Animating Film Theory

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There are two counterintuitive aesthetic paradigms: animation and the 1980s and 1990s experimental identity-politics documentary video. By experimental identity-politics documentary, I mean the kind of work sometimes called personal documentary, domestic ethnography, or autoethnography. In this work, the often-minority filmmaker’s personal experience, personal memory, and personal media (in the form of family photo albums and home movies) were used to present the self in a purposefully different way. These works, frequently made on video, were self-consciously different from both mass-media representations of Otherness and from ethnographic representations, on which the works often drew and critiqued. While some of these works showcased naive voicings of identity, more often various kinds of formal fracturing complicated the autoethnographic voice, as in work by artists such as Sadie Benning, Joan Braderman, Tony Cokes, Marlon Fuentes, Mona Hatoum, Isaac Julian, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Marlon Riggs, and Rea Tajiri. Reconsideration of the experimental identity-politics video through the lens of animation offers an important counterdiscourse to standard thinking about this now sometimes-disparaged genre of film. Understanding the role of animation in this work complicates the ways in which we understand how the two dominant discourses of this decade came together in the regularly forgotten medium of video: namely, postmodern theory and identity politics.

While documentary film scholars have not talked much about animation in documentary films of the 1980s and early 1990s, many of the present anxieties about digital animation’s supposed destabilization of the relationship between sign and referent in documentary are very similar to, or follow from, those anxieties raised by the proliferation of postmodern theory in the academy. At that time, theories of
postmodernity were perceived as threatening established documentary guarantees by flattening not only structures of signification but also the grand narratives that held them in place. By documentary guarantee, I mean the ways in which documentaries establish their truth claims. Video technology was seen as operating hand in hand with postmodern aesthetics. Many theorists figured video technology and video aesthetics, like those of television, as slippery, malleable, flowing, and capable of flattening our sense of history. Indeed, in some video work, MTV music-video aesthetics seemed to privilege a jumble of ideas via the use of found footage, animation, live action, and video keying. In the experimental identity-politics video, these forms of video special-effects animation can be seen not only as a symptom of postmodernity but as an antidote to it.

The video special effects of the 1980s and early 1990s, although not usually thought of as animation, operated rhetorically much as digital animation does today. Techniques such as video keying, the palimpsestic layering of images, the insertion or scrolling of video and computer-generated text, the use of the frame within a frame, and the manipulation of image speed through slow motion, stuttering, and looping gave documentary and experimental filmmakers alike a way of figuratively, visually, and rhetorically opening up critical space in a flattened postmodern world. These techniques of animating the image, of manipulating the image at the level of the frame, also allowed artists to open up a space of playful and transformative personal and political imagining. Animation allowed them to deessentialize notions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality—and imagine other ways of being. Artists’ aesthetic use of video animation tools actively theorized and historicized questions of subjectivity. In this way, artists’ use of animation contributed to larger theoretical conversations on the impact of postmodern theory on subjectivity. These artists did not just represent their subjectivities but additionally enacted them through various forms of video animation. Looking at the experimental identity-politics documentary video through the lens of animation and defining forms of animation more precisely as rhetorical structures allow these practices to become visible as theoretical interventions into the critical discourse of the day. This approach encourages us to think about how aesthetics reflects and also shapes shifting epistemological discourses in the larger culture. In other words, experimental identity-politics video illuminates the way that animation both was shaped by and shapes the ways we know the world and understand ourselves.
Hybrid Animation

Looking at video special effects as animation allows us to draw connections between questions about documentary in the 1980s and current concerns about animation in documentary today. With the rise of digital animation in the past decade, some documentary theorists have defined animation as a problem for documentary because documentary seems to require the indexical image to point to reality. Here I want to define animation as not limited to a problem for documentary certainty but as comprising a range of devices that work to enact specific rhetorical strategies within documentary. As such we can talk more specifically about particular tropes and techniques rather than talking about animation in general.

