

UNRAVELLING HAPTIC VISUALITY AND NOTIONS OF CARE THROUGH TWO VIDEOS ABOUT DEATH

ANNA WALKER

Plymouth University

anna.walker@plymouth.ac.uk

JO MILNE

EINA University

jmilne@eina.cat

KEYWORDS

Death, Laura Marks, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, haptic visuality, affect

DOI

[10.54916/rae.126732](https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.126732)

DATE OF PUBLICATION

29/09/2023

ABSTRACT

In this collaborative paper, artists Jo Milne and Anna Walker discuss the haptic visual through 2 videos: “Death as a Reforming” (Milne, 2022), and “Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates” (Walker, 2020). The artists utilize Laura Marks’ concept of the haptic as a component of inquiry to understand grieving, death, and loss. In addition, they extend Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s idea of haptic technologies as matters of care, arguing for a notion of care that extends beyond life and the living, to incorporate death and dying.

**"DEATH AS
A REFORMING"
(2022) BY
JO MILNE.**

→ [https://vimeo.com/
669346884](https://vimeo.com/669346884)

**"PROPOSITION 4:
RED IS THE
COLOUR OF
POMEGRANATES"
(2020) BY
ANNA WALKER.**

→ [https://vimeo.com/
669347486](https://vimeo.com/669347486)

I: Introduction:

*Death 'n' Stuff*¹ is a research adjunct of ARE (Art, Resilience/Research, Economy),² created in July 2021 to disseminate knowledge specifically on death, dying, and grieving. The second meeting in January 2022 consisted of 7 presentation papers—of which the videos *Death as a Reforming* (2022) by Jo Milne, and *Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates* (2020) by Anna Walker were shared. The videos brought two diverse perspectives to understanding grief. Milne's video traces the death of her beloved dog, Shima, as she transforms into another state. Walker's video describes grief as a process of unraveling and fragmentation. Both artworks question our roles as witnesses to the disintegration of our loved ones, and natural surroundings, questioning how we navigate this intimate entanglement of living and dying. The artworks are very different in their subject matter and approach. Linking them for this paper allowed the artists to connect to each other, and articulate their shared journey of grieving within and outside of their work. Here the making of the videos is seen as a concerted effort to care for the dead, the dying, and the living. The videos approach grieving through their content and through the action of devoted attention. Neither artist consciously employed Mark's haptic viscosity, or indeed Puig de la Bellacasa's matters of care, but rather, it is implicit, embedded within the artists' psyche through all of their making. The intent in making the work, and writing this paper, is to engage with a *tentacular* way of thinking, a queering that in Donna Haraway's words formulates new ways to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth, where "[b]ecoming-with, not becoming is the name of the game" (2016, 12).



1

From this place of *becoming-with*, Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality is a useful tool to interrogate the videos and question what the artworks reveal about grieving, death, and loss. In this essay, Walker, and Milne pay particular attention to the transmission of *affect* as a particular form of embodied knowledge making connections to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's idea of haptic technologies as matters of care, and as a means of "unpacking and co-shaping a notion of care in more than human worlds" (2017, p. 95). Mark's critical expansion of the haptic as a way of seeing or knowing, exceeds the conventions of touch, taste, smell or hearing, creating new ways of elaborating material ways of sensing time, change, and memory. Haptic visuality emphasizes the tactile and contagious quality of cinema (in this instance, video), as something viewers brush up against like another body.

In phenomenological terms, the haptic is a form of the visual that muddies intersubjective boundaries (Marks, 2002, p. 17), while psychoanalytically it is an aspect of the visual that moves between identification and immersion. In Marks' words: "[t]he engagement of the haptic

