

Dragging my video camera down the front steps: 30 years of unconventional camera movements from the Vtape collection

Anxious, thoughtful video artists hear many contradictory whispers about how they might position and move a video camera. Visual memories of camera movement from the hours, days and months of watching commercial television and movies disturb their optical unconscious. Whispers pursuing them range from levelness, verticality, and not crossing the index vector line, to the conventions of various genres, and other axioms on camera positions and movements. Altogether they form a formidable presence and usually an effective predictor of camera positioning and movement. Perhaps the loudest whispers are the ones about levelness and verticality — the viewers' expectations about the relationship between the projected image and the Centre of the Earth.

In 1609, Galileo used a primitive telescope that enable him to conclude that there were mountains on the Moon, and small bodies orbiting Jupiter. Encouraged by these observations, he published his *Dialogue on the Great World Systems* (1632) in which he asked his readers to consider that having the Earth rotating around the Sun did not need to compromise their spiritual beliefs. Galileo, a champion of problematic views and a user of a visual apparatus, re-emerges here in the 21st century with a determined but cryptic perspective on the conventions of camera movement. He is joined by his foil from the 1600s, Simplicico, in an imagined dialogue about the movement of video cameras with respect to the Centre of the Earth⁽¹⁾:

Simplicico: We expect people and other vertical objects to stand upright on level ground.
A tilted horizon is sloppy camera work.

Galileo: It is possible to force the apparatus to produce something impossible to see in advance, something improbable, something informative.

Simplicico: Because you can move a camcorder so easily, it may be tempting for you to 'animate' a basically static scene to get more life into it. Don't do it.

Galileo: Once the secondary elaboration of style has covered over the wild form-play of art, never again can the human eye see its full effects...

Simplicico: This manner of thinking tends to the subversion of all natural philosophy and to the order and upsetting of Heaven and Earth and the whole universe.

(Pause)

Not to mention nausea.

Galileo: We are moving at over 900,000 kilometres an hour around the centre of the Milky Way Galaxy... and in this room nothing is moving?

Simplicico: Pan...tilt...pedestal...tongue...crane...dolly...track...crab...arc...zoom. You should try to move the camera as little as possible. It shows disrespect for the audience.

Galileo: Every clip you shoot, every sequence you construct, every editing decision you make is going to limit more options than it opens up. The question is: what to do with a video camera?

Simplicico: What could be more absurd than working systematically to subvert the human embodiment of a natural law, like gravity?

Galileo: Does the door knob you are using belong to the room you are in or the one you are going into?

What movements are still possible with a video camera? Do we decide not to be counter-productive and so use a leveled tripod, a Steadicam-type device, or tracked dollies, and select from the vast range of emotive camera movement conventions? Or, in the interests of taking up Galileo's challenge and pushing gravity out into the open, are we determined to re-explore camera motion? Knowing that unusual camera movement is seen by some as a sign of the inept, how do we proceed?

Like commercial television and film, artists' videos track changes in video technology. The large camera, separate recording deck, separate cathode ray tube monitor, special lighting, and the black and white image of the 1970s, yielded to small, stand-alone camcorders, full colour images shot with available light, and autofocus, auto exposure and other automated-control features. Beginning in the late 1960s, camera motion has been explored by a number of video artists.

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Eight short videos, from 1974 to 2004, playfully use unusual camera positions and movements to create a slightly different visual gravity—showing things improbable, but viscerally informative⁽²⁾. Many video images are recorded from close to the eye position of a standing camera operator, and the orientation of the left and right edges of the frame are instinctively aligned with a imaginary lines drawn to the centre of the Earth. Many, but not all, as these eight videos demonstrate.

Martha Wilson's *Psychology of Camera Presence* (1974, 0:08:50) uses a tripod-mounted camera most likely connected to a separate recording deck and to a monitor which Wilson refers to and is seen watching. Wilson worked with early equipment, but established a conceptual opening for the exploration of camera movement. Presence is a profound video about camera motion, but one in which there is no camera movement. In the first part of the video, Wilson physically exercises herself out of the field of the stationary camera. She leaves us with no "subject" to watch; she leaves us with everything to watch — the beat-up floor, the room.

A person moves and the camera does not follow. Wilson asks us to attend to the arbitrariness of the camera's position. The camera was where it was and moved as it did because of its subject. Wilson's voice over narration proposes: "the absence of my body is not a negative, it is a positive." She gives us a camera view that is unexplored. A profound movement by Wilson makes a perfect preparatory video for putting the camera into motion.