These video animation techniques function very similarly to digital animation techniques used in documentary and across moving-image culture today, where animated lines, frames, color, and moving text are embedded within live images. Lev Manovich describes these as hybrid forms of animation, forms that we have come to encounter most regularly in “commercials, music videos, motion graphics, television graphics, and other types of short non-narrative films and moving image sequences.”4 Contemporary image culture features digital composites, composed of registers of analog and digitally animated images. Hybrid images, as Manovich notes, have proliferated in the wake of cheap and accessible animation programs such as AfterEffects and Photoshop, which became widely available in the mid-1990s. Hybrid forms of the animated image, in which editing occurs within the image rather than between images, are today ubiquitous and unremarkable. We assume that most images we see are digitally animated, whether obviously so or not. Whether or not such images present themselves as seamless or foreground their hybrid status, today editing and animation within the image are taken for granted. Hybrid forms of animation challenge indexicality and also integrate different registers and forms of the image, palimpsestically layering various forms of representation, such as video, television, photographs, and 16mm and 8mm film footage.

We should remember that before AfterEffects and Photoshop, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed an explosion of editing within the frame. As with today’s digital animation, video animation was partly automatic and partly undertaken through personal manipulation of video editing tools. While clunkier than current digital editing tools, analog video editing systems allowed editors to manipulate and gener-
ate various kinds of hybrid animated images. Artists’ experiments with documentary form in this period often incorporated complex integrations of images and sound. Like the image track, the soundtracks of the experimental identity-politics video documentary were often composed of multiple tracks, including found music, sound, other recordings, and voices in the forms of monologue, poetry, and interview. Rather than presenting a seamless image, these experimental identity-politics videos often seem to foreground their status as composited. At least it seems this way in hindsight compared to the relative seamlessness of current digital media.

The use of these kinds of animated special effects was not limited to experimental documentaries edited on video. In the same period, similar animated special effects were widely produced on celluloid film with optical printers. These techniques and the larger theoretical questions they addressed were not technologically determined. The optical printer, sometimes called a step printer, which invokes the step-by-step nature of the printing process, allowed filmmakers to produce complicated image effects one frame at a time on celluloid film, in a process more akin to what we think of as traditional sequentially produced animation. This can be seen in experimental work by Peggy Ahwesh, Betsy Bromberg, Bruce Elder, Nina Fonoroff, Su Friedrich, Malcolm LeGrice, David Rimmer, and Barbara Sternberg. The proliferation of experimental animation techniques across video and celluloid production in this period shows that something larger was happening throughout the culture than in just this small niche of experimental identity-politics video. It also helps to connect the aesthetics and concerns of the experimental identity-politics video to many experimental works made on film that also examined questions of personal experience and voice.

Just as hybrid digitally animated images incorporate various registers of appropriated images, the 1980s and early 1990s saw a strong turn to the incorporation of found footage from both mass media and more obscure sources. Television and video found footage were relatively easy to get and use, with improved accessibility to home-video recorders. Universities, media centers, and community groups, often organized around race, gender, or medium, provided access to cameras and editing systems. Found footage appeared in experimental and documentary work alike, whether made on film, video, photographs, or combinations thereof. Animated special effects were imbricated with artists’ use of found footage. Some hybrid animated special effects in both film and video included the use of the frame within a frame (for both found foot-
age and original footage); the manipulation of the speed of the image via slow motion, as well as the looping and stuttering of the image; and the editing, movement, and palimpsestic layering of image and text within the frame. These special effects for animated video, often used in combination, gave documentary and experimental filmmakers a way of figuratively, visually, and rhetorically doing three important things: comment on postmodern flattening, open up critical space, and create spaces of playful and transformative personal and political imagining.