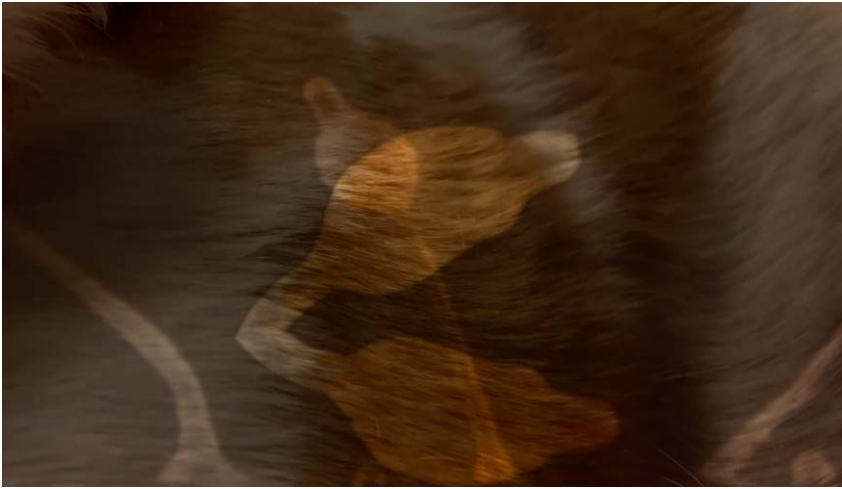
viewer occurs not simply in psychic registers but in the sensorium" (2000, p. 18). Haptic vision is the close-to-the-body form of perception, where the film is like a skin that places the work into "circulation among different audiences, all of which mark it with their presence" (Marks, 2000, p. xi). The haptic visual does not depend on the viewer identifying with a recognizable figure or character but on a more sensuous bodily relationship between the viewer and the subject, "haptic images and haptic visuality encourage a subjective position of intimacy and mutual entanglement between viewer and viewed" (Marks, 2015, p. 227).

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa builds on Marks' concept of the haptic, adding care as a manifold range of doings needed to create, hold together, and sustain life and its diverseness, where attending to grief, to loss, and to death are important components. For Puig de la Bellacasa, "the haptic holds promises against the primacy of detached vision, a promise of thinking and knowing that is 'in touch' with materiality, touched and touching" (2017, p. 95). In their videos, both Walker and Milne pay attention to what it means to touch

and be touched both in the physical and the emotional sense, to enhance their, and the audience's awareness of the embodied nature of thinking, of perception, and of affect. They explore, to paraphrase Thom van Dooren, how we are connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections, who we are bound up with and in what ways, for it is within these connections, these relationships that life and death happens (2014).

II: Death as a Reforming (2022)

Milne's video: *Death as a Reforming* (2022), presents the death of a beloved pet in three acts: bursting with life, struggling with life, and transforming into another form of life. The video,³ (the second version) was made last year in response to the death of the artist's dog, Shima, and is 4.04 minutes in length. The first video was shorter, (1 minute)⁴ and was seen as a raw and immediate response to loss. Revisiting the artwork, and extending it for this essay, represented a shift for the artist towards processing her grief. The first frames present the dog alive and skipping, before the camera zooms in on her eye and the rise and fall of her pelt. We hear her struggle to breathe as the artist breathes with her in sync, until the dog and video merge into the globular forms of slime mold. The only punctuation of the irregular breathing within the minimal soundtrack is the voice of the scientist John Bonner, which taken from his films of slime molds made in the 1970s, evokes for the artist a sense of the past. Milne couples the death of the pet with the growth and expansion of slime mold, to make manifest "a sort of connective tissue among material entities separate in place and time" (Marks, 2002, p. x).



2

Editing *Death as a Reforming*, Milne encountered difficulties with failing software, and her computer crashing, which echoed the stumbling blocks of her own grieving. She was connecting not just to the death of her dog but the recent passing of her partner. For, embedded within her making, but not made explicit in the video, are the memories of her partner in the final days of his life in hospital. By videoing her dog's last breaths, she was conscious of the desire to create a cenotaph for her partner, as the two deaths became one, and the video a coming to terms with the loss. Uniting the dog with the slime molds, Milne intertwines death with living, echoing the processes of cell apoptosis and rebirth, for like the spores that die as others bud, the dog's demise leads to a form of fruiting. The slime molds that rise and become entwined with Shima's dying are suggestive of a secular transubstantiation to mark the transience of our entangled existence.

