

-Research Article-

## In Search of Temporalities in Video Art: Ali Kazma's Aesthetic Gestures

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### **Abstract**

*The relation between videographic images and their production technique conducts us to the notion of time because it is through this temporal correlation that aesthetic qualities such as temporalities, durations, and rhythms are formed. This study conducts two complementary inquiries related to the above-mentioned correlation: The first one is the construction of synthetic temporalities through specific parameters resulting from aesthetic gestures that video artists implement to create an experience of temporality. The aesthetic gestures considered in this study include repetition, mixing, and dilation/contraction, which is discussed around Douglas Hofstadter's notion of self-referentiality and strange loops. The second inquiry is deciphering some possible traces that video images leave in collective memory due to juxtaposed temporalities that connect images. This second part is shaped following the methodology of Aby Warburg, which he implements through the notion of pathosformel.*

*I argue that the videographic images, as a technical and conceptual form, have a time-building model that also participates in new revisions of memory and collective history. Chosen works from the series Obstructions (2006-2011) of the Turkish video artist Ali Kazma are analyzed formally to visualize my argument.*

**Keywords:** video art, time, Ali Kazma, aesthetics, technics.

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**Video Sanatında Zamanın Peşinde:  
Ali Kazma'da Estetik Jestler**

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**Özet**

*Video sanatındaki hareketli imgeler ve yaratım teknikleri arasındaki ilişki bizi doğrudan zaman kavramına yönlendirir: zamansalılık, süre ve ritim gibi estetik özellikler ancak bu zamansal ilişki üzerinden kendilerini gösterir. Bu çalışmanın amacı bahsedilen ilişkiyi merkezine alarak birbirini tamamlayan iki düşünceyi açmaktır. Bunlardan ilki video sanatçılarının tekrar, miksaj, genişleme/daralma gibi estetik jestler aracılığıyla, zaman kavramını görsel imgeler üzerinden deneyimlemek için yarattıkları sentetik zamansallıkları araştırmaktan geçmektedir. Bu ilk araştırmanın merkezinde D. Hobstfatder'in özgöndergesel ve 'garip döngüler' kavramları yer almaktadır. İkinci araştırmada ise imgelerin anlamlı bir şekilde bir araya gelmesini sağlayan zamansallıklar aracılığıyla videografik görüntülerin kolektif bellekte bıraktığı izler deşifre edilmektedir. Aby Warburg'un pathosformel kavramı bu sorgulamanın metodolojik zeminini oluşturur.*

*Çalışmanın tezi, teknik ve kavramsal bir form olarak videografik imgelerin kolektif bellek ve tarihin yeniden gözden geçirilmesine de katkı sağlayan, kendilerine has bir zaman-ınşa modeli olduğunu sunmaktır. Bu çalışmayı görselleştirmek için Türkiyeli video sanatçısı Ali Kazma'nın Engellemeler (2006-2011) serisinin formel analizi yapılacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** video sanatı, zaman, Ali Kazma, estetik, teknik

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## Introduction

In *Worldview in Painting-Art and Society*, Meyer Schapiro argues that there are mainly three points on which one can build bridges between philosophy and art. These are the unconscious worldview, the systematic style, and the active engagement with problems. He writes that “it is in the forms and expressions that philosophical students of art have found telling analogies with art” (Schapiro, 1999:34). This article considers a selection of video works made by the Turkish video artist Ali Kazma that engage significantly with what Schapiro calls the bridges between philosophy and art. The relationship between images of Ali Kazma and their communication technique through aesthetic gestures such as repetitions, mixing, and dilatation/contraction of durations bring us to a philosophical problem that we could put as the experience of time.

This relationship of temporal correlation gives rise to two complementary ideas: The first one investigates a description of aesthetic gestures that the video artist used/implemented to create for the spectator an experience of temporality through images. At this step, D. Hofstadter’s notion of self-referentiality and strange loops are relevant to visualize the gestures in question. The second idea is shaped around a critical inquisition of collective memory. Collective memory is a collection of excitements formed in the mental archives following the laws made up of a new way of understanding images, by their juxtaposition (Kaptan, 2018: ix). This second part is shaped following the art historical methodology of the art historian Aby Warburg, which he implements through the notion of pathosformel.