**Documentary Theory and the Problem of Postmodern Collapse**

The formal and rhetorical uses of animated special effects were significant within documentary production in the 1980s and 1990s, yet these uses were not often remarked upon by documentary theorists and critics. With the rise of postmodern theory, investment in the guarantees of observational documentary, once endorsed by direct indexical recording and the project of authoritative truth telling, met with considerable challenges. Postmodernism produced a crisis within documentary theory dominated by “discourses of sobriety” that were “devoted to certitude.” This crisis occurred partly in response to postmodern theory’s description of a number of supposed collapses. These include the collapse of grand narratives, the collapse of history, the collapse of high and low culture, and the collapse of the avant-garde and mass cultures. Perhaps most significant for documentary were the supposed collapses between fact and fiction, between historical reality and the image, and between sign and referent. However, these convergences also generated anxiety over the possibility for generating critical art in the modernist tradition. As Fredric Jameson writes in a most influential, and anxiety-provoking, passage: “Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the signified—is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism.”

Documentary theory showed marked anxiety about the status of documentary and its capacity for political efficacy in the context of this supposed flattening of signification and reference. In particular, many documentary theorists bemoaned the limited possibilities for opening up critical space under the weight of so much historical, ideological, and semiotic flattening. The following quotations from essays written a decade apart by E. Ann Kaplan (in 1983) and Linda Williams (in 1993) demonstrate the durability of this anxiety for documentary theory. Kaplan writes, “The danger of semiology has been the sliding away from the
referent that I mentioned earlier. . . . Semiologists run the danger of collapsing levels of things that need to remain distinct if we are to work effectively in the political arena to bring about change.”9 For Kaplan, the collapse of the realms of text and the material world seemed to threaten possibilities for political change. A decade later, Williams writes, “While not all theorists of postmodernity are as disturbed as Jameson by the apparent loss of the referent, . . . many theorists do share a sense that the enlightenment projects of truth and reason are definitively over. . . . We seem to be plunged into a permanent state of the self-reflexive crisis of representation. What was once a ‘mirror with a memory’ can now only reflect another mirror.”10 Williams describes a widespread contemporary feeling of crisis regarding the status of critical visual representation. The metaphor of reflection that had been so important to theories of critical and political modernism now signaled a collapse of space for critical reflection.

For many theorists of documentary, postmodern theory’s troubling of the relationship between sign and referent threatened the status of documentary representation as a political vehicle with potentially material effects in the world. The collapses associated with postmodernity were often figured through the ways in which the increasingly dominant media of television and video presented both original and found footage. If celluloid was figured as a modernist medium with the capacity for critical juxtaposition of historically marked images, then television and video were figured as epitomizing postmodern flow and obliterating historical consciousness. Jameson notoriously describes video as the “art form . . . par excellence” of postmodernism and late capitalism, “ceaselessly reshuffling the fragments of preexistent texts,” and collapsing the critical and political capacity associated with modernist style through a supposedly indiscriminate incorporation of found footage.11 However, postmodern theory was less a threat than a tool for many political artists and documentary practitioners in this period—a group whose forays into documentary tended more toward experimental explorations of political subjectivity than the tradition of modern social documentary. Theories of postmodernity became illuminating tools for groups seeking a certain slipperiness or contingency in order to change their relationships to existing power structures. Postmodern theory met identity politics in this period, in what Linda Hutcheon describes as a most productive meeting, as individuals and groups worked to deconstruct essentialist notions of racial, sexual, and gender identity. “What these various forms of identity politics shared with the postmodern,”
Hutcheon writes, “is a focus on difference and ex-centricity, an inter-
est in the hybrid, the heterogeneous, and the local, and an interro-
gative and deconstructing mode of analysis.” Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman also note that “it is among the American left, among neo-and-
post-Marxists, feminists, queers, and Third World and postcolonial intellectuals, that postmodernism has been most enthusiastically em-
braced.” While now sometimes disparaged as simplistic, in that historical period, identity politics, feminism, and postcolonial concerns pro-
duced a set of grounding political (and physically material) stakes that butted up against the seemingly relentless textual circularity of post-
modern theory. This was nowhere more visible than in the experimental identity-politics documentary video, and made visible by video anima-
tion techniques.