The video moves through the weightiness of the sounds and the images of Shima's final breaths to the complexity of image upon image, and something begins to shift, slime spores move into place, and begin to

rise, and a sense of relief is experienced as the video jumps to a line of text on black space. The words act as markers, visual interludes that are taken from the title shots used to punctuate Bonner's original films, which Milne was studying at the time of their deaths. Milne's video is a pathway through grief to understand the entangled space of living and dying, for in Haraway's words "[...] human beings must grieve with, because we are in of this fabric of undoing" (2016, p. 39). Her video is a phenomenological exploration of light and dark, where the death of her pet is presented as a process of loss and transformation, one that underscores an insistence on the need "to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick presence" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

Milne uses video within her artistic practice as a complementary activity to her painting. In contrast to the abstraction of her artworks, video functions as a diary, a medium to think through ways of being—dying as well as living. Through focusing on the fur of the animal, and subsequently the metamorphosis of the slime molds, Milne echoes Marks in

establishing the format of video as a permeable skin. The artist brings us close to the surface, and therefore to the texture, and to the trace of the event. Entwined within is the event's materiality, its history. The close-ups, of both fur and slime molds, evoke the haptic viscosity of which Marks speaks, where the eye "tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (2002, p. 162). Tentatively within reach, the fur and molds remain indistinct, and yet this, in Marks' words:

[...] permits identification with (among other things) loss, in the decay and partialness of the image. This sort of look, then, is not just about death, but about loving a living but noncoherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self. (2002, p. 105)

Haptic criticism is mimetic: it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it. Milne's representation of death responds to Bergson's concept of mimesis as "an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it" (Marks, 2002, p. 142). The response to death sought by Milne is not its morbidity, but rather the loving connection with that which is lost—her dog, Shima, and her partner—bringing her and the viewer into an entangled relationship with all things, absent and present. Here, video is used to heighten the connection with this foreseen absence. The images capture the passing, and then disintegrate into sequences from Bonner's films, as if to "flaunt their tenuous connection to the reality they index" (Marks, 2002, p. 91).



3

As such, Milne ties death to Marks' consideration of film as a dying body, for the film becomes the presence of absence. We engage with the disappearance of the dog as well as other living beings. Milne's intention is for the visual form to lead the viewer to create emotional connections to the content of the video. She is asking the viewer not to reject what they see, rather to understand the imagery to be inextricable from her experience. Milne's video bears witness to a love lost, and also to the transformative nature of being with death. The video echoes Puig de la Bellacasa's belief, in that:

A politics of care goes against the bifurcation of consciousness that would keep our knowledge untouched by anxiety and inaccuracy. Involved knowledge is about being touched rather than observing from a distance. (2017, p. 93)

This is where Milne's video loosely echoes Walker's video, for both emphasize the tactility of vision and the ability to be touched through vision connecting to Puig de la Bellacasa's concept of how the "world [is] constantly done and

undone through encounters that accentuate both the attraction of closeness as well as awareness of alterity" (2017, p. 115).

III: Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates (2020)

The video, *Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates* (2020) was initially part of a digital residency & exhibition in 2020, which focused on three artists' shared appreciation of the Soviet director Sergei Parajanov, and his film *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969), a visual poem dedicated to the life of 18th-century Armenian poet and troubadour Sayat-Nova (1712–1795).⁵ Walker created four videos for the project, beginning with an introduction to the idea of the pomegranate as something other than fruit, as a digital exploration of color, sound, and pixels. The second video is a brief history and visual archival discussion of the pomegranate as an ancient fruit referenced in the Bible, the Koran, and Buddhist and Chinese arts. Video three is an initiation into the sexual connections to the fruit

and the passing of time; and the final video (presented here) is about death, grieving, and closure. Throughout the project, the artist was drawn to small segments of Parajanov's imagery, which she recycled, cut up, enlarged, and abstracted, layering it with newly shot video and fragments from her own personal archive of footage collected over the past decade. Walker reduced the text for the videos to a couple of Nova's poetic phrases and layered them with sound creating a mantra and a holding space for all of the videos to rest upon. She framed the four videos as propositions linking Parajanov, Nova, and the environment she inhabited at the time of making. The *red* of the title is the color of blood, danger, and the color associated with drama, passion, and love. By the fourth video, the color has been leached out completely to a black-and-white representation of loss and grief. The media's preoccupation with Covid19 and lockdown was unavoidable, in her words: "it seeps into me and therefore into the work, to the tap tap tap of the keyboard, the laying down of thoughts, words, images, and sounds" (Walker, 2020).

Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates (12.20 minutes), begins with the sound of someone breathing, and an imagining of the Greek myth of Persephone. The video moves from the close-up of a woman's eyes framed within a large black space as one that watches to a harsh view of winter. There is a modicum of softening in the sounds of breath, the tinkling of bells, and the timbre of voice before the undercurrent rumbling of a foreboding potentiality surfaces. The words continue:

Hades moved around her with care, because he knew he was to lose her again and again and again. And though he knew the texture of loss and the color of its pain, he had never felt it until



4

now, until this moment, and it stayed with him, and it made him sad. (Walker, 2020)

The words are layered upon a mournful melody as the imagery gives way to a stormy and cloudy sky. The narrator continues: “[y]ou are fire, you are now dressed in black”, connecting the poetry of Sayat Nova to the Myth of Persephone, and the artist’s world, crossing time and space.

She replied —“who has spread all this sorrow on this old and weary earth? Let me go and return to earth. I am weary, I am weary!” “I would die for you”, he said “and your admirable mind don’t leave me.” (Walker, 2020)

The camera moves to trees being tossed to and fro in a violent wind, while the sounds of a storm rage before jumping to a close-up in black and white of a tiny section of Parajanov’s film of women wailing as the wind continues to churn. It is a nod to the source of the inspiration for the series of videos—a dedication to the director. The video then cuts to a close-up of eyes and a face again as one watches, storm clouds pass through her, larger than her, and still,

she watches, becoming ghostlier, her skin thinning in response to all that is happening in the world. In unison, haunted voices echo, floods create devastation, fires burn, rivers burst their banks, and hurricanes and typhoons wreak havoc. This is the future we are heading towards. The camera closes in on the face of the watcher, and she turns her gaze momentarily to the camera and so to the viewer. Without speaking, her glance seems to ask, what are we to do? How do we navigate this? She once more returns to watch as if she is seeing it all on a screen before her, or the omnipotent eye watching from above. As she does, her tears fall. The camera moves closer in an effort to see what she sees, before the video fades to black, and then to silence. The intention of the artist, through positioning the woman who gazes as the main subject, is a subversion of the male gaze. She is both one who watches, and for those brief moments as she looks into the camera at the audience the one who sees. It is she who accuses: “Who has spread all this sorrow on this old and weary earth?” (Walker, 2020).

In the foreword of *Lacan at the Scene*, Slavoj Žižek (2012) discusses that when we see ourselves from outside, from this impossible point, the traumatic feature is not that we are objectivized, i.e., reduced to an external object for the gaze, but, rather, that it is the gaze itself that is objectivized; which, precisely, means that the gaze is no longer about the subject but that of the viewer (2012, p. xiv). He argues that there is no escape from this disembodiment and that direct contact with reality is impossible because we cannot get away from the sensory transformations created by the media. He believes the only way to cope with this situation is to embody, internalize, and anthropomorphize media objects. *Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates*, invites such an embodiment to instil in the viewer a shared complicity in the disintegration of our natural environment. Similar to Milne’s video, Walker is asking for the viewer to be in contact with what is enfolding on the screen, to engage emotionally and empathically, and to experience the dissolution of our world, while simultaneously addressing one’s impermanence. By layering one ghostly image on another, the artists are seeking, within their memories, new ways to reconfigure our relationship to the earth and each other (Haraway, 2016, p. 10). Mourning here is a necessary component of this unravelling. *Death as a Reforming* is a close-to process of personal grief, while *Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates* asks why we are not grieving more for what is lost. Van Dooren suggests that through mourning, we enter an alternative space, “one of acknowledgement of and respect for the dead” which undoes any “pretense toward exceptionalism, instead drawing us into awareness of the multispecies continuities and connectivities that make life possible for everyone” (2014, p. 126).

