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The Return of the Star Wipe

Jiří Anger, Queen Mary University of London, UK, j.anger@qmul.ac.uk

Veronika Hanáková, Charles University in Prague, CZ, veronika.hanakovaxp@gmail.com

This videographic essay explores the star wipe—a long-dismissed and oft-ridiculed editing transition—as an emblem of marginal and forgotten media artifacts. By examining its historical use across various forms of media, from classic television and feature films to online ephemera, we reveal how this seemingly trivial transition embodies complex intersections of technology, memory, and aesthetic value.

Creators' Statement

One of the key potentialities of videographic criticism is its ability to bring attention to media, artifacts, interfaces, and applications that are often considered marginal, outdated, or unworthy of academic attention. Video-editing software's capacity to shift focus toward the minor (Binotto 2020; Anger 2024: 158–70) can not only reveal subtle nuances in film style and representation, but also give contours to phenomena whose status as archival, memory, or research objects remains contested or ambiguous.

Our videographic essay introduces an epitome of such artifacts—the star wipe. This peculiar editing transition connects two images through the shape of a star, placing it within the broader family of wipes, which replace one shot with another by progressively pushing it off the screen. Unlike dissolves or fades, wipes draw attention to the act of transition itself (Conrath 2023: 37), engaging the audience with graphically prominent shapes, from a simple vertical dividing line to a complicated 3D explosion (Bowen 2024: 163–7). Among these, the star wipe stands out as perhaps the most ridiculed. For many professional editors and critics, the star wipe has become a symbol of amateurism, laziness, excess, and poor taste—a visual cliché that, by the mid-2010s, had even disappeared from major editing programs such as Adobe Premiere and Final Cut. Yet, despite its apparent obsolescence, the star wipe persists, sparking occasional waves of nostalgia and revival across social media and popular culture milestones such as *Better Call Saul.*

By tracing the history of star wipes across different media and time periods, this essay explores the star wipe's ephemeral yet surprisingly resilient appeal in the cultural imagination. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's theory of the gimmick (Ngai 2020), we examine how this paradoxical character of the star wipe captures the bond between aesthetic value and questions of temporality and labor. The gimmick can be defined as an ambivalent and unstable form that is simultaneously "overperforming and underperforming, encoding either too much or not enough time, and fundamentally gratuitous yet strangely essential" (Ibid.: 6). In other words, it is typically a flashy trick or feature that grabs our attention but often disappoints through its shallowness, quickly becoming outdated. Still, there are gimmicks that somehow endure, and the star wipe is one of them—perhaps because it reflects a core tension of our time: the anxiety over how much work and time should be invested in creating something that truly lasts in an era of rapid technological change. The irony, of course, is that this anxiety is captured in an artifact that is not only (seemingly) trivial but also, by its very transitional nature, resists being considered a tangible object in the traditional sense.

How can videographic scholarship investigate the mechanisms that transform such an artifact into a gimmick? The first step is to identify existing instances of the star wipe. While it is impossible to catalog these transitions on a mass scale—given their fleeting nature and long-standing neglect in film criticism, academic scholarship, and traditional archiving—we have assembled a substantial collection of star wipes, alongside other types of wipes for context, from the early 1900s to the present. This archive draws from a wide array of sources, including films, television, video art, home movies, music videos, video games, and online content. As traditional film and media archives generally lack documentation of specific editing transitions—particularly those as idiosyncratic as star wipes—we relied primarily on digital archives and catalogs (*Internet Archive*, *TV Tropes*, *Media History Digital Library*, and others), as well as social media, discussion forums, and consultations with scholars, archivists, curators, experimental filmmakers, and video essayists.

Thus far, our search for existing star wipes has revealed a few notable patterns. First, aside from a handful of canonical examples such as *The Simpsons*, *Better Call Saul*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, most of the collected instances come from lesser-known sources and ephemeral formats, including trailers, commercials, game shows, demo reels, and tutorials. We have also identified star wipes in experimental film and video art, where they are sometimes used for defamiliarizing, subversive, or queering effects, as seen in the works of figures such as George Kuchar and Ryan Trecartin. Our research also showed that the star wipe keeps finding its way into unexpected territories, from recent feature films such as *The Munsters* or *Fire of Love* (both 2022) to online ephemera,

including a Czech YouTube political satire video and even a campaign video for Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, simply assembling these found star wipes into a compilation or supercut would be insufficient. In many cases, the star wipes we encountered exist in forms quite different from those in which they were originally designed and received by audiences. Further, our memories of these "actual" star wipes are often entangled with imagined or misremembered instances—the half-remembered star wipe from a commercial, music video, porn film, or PowerPoint presentation that, upon closer inspection, turns out to be unprovable or entirely false.