Under postmodernity, with its convergence of categories, medium specificity also became an outmoded category of analysis. Video’s adapt-
ability and ease of use meant that it was often figured as a nonmedium capable of blending into a larger discursive field. Even so, video still re-
called Rosalind Krauss’s “video narcissism” and the remnant of its early critical figuration as a mirror. The nonmedium of video seemed to offer transparent access to the minority author-subject of the experimental identity-politics video. Indeed, documentary criticism has examined the experimental identity-politics video of the 1980s and early 1990s primarily in terms of authorship and identity with transparent access to even the most multiple and dispersed of subjects provided by the medium of video. In turn, many critics have tended to collapse author-
ship, subjectivity, and the video into a transparently accessible autobi-
ographical voice. If theories of postmodernity unsettled traditional guar-
antees for documentary film theory, then via identity politics the lived experience and authentic voice of the minority subject-artist seemed to ground meaning in physical and emotional experience. In this context, for some theorists of documentary, the experimental identity-politics video appeared to offer the impression of grounded, embodied author-
ship, even as these works complicated the status of that authorship and of those bodies.

Still, despite all this animation and manipulation, there remained a strong tendency to see video as a mirror of the self that reflected the author-subject rather than figuring the field of video as a complex disc-
vursive space. The place of formally complex films and videos by mi-
nority subjects, often taken up within the academy, was often seen as revealing a fractured psyche. Writing in 1988, Judith Williamson notes
that “it is particularly striking that the black British work that’s been taken up most widely in the world of theory, been most written about and also picked up at festivals, on tours, and so on, is the work that fits most obviously into that category avant-garde.” And yet, as Williamson writes, and as I also note, “the formal properties of those films have somehow, in most of the critical discourse surrounding them, been subsumed into their ‘blackness.’” Formal inventiveness by women and blacks (not to mention black women) was seen by many critics as articulating a specifically women’s—or black—aesthetics. Work by LGBT artists was likewise seen as articulating a specific point of view, where fractured aesthetics were linked to fractured identity. Further, artistic choices in experimental identity-politics work on video, far more than on film, were subsumed into categories of identity and understood as self-expression. Coco Fusco observes: “Since the early ’70s, the reigning interpretation of Eurocentric film theory has led to the fetishisation of formal complexity and the obsessive search for visual illustrations of psychoanalytic ‘truths.’” In other words, academic criticism has tended to equate formal complexity with direct access to the minority subject’s complex inner life and complicated subject position. In experimental identity-politics videos of the late 1980s and early 1990s, “formal complexity” and “visual illustrations of psychoanalytic ‘truths!’” were seen as one and the same.

Rather than simply reflecting a state of being through video, the often-minority author-subject of the experimental identity-politics video used animation to critique the notion of unified subjectivity. Special-effects animation for video was used to visually enact, rather than merely reflect, the disjunctions of that subjectivity under specifically historical conditions. In this period, these animated special-effects techniques emphasized spatial and temporal disjunction as a metaphor for disunified, fragmented subjectivity. It should be noted that the use of sound (spoken monologues, popular music, fragments of voice, sound from movies) operated in similar ways. Rather than merely reproducing the supposed collapse of history and signification under post-modern conditions, artists used video animation to pry open figurative, rhetorical, and critical space. Some of these techniques worked in Marlon Riggs’s Tongues Untied (1989), Rea Tajiri’s History and Memory (1991), and Tony Cokes and Donald Trammel’s Fade to Black (1990).
Frame within a Frame

