92, 96.

[41] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 21.

[42] Rancière, 'The ethical turn', p. 8. As Rancière understands it, 'the humanitarian war becomes an endless war against terror: a war that is not one, but a mechanism of infinite protection, a way of dealing with a trauma elevated to the status of a civilisational phenomenon' (p. 8).

[43] Ibid., p. 18. Rancière writes: 'The non-representable is the central category of the ethical turn in aesthetic reflection, to the same extent that terror is on the political plane, since it is also a category of indistinction between right and fact' (p. 12). This is one of the ways he describes 'consensus' in his essay, as something that shuts down politics and 'strives […] to reduce right to fact' (p. 6).

[44] Ibid. For another influential critique of the 'ethical turn' on the basis that it 'marks a retreat from the political' see Chantal Mouffe 'Which ethics for democracy?', in Rebbeca L. Walkowitz, Beatrice Hanssen and Marjorie Garber (eds), *The Turn to Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2013) pp. 85–86.

[45] Moya Lloyd provides an overview of these critiques in the 'Introduction' to her edited collection *Butler and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 5, mentioning the work of authors including Jodi Dean and Diana Coole.

[46] See, for example, Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the torture of others', *The New York Times*, 23 May 2004; Joanna Bourke, 'Torture as pornography', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2004; Peter Bradshaw, 'Review: Standard Operating Procedure', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2008.

[47] Steyerl's specific selection of the hooded-man image is arguably the first indication that she wished to retain a space of distance between torture and pornography even while drawing these themes together, because while the hooded-man image has come to function as a visual synecdoche for the Abu Ghraib archive as a whole, it does not foreground the extreme sexual violence visible in other photographs.

[48] Butler also challenges conflations of torture and pornography: 'the torture may well have been incited by the presence of the camera and continued in anticipation of the camera, but this does not establish either the camera or "pornography" as its cause. Pornography, after all, has many non-violent versions and several genres that are clearly "vanilla" at best, and whose worst crime seems to be the failure to supply an innovative plot'. Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 91.

[49] See Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, pp. 113–114.

[50] Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 165, 133, 4. He continues that: Sade's literary 'orgy is organised, distributed, ordered' (p. 125).

[51] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 88–89. Adorno and Horkheimer perceive Sade's texts as revealing the 'shocking truth' of reason (p. 118). Steyerl argues that today's algorithmic censorship represents a continuation of the 'instrumental' and 'grammatical' thought about the body associated with Sade, mentioning readings of his literary pornography by Barthes, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Michel Foucault. Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, pp. 36–37.

[52] Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, p. 143.

[53] Ibid., p. 145.

[54] Ibid., p. 146.

[55] Ibid. (emphasis in original)

[56] Spectators are informed about the patterns of censorship that have marked the history of rope bondage in Japan (with bondage industry producers emphasizing the ways in which censorship was better, economically speaking, for the industry). The restriction of footage related to war is also evoked. Steyerl underlines the post-9/11 'restriction' of the *Spider-Man* trailer displaying the Twin Towers. Spectators would also be aware that censorship heavily marks the War on Terror's black sites: whilst we might be able to see the hooded-man photograph and hundreds of others, further videos, images and information remain unavailable.

[57] Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, p. 152.

[58] In addition to the violent history of the bondage industry, the models' pain is also mentioned. In one interview, a bondage producer discusses how he had wax poured onto him when he first began to work in the industry, so that he could better comprehend the models' pain.

[59] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 85.

[60] Sontag, 'Regarding the torture of others'.

[61] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen,* p. 18.

[62] Ibid., p. 20.

[63] Ibid., pp. 22–24.

[64] Parks, *Rethinking Media Coverage*, p. 4

[65] Ibid.

[66] Vertical lines and viewpoints are frequent themes in contemporary scholarship on war and visuality, as Steyerl is well aware. See, for example, Rey Chow *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) and Eyal Weizman, 'The Politics of Verticality,' *openDemocracy* (2002) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/article_801jsp/> accessed 8 September 2021.

[67] Parks, *Rethinking Media Coverage*, p. 2.

[68] Ibid., p. 10.

[69] Ibid., p. 2.

[70] Rancière, 'The ethical turn', p. 5.

[71] See Steyerl, 'In free fall', in *The Wretched of the Screen*, pp. 12–30.

[72] Tokyo's vertical structures are not, then, linked within the frame to the patriarchal power of the erotic industry, as they might have been.

[73] I refer here to Demos's nuanced reading in *Dara Birnbaum* of Wonder Woman and Birnbaum's framing of her. Arguing that the meanings of this video exceed the artist's original intentions, Demos concludes 'beyond its considerable deconstructive and analytical resourcefulness […] the video is also deeply affective (rejuvenating, exciting, pleasurable, libidinal […] Its intense visual and aural experience unleashes […] the very potentiality of transformation – the power to be otherwise […]' (p. 102). Steyerl's framing of Spider-Woman does not converge exactly with the effects Demos outlines, yet is comparably multivalent.

[74] At the end of *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl is asked by a member of her film crew if she considers herself a feminist, a question to which she responds 'Yes, definitely!' The example of what one might term 'poor image feminism' is one instance of how this feminist commitment appears in the film.

[75] Parks, *Rethinking Media Coverage*, p. 12.

[76] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, p. 13.

[77] Ibid., pp. 69–70.

[78] Ibid.

[79] *Lovely Andrea*'s arrangement within the gallery space to some extent resists this overload, for the film is exhibited in an empty, dark room set apart from other installations, a setting that encourages spectatorial focus. Yet the film does not completely escape the gallery dynamic, in the sense that spectators may arrive partway through the film's screening, are free leave before the end, and will probably take in many moving image works as they move through the gallery. This description of *Lovely Andrea*'s exhibition setting is based on my experience of watching it at the Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin in 2015.

[80] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Picador, 2003), p. 108.

[81] Ibid., p. 110.

[82] A problem that Sontag dates back to newspapers, and which, she notes, has since been amplified significantly by developments in technology.

[83] I am reminded as I write this of the Surrealist practice of dropping into cinemas to take in only parts of a given film, a practice undertaken in a very different context, but which was also undergirded by a belief in the promise of visual glimpses.

[84] Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, p. 137.

[85] As Didi-Huberman points out, ongoing arguments against the representation of violence are in part guided by concerns that we are drowning in a sea of commodified images of

violence; he quotes Gérard Wajcman, who speaks of a ‘bulimia of images’. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, p. 69.