To bring the star wipe's ephemeral, ambiguous, and transitional character into the spotlight, we have drawn on another key affordance of videographic criticism—its capacity to portray research as a literal search for its object across various interfaces and material forms. This is where we built on the "desktop documentary" format, which relies on screen capturing software to simulate the experience of navigating a computer or smartphone screen (Kiss 2021; Anger and Lee 2023). This self-reflexive and media-reflexive method allows us to uncover the star wipe's inherent relationship to technological contexts. Across the many shapes the star wipe has taken—whether as a photochemical trace created through an optical printer (Dunn 1934), a live effect produced during television broadcast via a video switcher (McMahan 1957), or a playful, DIY flourish in home movies and school presentations enabled by early digital editing programs (Wilson 1995)—there remains the same graphic simplicity, yet also similar patterns of decay and disappearance. It is no wonder, then, that today's online sphere often preserves only barely discernible phantoms and silhouettes of past star wipes, and the role of the desktop documentary is to foreground the labor involved in bringing them back to life.

Therefore, building on our previous work (e.g., Anger and Žák 2021; Hanáková, Tremčinský, and Anger 2023), this essay adopts the desktop approach not merely to map the present, but to develop a computer-based method of "experimental media archaeology." Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever define this approach as "a form of media archaeology that is driven by a desire to produce experimental knowledge regarding past media usages, developments, and practices" (Fickers and van den Oever 2022: 18–19). By confronting the computer desktop with its repressed histories as well as with older media regimes and gestures, our video seeks to expose the impure, composite, and sedimented nature of our online "home," while also exploring the variety of artifacts through which we can (re)construct it. The persistent familiarity of the star wipe amidst all these interfaces suggests that in the face of increasing automation and control of our home spaces by tech giants, the appropriation of forgotten, obsolete, or even tacky artifacts presents a meaningful strategy for asserting agency.

To highlight this strategy from the perspective of someone encountering the star wipe within today's online media environment, the desktop documentary—with its capacity to simulate subjective experience—once again provides a fertile framework. That said, if our aim is to "experience rather than intellectually appropriate the acts of using media as social and cultural practices" (Ibid.: 28), it is also necessary to venture beyond the screen—particularly when our task is to prove that the star wipe transition constitutes an object in the first place. This is why our embodied presence throughout the essay plays a significant role—whether by breaking the fourth wall or attempting to "touch" the star wipe itself. While Jiří asserts his presence through an explanatory yet ironic voice-over, Veronika does so through the invention of whimsical editing solutions that expand on the star wipe's legacy. This ongoing reconstruction of the star wipe as a research object is inseparable from the ongoing reconstruction of ourselves as scholars and feeling subjects.

The results of this experimental tinkering with the star wipe remain deliberately open-ended. For some, the star wipe and its afterlives may still serve as a symptom of online capitalism, of its planned obsolescence and routinized innovation, and its shortening of memory and commodification of nostalgia. Yet, as we have argued, it can also lay these mechanisms bare in all their contradictions and invite us to "edit" together an alternative world of media production—one that values playfulness over professionalism, imperfection over polish, and spontaneity over algorithmic precision.

Note

Parallel to the video essay, we have produced a feature article that situates the star wipe in the context of memory of editing transitions. While there are overlaps between the video and the texts, the overall focus, aims, and contributions are distinct.

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Biographies

Jiří Anger is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen Mary University of London and a researcher at the National Film Archive in Prague, where he also serves as an editor for the peer-reviewed academic journal *Iluminace*. His research focuses on the intersections of media theory, videographic scholarship, and archival practice, with a particular interest in media archaeology, digital obsolescence, and the cultural afterlives of early video technologies.

He is the author of two monographs, three edited volumes, and numerous journal articles and video essays, with work appearing in journals such as *Screen*, *NECSUS*, *[in] Transition*, *Film-Philosophy* (where he won the Article Award in 2022), and *The Moving Image*. His most recent book, *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (Bloomsbury, Thinking Media series, 2024), was awarded the Runner-Up prize for Best Monograph by the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS).

Anger's recent collaborative video essays, often exploring themes of digital nostalgia and experimental media archaeology, have also received significant recognition. One of

these works, *Cycles of Labour: In the Metaverse, We Will Be Housewives* (2023, co-authored with Veronika Hanáková and Martin Tremčinský), won the BAFTSS Award for Best Videographic Criticism.