Perhaps one of the most widely used animation techniques in the 1980s and 1990s was the frame within a frame. In the present day, filled as it is with digital windows and frames, a hybrid image such as the frame within a frame so pervades our daily field of vision that it almost fails to register. Today these frames operate less as framing devices and more as portals or windows into different websites, images, photographs, texts, YouTube videos, and so on, which are layered over one another on our laptops and desktop computers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the frame within a frame functioned very differently. While it sometimes served as a window to memory, it more often functioned as a critical, reflexive gesture that drew attention to the status and ideology of the media image. This media image was figured regularly through the presence of the television raster, which sometimes stood for a certain kind of ideological framing aligned with mass culture, rather than as a window through which to access images and information. The frame within a frame as a formal and rhetorical technique in experimental documentary includes more than just video and optically animated frames around found and originally shot footage and photographs. These frames also appeared as actual material television frames, picture frames, book pages, and mirrors, as can be seen in examples as diverse as the critical cable-access show *Paper Tiger TV*, Leslie Thornton’s *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, and a number of pieces by Isaac Julien, including *The Passion of Remembrance*, *The Attendant*, and *Looking for Langston*.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the animated frame within a frame was a privileged formal structure that artists and documentarians widely employed in attempts to, on the one hand, figuratively pry open critical space for the analysis of images and, on the other hand, serve as portals to spaces of memory, play, and fantasy. Criticism and fantasy are of course two important functions of animation in documentary. They also help us to see the two sides of experiments with documentary in this period. The mobility of the animated image is important both in the context of postmodernist challenges to the stability of the human subject and in the possibility for playful transformation.

For example, Riggs’s now-canonical *Tongues Untied* makes use of a number of animated special effects in relation to found and originally shot footage. In one instance, Riggs uses the frame within a frame as a space of fantasy to animate a high school photograph in a segment...
that recalls the miracle of friendship offered by “the boy with the gray-green eyes,” told in longing voice-over, against the sonorous backdrop of Roberta Flack singing *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. Animated against a black field, the photograph advances, eventually filling the frame and the space of the present before receding, as Riggs narrates his story on the audio track. Here the animated photograph opens not only a space of memory, fantasy, and personal history but also a space of recognition that produces a sense of wholeness for the young Riggs.

This frame-within-a-frame animation segment generates a striking rhythmic and emotional contrast with the narration of childhood experiences that precedes it. Riggs describes that childhood as spent “cornered by identities [he] never wanted to claim”: “Punk—homo—faggot—freak—mother-fucking coon—niggas, go home—Uncle Tom.” These stereotypical names delivered in clipped fragments come out of anonymous mouths set in partial faces, eyes cut off by the frame, flashing across the screen. These aggressive staccato audio-visual rhythms are hushed by the lush, lyrical wholeness of the song sung by Flack and the wholeness of the face of the boy with gray-green eyes, framed in a high school photo. The boy Riggs loved, who called him a friend, did not only have eyes that Riggs could disappear into. More important, they were capable of seeing him and making an alienated young black gay man feel whole. Riggs says looking into the camera: “In search of self I listened to the beat of my heart, to rhythms muffled beneath layers of delusion, pain, alienation, silence. The beat was my salvation. I let this primal pulse lead me past broken dreams, solitude, fragments of identity to a new place, a home.” However, this particular use of the frame within a frame as a space of longing in *Tongues Untied* constitutes a mere
moment in a complex tale of often-fractured subjective experience, articulated through a range of formal animation and editing devices. This interplay between a sense of broken, fragmented selfhood and a longed-for, if ideologically suspect, feeling of wholeness is echoed in most of the prominent experimental identity-politics videos of the day.

**Slow Motion, Looping, and Stuttering**

Slow motion, looping, stuttering, and repetition of both found and originally shot images also were used for multiple purposes in experimental identity-politics documentary. Sometimes slow-motion animation techniques contributed to a sense of lyrical wholeness, while at other times they constituted critical strategies that attempted to break apart the apparently obvious meaning of an image and make it signify differently. Looping and stuttering were used more often in the service of intellectual critique, but also to draw attention to feelings of displacement and alienation. Variations on these animation techniques can be seen in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1983), Joan Braderman’s *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986), Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1989), Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* (1991), Shashwati Talukdar’s *My Life as a Poster* (1996), and many others. In part, the regular use of slow motion, looping, and stuttering of the image as critical devices helps explain why scholars of documentary were outraged during the Rodney King trial in 1992 by the defense’s use of slow motion and frame-by-frame analysis to scrutinize the video footage of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King. The use of frame-by-frame analysis in deconstructing a grainy home video disregarded the visible evidence of a brutal beating, yes. However, even more disturbingly, the defense used a supposedly critical methodology in the service of the state.