Phenomenologically, one's experience of mortality has a crucial role towards understanding the self. In Heidegger's words: "entangled, everyday being- toward-death is a constant flight from death. Being *toward* the end has the mode of *evading that end*—reinterpreting it, understanding it inauthentically, and veiling it" (1992, p. 262). But by facing our finite existence and death's inevitability, we become conscious of our potential as living beings, thus arriving at a *realized* or authentic sense of self. Through embracing death as a natural process that both interrupts and continues the life cycle, we can embody the transitory nature of what it means to be alive, while respecting the dead. Questions that surface from here touch upon what the deadness is communicating and what it means to have a good death, whether human or other. Such questions enliven a discussion about how to engage with the liminal place that exists at the edge of extinction. Walker and Milne, are not attempting to answer these questions, merely point to a space where they could occur. Common to the videos of Walker and Milne is the sense that death is a shared and collective experience. As Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, such relational processes create discomfort, but they have something specific and situated to teach us (2017, p. 116). In *Death as a Reforming*, we are asked to come close and experience Shima's final breaths, to breathe with her as she dies. This close-up, close-to of Shima's fur is also a reminder that as animal, she is entangled within a system where species are under threat of extinction. The auditory breath continues into *Proposition 4: Red is the Colour of Pomegranates*, expanding to engage not just the spectral realms of extinction, but also the repercussions and the devastation of loss as storms rage, winds howl, and rivers flood. For it is that Hades'

sadness is due to the uncertainty of Persephone's return, to the seasons gone awry and to climate change. As Haraway asks:

What is it to surrender the capacity to think? These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away. (2016, p. 35)

John Bowlby, an early proponent of a continued attachment to the deceased, believed a sense of continuity in the life of the bereaved helped facilitate a healthy adaptation to loss (1980). Such *continuing bonds*, could be said to encourage not just an aliveness within the deceased but an interiorized concept of what it means to die. To learn how to be with death and with the dying is to learn how to live with others. To be touched by life is to actively touch life. To be touched by death is to deepen our relationship to life and living. Therein lies the potential of "becoming-with," an invitation to participate in life's ongoing redoing and to be redone in the process. But the artists' speculation with video as a haptic experience, where touch is presented as a form of knowledge, "doesn't guarantee material certainty; touching is not a promise of enhanced contact with "reality" but rather an invitation to participate" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 117).

Communicating from the liminal place between life and death, Walker and Milne reveal ways in which affect becomes a thinking with care. Through their work, the artists

embrace a feminist ecology: consciously maintaining, communing, and endeavoring a repair to a shared world, to paraphrase Joan Tronto, it is seeking to entwine ourselves into a complex, life-sustaining web (1993, p. 103), it is *tentacular* thinking, an entangled and intimate engagement. Through conscious engagement with the haptic visual the possibility is created for increasing awareness of one's body, of its physicality, and the interaction with what is on the screen, as Marks writes: "Haptic images give the beholder a sense of being both physically and subjectively connected to the image source" (2015, p. 276). Imagery, sound, and voice provoke introspection, an evocative entanglement that weaves through memory circuits towards an "attentive recognition," and a "participatory notion of spectatorship" (Marks, 2000, p. 48). Although the approaches in the two videos are different, i.e., one is a personal interaction with death, the other weaving myth into current issues around climate change, the aim is a shared one: to establish an understanding of loss and death's entanglement with life, and create a space for dialogue, and for the breath.

References

- Bowlby, J. (1985). *Loss: Sadness and depression vol. III*. (New edition). Penguin.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Marks, L.U. (2000). *The skin of the film, Intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses*. Duke University Press.
- Marks, L.U. (2002). *Touch, sensuous theory and multisensory media*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Marks, L.U. (2015). *Hanan al-Cinema. Affections for the moving image*. MIT Press.
- Parajanov, S. (1969). *The colour of pomegranates* [Film] Armenfilm.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries. A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- Van Dooren, T. (2014). *Flight ways. Life and loss at the edge of extinction*. Columbia University Press.
- Žižek, S. (2012). Foreword. In H. Bond, *Lacan at the scene* (pp. xi – xvi). MIT Press.

Endnotes

- 1** <https://www.death-n-stuff.com>
- 2** <https://are-research.com>
- 3** <https://vimeo.com/785069872>
- 4** <https://vimeo.com/669346884/649741e3a9>
- 5** *The Colour of Pomegranates, part 2—the digital space*, www.digitalartistresidency.org/pomegranates

Figures



Fig. 1.
Video Still. Death as a
Reforming (Milne, 2022).



Fig. 2.
Video Still 2. Death as a
Reforming (Milne, 2022).



Fig. 3.
Video still. Proposition
4: Red is the Colour
of Pomegranates
(Walker, 2020).



Fig. 4.
Video still 2. Proposition
4: Red is the Colour of
Pomegranates (Walker, 2020).