Veronika Hanáková is a PhD candidate in new media studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. Her research explores the materiality, memory, and preservation of digital images and artifacts, with a particular focus on DVD features and interfaces. She has published articles and video essays in journals such as *NECSUS*, *[in]Transition*, *Iluminace*, and *Tecmerin*.

She recently guest-edited a special issue, "Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media," for *Iluminace* (no. 2/2024). Together with Martin Tremčinský and Jiří Anger, she co-authored *Cycles of Labour: In the Metaverse, We Will Be Housewives* (2023), which won the BAFTSS Award for Best Videographic Criticism. She also co-curates the Audiovisual Essay section at the Marienbad Film Festival with Jiří Anger.

Reviewed by Neelakantan Keshavan, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad

What does the brightness of the star wipe signify?

Isn't the star wipe just really a really loud visual noise? An optical shout-out? An annoying, arresting, distracting stop? My viewing flow stumbles. I stop from going along. I stop being the type that I usually am: the one that tends to go along easily.

I often allow myself to be Netflixed. The everyday ritual consists of this: Open the app, browse the already-viewed viewing shelf. Sift through, cursor-cruise, until I touch play to enter, pause, zoom past the introductions, race forward, skip the long line of names claiming credits even before we have watched the film. I get to where the movie begins. The screened world is total. A make-believe stitched together when I'm glued to the screen. But it's also just never only that. That's what the star wipe tells me. That there's more.

I would hate a star wipe in a Wim Wenders film. It would make *Perfect Days* so much less than perfect. I loved the transition from when Hirayama slips into sleep, reading in the warm-lit, night-light and wakes up to the softly transformed blue morning. Though I can, I really can't imagine a star wipe as a transition there. Its anti-aesthetic would've woken me up. Waking up would have made me re-think the "special" in special-effects. The ones which stand out sore. Dissolves are some of the smoothest of transitions, even on PowerPoints. There's no such sophistication with the star wipe. Sophistry could mean wisdom, masterfulness, intelligence, prudence, etc. but could also stand for deceit. The deceit of technique, of the workings behind that we cannot and learn not to see. Software labour screened out by the touch-based sophistication

of viewing features. "The Return of the Star Wipe" mentions labour and also asks: why labour?

The re-surfacing of the star wipe is a noise that wakes me up from the slumber of everyday electronic LED smoothness. I am reminded that the transition in between is a connecting passage, a corridor stretching between two different spaces. I can see why this video essay should be a core member of the essay collection at *[in]Transition*: the medium in transition. Better than the medium that is intransitive. The fluid dynamics of images.

The star wipe is very much a deviant device. It points to the workings behind the curtain, beyond the projection space. And it does what heritage tends to do—bring in an a priori time and place. A place out-of-joint. It brings forth technique to remind us that there are appearances that technologies tend to maintain. And why at times it is the tactility of the craft that reminds us of this through its re-surface. As critique.

Should we preserve this odd stick-out? A behavioural gesture from an altogether other time? Perhaps it needs to be seen as in-transition. Against the standards of flow conventions and of the most present and immediate of times. The "Return of the Star Wipe" asks: what would it be like to cut out a star-shape from a flat surface? With footage that actually performs the cutting out, with the knife and a piece of paper, the star wipe becomes a critical-tactile, handmade operation. The "cut" reveals the star as a hole.

The "Return of the Star Wipe" presents the star wipe as an academic object. And that is one of the essay's politics. To bring the visible invisibility of the edit-stitch into reflective visibility. To neither fetishize it (which would mean to take it seriously) nor give it inattention. I would prefer to use the term "infra-ordinary." A Georges Perec term, used to dust out the everyday. To clear it of its familiarity, of its stickiness to everyday reality. The term shows how there is a possibility of looking at the everyday without the memory of it being just ordinary. Philip Auslander, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* says the "liveness" of the real is a creation of mediation itself. Media is seamed. It's not as seamless.

At least not as much as Netflix makes it out to be. A detail need not remain hidden behind the conspicuousness of the plot and the story. The "Return of the Star Wipe" activates many thoughts on the necessity of staying awake while cruising swiftly down algorithms.

Critical theory critiquing itself would be theory of the right kind. Do I need to cite here the rich chorus of voices, multi-timbred, multi-pitched, demonstrating the necessity of this awareness?