Tajiri’s exemplary *History and Memory* (1991) employs slow motion, looping, and stuttering to manipulate found footage from various sources, including army footage, government-produced documentaries, Hollywood movies, home movies, and Tajiri’s own original footage, in ways that range from identificatory to poetic to critical. One segment uses the stuttered video image to point to the fragmentation of her mother’s memory of past experiences in the Japanese internment camps during the Second World War. These stuttered images also gesture to Tajiri’s own sense of incompleteness, “feeling a lot of pain,” as she says in voice-over at one point, not knowing how the incomplete stories and fragmented images of that time fit together.
This segment begins with found footage taken from the Hollywood film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, in which the actor Spencer Tracy investigates the death of a Japanese man around the time of the internments. The animated title “wildflowers” is superimposed over a man’s hands as he picks flowers. The next image features the stuttered image of Tajiri’s mother laughing and leaving the frame, followed by the title “Mother’s voice 1989,” and scrolling white text over a black field:

She tells the story of what she does not remember
But remembers one thing:
Why she forgot to remember.

This text scrolls over audio of Tajiri’s mother talking about the consequences of thinking too much about why the Japanese had been interned, as she recalls the memory of a beautiful young woman who lost her mind from the experience. As the stuttering image emphasizes its missing frames, it points to Tajiri’s mother’s lost memories, and the beautiful young woman’s lost mind.

As the mother voice speaks on the soundtrack, two other forms of animation appear. A young boy’s face in negative with an artificial bright pink glow emerges from the blackness. Over his face, the following text scrolls in glowing green letters: “Letter sent to selected members of the Japanese community post-Pearl Harbor: ‘Certain Japanese persons are being considered for repatriation to Japan. You and those members of your family listed above are being so considered.’” The sequence evokes the feeling that things are not as they should have been. Black seemed white. White seemed black. The animated video’s keying of an unnatural pink pervades the negative image of an innocent child who could not understand what was happening. The historical “reasons” for the Japanese internment in glowing green scroll deliberately over the image. They make no sense, but they continue their relentless animated pace.

The end of this segment returns to a clip from *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Pulling a few wildflowers out of his pocket, Tracy says: “There’s something buried up there—wild flowers? That means a grave. I suppose you knew that.” Following this bit of footage is a slow, stuttering image of a plant identified by the title “Wildflowers in Mother’s Yard 1989,” implying that something lies buried there in Tajiri’s mother’s memory (see figure 12.2). The stuttering image points to the lost, discontinuous spaces of not only memory but self. For Tajiri, the loss of memory implies a fragmented sense of self, one that haunts her too. Later in *History and Memory*, Tajiri says in voice-over: “I began searching because I
felt lost, ungrounded, somewhat like a ghost that floats over terrain, witnessing others living their lives and yet not having one of its own.” “Somehow I could identify with the search,” she says, “the search for an ever-absent image and the desire to create an image where there are so few.” By making a picture, she could connect to the story, Tajiri says: “I could forgive my mother her loss of memory and could make this image for her.”

