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Jon Rafman and Daniel Lopatin

"Sticky Drama"

Introduced by Michael Nardone

HD Video, 11

Year: 2015

Vdrome

Featuring a cast of over 35 children, with Oneohtrix Point Never's soundtrack, *Sticky Drama* **portrays the development of a role-playing game set in a fantastical and violent world in which its participants struggle to preserve their memory and past histories.**

"How far back can you remember?" a compact-disc-donned teen from the future asks her pet, a cyborg tamagotchi-shitpile. As viewers, we experience fragments of this cyborg's formatted past, and hurtle through the circuits and frames of recollection and retrieval to the events themselves. There, time oscillates, its durations and recursions simultaneously present. Any divide between what is live and what is of another time remains uncertainly suspended.

Jon Rafman's previous works have focused on the cultural spaces and rhythms of networked digital milieus: they are itinerant, ethnographic depictions of life immersed within Google Earth, Second Life, PS3 video games, and the traffic of the deep web. In *Sticky Drama*, he portrays a version of the physical world, though it is a fantastic and futuristic one that is inextricably linked up with the virtual. The cyborg tragically recounts details of its once-upon-a-time kinships; a young warrior recites the high Romantic poetry of an Internet meme to a simulated butterfly; a soothsayer and mercenary leader communicate by means of interfaced avatars; life is a LARP [Live action role-playing game]. Imagined space, cyberspace, and meta-space all inform and shape one another while indistinguishably oozing together into some new assemblage.

    Michael Nardone: "The idea of accumulating everything in a general archive," Wolfgang Ernst writes, "is a product of Modernity. Nevertheless, the archive is born of disorder…" In *Sticky Drama*, one begins to envision the great disorder of a future archive. It is made not only of documents such as printed reports and magazines, but all kinds of paraphernalia: re-jigged gadgets and doodads, makeshift prototypes, computer-creature hybrids and their disemboweled software and hardware remains. Will you discuss the past histories and the practices of archiving imagined in *Sticky Drama*?

Jon Rafman: The original idea for the film came from conceiving of a super intelligent AI Tamagotchi: while it is dying of a virus, its owner attempts to save its archive. Instead of creating an archive through the usual contemporary digitization, the drama would center on the creation of an analogue archive through

Vdrome

how easily it can be erased, how precarious it is. At the same time I am amazed at the speed with which the archive expands and accumulates data, to the point of overload.

MN: You often portray the event of data loss so as to have tragic, if not horrific, consequences. It is a theme that permeates your works, implicitly and explicitly, and that you address via wildly different positionalities in different systems of information. What is it about this theme that compels you?

JR: The theme of loss permeates all my work to some degree. *Remember Carthage* (2013), *You the World and I* (2010), *Codes of Honour* (2011), and *A Man Digging* (2013) deal with it quite directly. It's a theme I come back to again and again; whether it be the loss of history, the loss of subcultures, the loss of love, or the loss of memory. When it comes to data loss specifically, on one level I think I am attracted to it simply because it a very relevant and timely fear to which we all can relate. In *Sticky Drama* in particular, I wanted to examine the relationship between memory and data, and the ways in which they are both corruptible, fragmentary, and subject to decay. The entire film ended up in an almost Rabelaisian exploration of this theme: the Tamagotchi—an oozing, diseased creature—is a massive digital archive of experiences that explodes and erases the records it contains.

MN: Wolfgang Ernst, the media theorist I mentioned earlier, is a writer who often comes to mind when I regard your works. In addition to numerous essays on the archive, he has written extensively on the field of media archaeology and the concept of machinic time. Ernst has argued that we need to see media as dynamic agents that participate in "media events" in the way that they store, process, and transmit signals. These signals introduce their own specific concepts of time— iterations, recursions, short circuits—that perpetually shift and reshape human-centered notions of time and history. Is this something that resonates with you and your works?

JR: That is very interesting notion that speaks closely to my *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* project. In point of fact, I have always seen a Google Street View image as essentially a "memory" that nobody has actually had. In *Sticky Drama* I was interested in using obsolete technology as an entrance point into accessing cultural memory, and in that case I do think there is a type of archeology at work.

MN: In previous discussions of your work, you have intoned a number of Benjaminian concepts – flânerie and the arcades, the collector or archivist and the great significance of seemingly mundane objects, technological (specifically digital) reproduction. One important notion from Walter Benjamin I don't believe you've

Vdrome

modernist articulation of the aura, confined solely to an aesthetic category and associated with the status of an artwork, a kind of affective resonation of a singular object's authority, uniqueness, and unattainability. Yet, in his more personal writings, his sense of the word is quite different: "First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine" (from *On Hashish*). Here, his use of aura invokes a more popular sense of the word, yet one that is also more esoteric and spiritual. *Sticky Drama* portrays an epic journey to retrieve these historical objects, and yet there is a pervading sense of the tragic in the inability to recuperate the auras of these childhood materials and affinities. Will you discuss the auratic qualities of the materials and affinities depicted in *Sticky Drama* and the means by which you've presented them?

JR: I find the myth of the irretrievable past to be a very fertile tool in art. I'm interested in the Proustian qualities of certain memory triggers, especially in the form of media that one consumes or interacts with as a child. In *Sticky Drama* I was using nostalgia as a tool—cultural reference points from the 1980s and '90s function as a common language for those who grew up with them. The use of nostalgia in *Sticky Drama* is a manipulative device. It is meant to highlight how the aura of these cultural signifiers is always slipping away. In a Benjaminian way, I simultaneously celebrate and mourn its loss.

NM: I consider the essay-films of Chris Marker as being a central inspiration to several of your previous films, *A Man Digging* and *Remember Carthage* in particular. *Sticky Drama* moves outside that style and works with entirely different compositional and narrative modes. Is there an inspiration behind this work you'd like to discuss?

JR: Yes, Chris Marker has certainly been a major influence on my practice. In the case of *Sticky Drama*, however, there are multiple inspirations: I am pulling more from popular culture, Hollywood, videogames, 1980s adventure films starring kids, body horror, slime aesthetics, Dungeons and Dragons, and LARPing.

MN: *Sticky Drama* moves in a new direction in that it is not assembled from ready-made images and video, and is your first fully live-action film work. Can you tell us about the production of the film?

JR: The story developed directly out of a combination of two different aesthetic worlds that Daniel and I were developing. I wanted to create a fully fleshed out world inspired by DIY LARPing aesthetics and Daniel was interested in the dark tranformations of teenage-hood. Making the film was invigorating, but also insanely stressful. The kids had either no training or very limited acting experience, the set

Vdrome

Credits

Sticky Drama, 2015. Jon Rafman and Daniel Lopatin.
Courtesy of The Zabludowicz Collection, Warp Records, and Seventeen, London.

1/5