Relatively few artists' videos are about camera motion itself. Most have a "subject" or three. Subjects provide the sugar that makes the visceral impact of unusual camera movement at least reasonable, if not attractive. Leslie Peter's *Loved and Lost* (1999, 0:02:45) connects sound and image in a reassuring way: the ambient sound of a car on a highway with a radio playing a sweetbitter country song; the granular colour flow of close-up clips of the roadway and the shoulder at highway speeds. Listening to the radio riding in a car, remembered acceleration, gently being pressed back into the seat, now at highway speed floating in the music, suspended, speeding up, slowing down, looking straight ahead. Why would we look to the side? *Loved and Lost* shows what we missed—the flowing colour and texture of the pavement and the shoulder, and cars passed. She respectfully does not tease us about where the Centre of the Earth is. The moving and the music are sweet.

Jeremy Drummond in *Spit* (2000, 0:02:27) makes us think about gravity. His look is in the opposite direction from the Centre of the Earth. Almost / not quite covering us in spit, how bold he allows us to be. A lover is here over us with spit to lubricate, a hungry mouth hovers with saliva to digest, we imagine ourselves a drooling stroke victim, or ache for the spittle of the dead. On our backs, we are looking up inside a volcano, inside a fountain looking from the Centre of the Earth, inside the living sounds of sucking and expectorating.

The extraordinary adventurer and near-martyr, Vanessa Renwick, dares us to look at the Centre of the Earth in *Crowdog*, (1998, 0:07:00). Bare human and animal feet walking on the skin of the Earth along a straight white line suspended far above the unseeable centre. Renwick is feeling with her sensitive appendages the surface which stops us from falling into death. Gravity has pressed sharp objects into her flesh she tells us as we move with her. The surface of the Earth has grabbed her feet with sticky urban slime. From the heart of darkness, she recollects: "I felt like I was that straight white line. I can't remember why I started wearing shoes again." *Crowdog* is not a soft adventure.

The sequence at the beginning of Gunilla Josephson's *(Loco)motive Series: The HEDDA Videos*, (2000, 0:20:30: 4:00 minutes excerpted with permission of the artist) presents an image with its bottom at the top. Such an image flips rapidly back and forth. The first interpretation is that we are being shown an upside down image like the accidentally inverted image we used to see in a projection of 35mm slides at home or school. The second interpretation is powered by our convention that the bottom of the image represents that which is closest to the Centre of the Earth in the scene depicted. This convention makes the opening sequence of her video strange. Her image flip transforms the repetitive movements of a woman bouncing on a couch into a peculiar metallic-sheened cherub repetitively and ineffectually struggling against some monstrous

green and gold flypaper made to look like furniture. Josephson's flip converts the image of an adult bouncing on a couch as a child might in our playful daily struggle with gravity, into a visual fable about an unequal struggle for life against an overpowering force. Josephson's audio track of train sounds further emphasizes the entrapment of her persona.

More than any other video considered here, Tom Sherman's and Jean Piche's, *Motion Pictures at English Bay* (1990, 0:06:20) is explicitly about camera motion. Sherman uses vigorous camera movement throughout. Piche's score responds directly to this motion. Shot from the exterior of a tall building, Sherman makes rapid horizontal, vertical and diagonal camera movements that flash by mountains, water, and an urban landscape. These sequences are interrupted three times by motionless images of a solitary male figure, two of which are rotated 90 degrees to their original orientations to the Centre of the Earth questioning the normal camera/image orientation. The three figures each include a red, green or blue colour bar calling attention to the physics of light. Sherman's complex camera movement pushes beyond the simple elegance of the single, unusual, but consistent camera orientations/movements used by Peters, Renwick, and Josephson. In doing so, the video becomes removed from the warm and emotive and more about just itself. Sherman and Piche use voice over narration, music, and the images of the rotated male figure to provide more conventional ways for the viewer to access the video. It is a bold venture into the "région sans sujet."

Quite the opposite is Samuel Chow's slick, man-loves-machine excursion into camera movement: *Sex Me Up* (2004, 0:05:10). A man holds a camera to his face, licking, and nuzzling it. This embraced camera repeatedly shows us close ups of the face moving in for these freely-taken intimacies. Gravity is flung around. Another camera with a conventional relation to the Centre of the Earth shows us a medium shot of these passionate man/ camera entanglements. In clips from the loved camera, the centre of the earth is momentarily lost before Chow cuts back to the second camera to re-present it again. In the end, semen-like congee silently drips down from the kitchen counter as cameras and man are motionless and the Centre of the Earth is back where it usually is for lover, loved and spent observer.

Steve Reinke's *Afternoon* (1999, 0:23:58) is an emblematic and rich essay on camera location and movement. So many subjects are raised over the course of the video and passed by that any particular subject disappears, and many complex camera movements are allowed to unfold in succession. *Afternoon* concludes with a tentative yet wonderful theorization: a modest proposal for rubberband ball-centred camera movement. Reinke's apartment-based improvisation also foregrounds the "...blury techno things" of camera as mechanism: edits using the lens cap, auto focus stress testing, and extreme close-ups.