**Editing within the Frame**

Cokes and Trammel’s *Fade to Black*, which appeared in the Whitney Biennial in 1992, employs a range of animated special effects in critical ways. Unlike many of the experimental identity-politics videos of its day, *Fade to Black* is more interested in exploring and evoking a fragmented sense of subjectivity than resolving it in wholeness. For this reason, I believe that *Fade to Black* has received less critical attention than it deserves. *Fade to Black*’s prologue sets up its overall logic, reorganizing meaning and deconstructing subjectivity via a juxtaposition of original and appropriated sound with a sophisticated and layered image track. The image track of the prologue begins with the appropriation of the credit sequence to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, in which a spiraling line disappears into actress Kim Novak’s eye, set in a box within a larger black field. This box frames specific parts of the original credit sequence, using *Vertigo*’s animations of spirals and overlays of color to imply the themes of vertiginous experience, desire, split subjectivity, and performative identity that *Vertigo*’s narrative explores, and that likewise constitute some of the major themes explored in *Fade to Black*. Here the frame within a frame serves as a citation, zeroing in on portions of *Vertigo*’s image that Cokes and Trammel wish to isolate and emphasize. This procedure foreshadows a recurring sequence on *Fade to Black*’s image.

![Wildflowers in Mother's Yard 1983](image)
track, which features a historical accounting of iconic Hollywood films, some represented through framed visual excerpts, and others represented only by text stating their titles and years of release; this offers an idiosyncratic history of race, representation, and uneasy identification across a century of image production.

Below the box that cites images from _Vertigo_, glowing animated text emerges from and fades into a black field. “In this darkened room,” the text begins, “there is nothing for me to see. The plot in this darkness revolves around recognition—But this recognition is always, already a mistaken identity” (see figure 12.3). The text continues, asking questions about the writer’s subjectivity and desire in relation to the film, saying: “I find my fragmented self posing questions I should have asked,” for example, “what does this film have to do with me?” in this text where “no one looks like me.” This animated writing seems to offer a distinct point of view, a clear voice, which the viewer might associate with _Fade to Black_’s authors. However, the work’s dual authorship complicates the ascription of a clear subject position to the voice behind that text, or to any singular experience of being a black man in North America.

The sounds and voices that accompany the image track also ask questions about subjectivity, wholeness, and identification, both on the level of the human subject and on the level of the text. Like the image track, the soundtrack foregrounds the excerption and appropriation of found texts, very similar to the snippets of rap music that weave in and out. The audio track of the prologue begins with an excerpt from Public Enemy’s _It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back_, followed by an appropriated clip of a man’s voice talking about the function of rap as a form. “As an art form,” the voice intones, rap allows “the youth of our culture be able to pick up the bits and pieces of life as it is lived and transform mess into a message.” Like its image track, _Fade to Black_’s audio track takes
up bits and pieces in order to form a new whole, as rap does, even as the sampled parts remain distinct. In this sequence the sound of a tape rewinding punctuates the spoken text’s ability to be excerpted. A man’s voice reads from Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” on the way that ideology works to transform individuals into subjects: “It transforms them all, by that very precise operation that I have called interpolation, or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police or other hailing, ‘hey, you there!’” The verbal citation of Althusser on the hailing of the subject continues through *Fade to Black*’s prologue, which points to the way that differently raced subjects respond to the call. Likewise, *Fade to Black*’s use of animation continually points to the slippage between the hailing call and the subject’s sense of self.

The prologue ends with the title “Fade to Black,” followed by more computer-generated texts giving credits, but also citing the texts used—audio, music, voices, sounds. In this way the prologue points to the fragmented amalgamation of sources, including David Byrne and Brian Eno, Last Poets, Living Colour, Jesse Jackson, N.W.A., Pet Shop Boys, and Public Enemy, in conjunction with jokes told by the two narrators, personal stories, and quotations from people ranging from Althusser to Malcolm X. *Fade to Black* is elegantly assembled but points to the multiplicity of its sources and the difficulties of resolving them into a seamless whole.