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Reviewed by Annie van den Oever, University of Groningen

On the Return of the Repressed or the Aesthetic and Political Significance of the Star Wipe Today

Surprisingly gimmicky and goofy-looking at first sight, "The Return of the Star Wipe" is a well-researched, well-curated video essay on the use of the star wipe today. It features a long-dismissed and oft-ridiculed editing transition technique that few experts were sorry to get rid of, given its rough, clumsy, and unpolished aesthetics. However, on a deeper level, Jiří Anger and Veronika Hanáková's video essay is a monument to an era we are cut off from by algorithmic media. It is tempting to read the playful, edgy, and *energizing* retro aesthetics of this purposefully imperfect video as a *revenge* on the pseudo-glamorous social media regimes and their standardized looks. Rather than a *return* to what they call a "seemingly trivial media artifact," the video is a tribute to a retro technique that disappeared yet reemerged over time in significant ways (e.g., in video art) as a *defamiliarizing* technique that, as it happens, was also used in early cinema. Like the timely discussion of the split-screen technique, which Catherine Grant, Katherina Loew, and Malte Hagener only recently returned to (in 2024 in *Technics, Media in the Digital Age*), the star wipe is yet another marginal technique that offers a perfect ground for a historiographic and aesthetic probing of the genealogies of film, media, and technology more broadly.

"The Return of the Star Wipe" defines itself as *desktop research* and it is rooted in a true investment in archive-driven research on the star wipe by film and media scholars Anger and Hanáková, who are obviously intimately familiar with image archives and curatorial practices, bring to light an abundance of historical examples of its use in different media all over history.

Most importantly, perhaps, this video is a great contribution to the video essay genre *as a new research method* typically rooted in the 21st-century digital editing practices from which the video essay as a genre emerged. As a research method, the video essay brought (back) so many film and media theorists to the hands-on dimension of *doing* while thinking. I read "The Return of the Star Wipe," and its emphasis on its making, as a plea for the video essay as a tool for *doing* research, or, more precisely, as a tool to

think while *tinkering,* in this case tinkering with the editing devices they are thinking about. In other words, they are doing what media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo called "thinkering" and what Andreas Fickers and I turned into a program under the name "experimental media archaeology," to which Anger and Hanáková refer. One of the things this brings to researchers is a return (of sorts) to the experimental and avant-garde practices evoked in this video. It begs the question to what extent these experiments can be understood as re-doings or re-enactments of elements of cinema's earlier recording, editing, and projection practices; and whether a video-driven research practice like this one can perhaps more easily address questions concerning techniques, their uses, and effects on audiences.

If we look more closely at this video's research methods from this perspective, it is clear that the figure of the editor or "*monteur*" in French, precisely an engineer-like figure, is used for research purposes. Elizaveta Svilova Vertov springs to mind, seated behind her editing table, engaged in a practice not unlike that of the video essay makers, who do their "desktop research" as creative makers, curators, and archivists with access to historical image archives. What this in fact brings back to us is the research methods of the avant-gardes, of Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein. Seeing the great potential of Benjamin's methods of assembling and rearranging (text) *fragments* as the driving force behind his writing is so much easier today, within the context of the 21st century video essay. As Hannah Arendt indicates in her introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations*, the method goes well beyond just "tearing fragments out of their context and ranging them afresh," as it is intimately connected with archival and curatorial strategies with a known heuristic and hermeneutic merit. The research potential of this method, used in the Arcades Project, and in so many video essays today, can hardly be overestimated. In addition, as Antonio Somaini reminded us in his book on Eisenstein, the "anachronic montage of examples taken from very different historical and cultural contexts," used "to carry over the principle of montage into history," was the tool *par excellence* for Eisenstein's thinking about a "general history of cinema."

In some ways this playful video essay on editing can be valued as a reminder if not a re-enactment of such historical "ways of doing" driven by *collectives* rather than by individuals, under the dictum of Constructivism, with two archivist-curator-engineers pushing each other to try *AGAIN AGAIN AGAIN.*

This brings me to excavations as epistemological subversions. I suggest that one of the most interesting ways to value this excavation of a forgotten technique is that it creates alternatives to the standardized and mainstream approaches to media cultures and media histories it subverts. As the makers of the video say of the star wipe as an editing technique: the flamboyance of its shape and its clumsiness is obvious and,

compared to the idea of an invisible style, it ends up drawing attention to editing as a laborious, time-based process.

The aesthetic of the video essay itself is reminiscent of avant-garde art and its subversive powers. This essay is also timely in this particular sense. To those of us who read the AI-era rhetoric as all about an aggressive form of control, the abundant and goofy use of the star wipe as part of the video's aesthetic is significant and subversive and reenergizing in its own right: it is a plea for the return of a forgotten and marginalized (film) technique at a moment of distinct aesthetic and political significance.

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