Afternoon's wealth of camera movements stream by seemingly effortlessly. As Reinke cuts a rubber band in half, length-wise with the camera in his pocket, his activity moves in and out of the frame: "Oh, I am out of the frame, sorry ..." He rotates the camera 90 degrees to its normal relationship to the centre of the earth to view storage boxes. We then lose all sense of where the Centre of the Earth is as he shows a photograph of a face, a tongue and an asshole

from various directions--the camera moving and the picture moving at the same time. Reinke investigates aesthetic questions in his "test for good art" — Is the drawing more interesting than a view out the window of his apartment? He rotates the drawing upside down and back again. In the concluding sequence, he suggests using rubberband balls as a "...guide to raising your consciousness about your space...(and to) lead you to places you have never gone to." He releases the rubber band ball and then tracks it down underneath his desk nestled in amongst power cords and dust bunnies.

Reinke's *Afternoon* rolls through many subjects, many camera locations and movements, with engaging intrusions of the mechanisms and manipulations of the recording device. The unarticulated agreement between the image maker and the viewer has many conventions. Fundamental are relationships of the projected images to the Centre of the Earth. We are most comfortable with the projected image orientation being the orientation that we would see if we had been standing beside the camera at the time the image was made. This is not intellectual perversity or the unthinking adoption of a style. It is built into our visual and auditory systems. We are most comfortable when what the eye conveys to our brain about where the centre of the earth is, is the same as where our inner ear senses the centre of the earth is. Some people are more sensitive than others to nausea when there is dissimilarity, but over any lengthy period we all will become nauseous if the two messages conflict. When the dissimilarity continues for a lengthy time, for example, outside of the Earth's gravitational field, the brain eventually is able to separate these two sensory inputs and shift to visual clues alone for orienting the body.

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As embryos we floated. We were then pushed and pulled, sometimes with the aid of the silent midwife gravity who received and laid us against the Earth and held us there until we crawled, walked, ran. And then jumping, swinging, spinning as children we briefly exalted over gravity. We enjoyed the weightlessness at the top of the forward and backward swings of a swing, the outward tug of a different gravity when spinning around in circles. Our dizziness was the cost of a bodily victory over the hegemony of the centre of the Earth.

Gravity is in me and I am in gravity. Mostly it stays hidden in plain sight. Stepping into a darkened room illuminated by a glowing image, we prefer that the location of the Centre of the Earth remain unaltered, as such questioning can be nauseating. These eight videos are gentle explorations of darker corners, full of reassurance to the viewer. Yes, we know where the Centre of the Earth is. You are safe. Here, I will show you, but first let's have a little fun...

John Shipman, 2009-11-03 v7

Notes:

(1) The fabricated dialogue between Galileo and Simplicio is adapted from:

Galileo, *Dialogue on the Great World Systems*, T. Salusbury, translator, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1955

Herbert Zettl, *Television Production Handbook*, 6th ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997

Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion, 2000

Anton Ehrenzweig in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993

Adam Kirsch, "He Kept Marx Going," *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 22, 2009

Mark Wigley, a lecture in Toronto in 2008 and an interview accessed on 2009-10-12:

<http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2007/04/architectural-weaponry-interview-with.html>

(2) Vtape, a not-for-profit distributor of artists' videos, has a large collection of videos from the 1970s on. Vtape is located at 401 Richmond Street West, Toronto ON. Additional information about its collection is available at vtape.org

Beginning in November 2008 and continuing until July 2009, I spent four hours per week working my way through the Vtape preview collection of approximately 2,640 tapes. I handled all of them, reviewing the title, artist, and the description provided. Not surprisingly, camera movement was never described. A quick assessment based on the description and my familiarity or lack of familiarity with the artist led to viewing 905 videos partially or in entirety. I used fast forward frequently, searching for the visual clues showing unusual camera movement. I compiled a long list of 51 movement videos and from these selected eight videos that best presented different strategies for camera movement:

Leslie Peters, *Loved and Lost*, 1999, 0:02:45

Jeremy Drummond, *Spit*, 2000, 0:02:27

Vanessa Renwick, *Crowdog*, 1998, 0:07:00

Gunilla Josephson, *(Loco)motive Series: The HEDDA Videos*, 2000, 0:20:30,
(4:00 minutes excerpted with permission of the artist)

Tom Sherman and Jean Piche, *Motion Pictures at English Bay*, 1990, 0:06:20

Samuel Chow, *Sex Me Up*, 2004, 0:05:10

Steve Reinke, *Afternoon (March 22, 1999)*, 1999, 0:23:58

Martha Wilson, *Psychology of Camera Presence*, 1974, 0:08:50

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Dragging my video camera down the front steps: 30 years of unconventional camera movements from the Vtape collection was presented as a Curator's Talk on 21 November 2009 as part of Vtape's annual Tales from the Crypt series. The 60-minute program of eight short videos ran from 21 November to 19 December 2009.