**Conclusion**

By examining these animated special effects for video within the experimental identity-politics video of the 1980s and early 1990s, we are able to rethink a number of questions that were under discussion at the time. First, this examination allows us to see how the split figuration of video technology as an epistemological tool functioned. On the one hand, video was figured as a mirror, capable of rendering an accurate documentary image of its often-minority subject-author. On the other hand, video via editing and animation also was figured as the opposite of a mirror, a field of playful experimentation that could be used to render that minority subject fragmented, unstable, and critical of the notion of coherent subjectivity. Ironically, this fragmentation of self via editing and animation was often read as mirroring the subject’s inner state rather than as a discursive intervention. The video representation of
subjective fragmentation was seen as a most authentic mirroring. At the same time, with the category of medium specificity officially dead, the nonmedium of video blended easily into the larger discursive field.

Second, rather than seeing video special effects as a symptom of postmodern collapse, an examination of animation as a rhetorical tool within this work helps us to see artists’ use of video animation as making significant theoretical interventions into contemporary discourse. As Trinh has noted, the stories and experiences of people of color tend to be relegated to the realm of the personal rather than the ideological. I suggest that in documentary theory, the experimental identity-politics video has tended to be relegated to the realm of autobiographical rather than the theoretical. Like more traditional editing, editing within the video frame by way of animation enabled artists to make a variety of rhetorical interventions. Special effects such as the frame within a frame, video keying, scrolling text, and the palimpsestic layering of images did not produce mirror reflections of fragmented subjectivity. Rather, artists and filmmakers employed special effects to negotiate the intersecting concerns of postmodern theory and identity politics. Through animation, artists enacted investigations of the personal, historical, and discursive conditions under which subjectivity was constructed.

Finally, interrogating video animation as a form of editing within the frame in experimental identity-politics video helps connect video editing practices in the 1980s and 1990s to present digital animation practices. Within the field of cinema and media studies, video and digital media were figured as similar, often appearing in the same edited collections with little distinction between them until the mid-1990s. Only toward the late 1990s, with the increased presence of the web and questions of interactivity, did documentary scholars start to distinguish video and digital media from one another. Part of what this examination of experimental video animation techniques shows is how animation has long operated as a form of editing. Such an insight asks that we reconsider the status of not only animation in this period but also editing. This insight makes us think about the shift from editing between frames to editing within the frame as a kind of critical intervention rather than simply a collapse of images upon one another. In some ways, the overwhelming nature of these visual and aural aesthetic practices was associated with the collapses of postmodernity. However, video animation in the 1980s and 1990s also points to shifting forms of critical intervention within documentary practice in a period when political modernism found itself in crisis.

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Notes

2. For “flow,” see Williams, Television, 78.
3. Artists and filmmakers, many of whom were familiar with theoretical discourses on postmodernity, as well as the discourse of race, gender, and sexuality that pervaded the academy, also examined the relationship between documentary guarantees and authorial subjectivity.
5. Other animated video special effects include the movement of photographs within the frame (or into and across photographs) and video keying (which inserted color and image in irregular ways into the frame).
8. In the 1980s through the 1990s, numerous theorists of documentary, including Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Jay Ruby, Paul Arthur, Seth Feldman, Phil Rosen, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Linda Williams, Brian Winston, Katie Russell, and Laura Marks, investigated a range of challenges posed by theories of postmodernity to documentary guarantees. Among the most influential at the time were theories of documentary reflexivity, performativity, and failure as modes of producing new forms of documentary authority.
17. For a broader discussion of the evolution of frames and windows in media, see Anne Friedberg’s book The Virtual Window from Alberti to Microsoft.
18. The use of the television raster can be seen in Paper Tiger TV, a cable-access television show that was dedicated to the critical analysis of mass media, in particular, but not exclusively, television. Shows often took the form of academic lectures, as in “Brian Winston Reads T.V. News March 16, 1983” (1983), “Joan Does Dynasty” (1986), and “Ads, Ads, Ads! Mark Crispin Miller Journeys thru the Expanding Geography of American Advertising” (1991).
19. More colloquially known as the “Ken Burns effect,” the camera’s movement into the photographic image, across images, and through images is an example of mainstream usage, as in Ken Burns’s miniseries The Civil War (1990).
20. For a very different account of Fade to Black, see Scott MacDonald’s “Desegregating Film History.”