I believe that Ali Kazma’s video works produced in the last decade are the best examples to assess this relationship between time and moving images. I have two main reasons for choosing his series *Obstructions (Ali Kazma, 2006-2011)* to visualize my argument. First, the formal features of his videos communicate the sense of duration with the viewers. His works concentrate on the ways in which time is regulated, structured, and rearranged in rhythmic patterns through artistic conception. (Baykal, 2015: 14). Second, the recurring motifs of human body gestures complete and concretize Warburg’s notion of pathosformel which will be explained in detail below.

### Patterns of the loop: What connects Aristotle, Hofstadter, and Warburg?

What does Aristotle’s prime mover do? The answer might seem obvious if you know or at least thought about eternal motion from a philosophical perspective. One would argue ‘It probably gives rise to the motion of the first sphere’. However, the answer is a bit more complicated than this. According to Aristotle, the prime mover essentially contemplates. It thinks about itself; the object of its thought is itself. Therefore, it is ignorant of the cosmos. The description of the prime mover in *Metaphysics*, as a divine thought whose thinking is a thinking on thinking, has a self-referential character:

And thinking in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought, and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e., the essence is thought. But it is active when it possesses this object. Therefore, the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If then, God is always [...] eternal. (Aristotle, 1996: 479)

In other words, the prime mover or God described by Aristotle does not have the attributes of the Christian God: First, the prime mover should be ignorant about its creatures, and should not be thinking about them, otherwise, it would derogate from its perfection since thinking about anything except what is perfect would be something not perfect. And this necessary self-

referential thinking is related to the perfect circular movement of heavenly bodies as they are moved by the admiration of the prime mover. Therefore, in very simple terms if the thinking of God is perfect because it is self-referential then it should be looking like a perfect circle if we ought to visualize its thinking. This is also why the movement of heavens is thought to be circular by Aristotle: "Something which is always moved with an unceasing motion, which is motion in a circle; and this is plain not in theory only but in fact. Therefore, the first heaven must be eternal." (Aristotle, 1996: 471)

Let's keep in mind this self-referential description of the prime mover as a perfect circle made around 350 BC by Aristotle before moving to Hofstadter's arguments because their relationship will be shown by that trait of circularity and self-referentiality.

The main argument of the popular book titled *Gödel, Escher, Bach* by Hofstadter, could be summarized as pointing out the common elements or the hidden parallelism between the mathematician Gödel, the painter Escher, and the musician Bach. Hofstadter, as a professor of cognitive sciences, explores the sense of self in relation to the external world, consciousness, analogy-making, artistic creation, and mathematics. He is exploring how Escher's engravings, Bach's composition, and Gödel's mathematical theory end up in a situation of self-reference and recursion.

Recursion comes from the Latin word "recurrere" which means to run back. Like in a loop like in a perfect circle. Hofstadter states that "recursion is based on the same thing happening on several different levels at once. But the events on different levels are not exactly the same-rather, we find some invariant feature in them, despite many ways in which they differ." (Hofstadter, 1999: 148-149) You can discover it in Escher's drawings and if you are familiar with Bach's compositions, you can hear the canon repeating itself, or find it in the number theory of Gödel. The writer calls these patterns strange loops. Interestingly, this idea of a "strange loop" engages significantly with the self-referential description of the prime mover by Aristotle.

Hofstadter writes furthermore that "Implicit in the concept of strange loop is the concept of infinity, since what else is a loop but a way of representing an endless process in a finite way?" (1999: 15) Hence, his argumentation could point us a way to understand the need to think about a perfect being necessarily together with the notion of eternity. It might be further noted that the "strange loop" notion is the key to understanding the consciousness which stages the question of the correlation between the above ideas and the art historian Aby Warburg.

Aby Warburg is an art historian and a cultural theorist. Yet what he does looks very close to the philosophy of art because he creates concepts that would help us when reading images. One of them is called pathosformel. It is an "emotionally charged visual trope" (Becker, 2013:1) that recur throughout images in Western Europe. When in 1889 he was writing his thesis on the *Birth of Venus* by Botticelli he sees that images leave imprinting unconsciously in the collective memory and he argues that the bodily gestures or the folding of draperies in Renaissance paintings could be traced back to antiquity which is obvious, but they can also be found in the image-making habits of the 20th century. As Rampley states, "Inheritance for Warburg is referring to the Roman and Greek antiquity which he sees as providing the basis of western European culture, not the preservation but transformation" (2001:306). In short, the pathosformel is a methodology to point out the unconscious persistence of motifs throughout the history of images. The pathosformel as methodology would vehicle an understanding of the motif of strange loops, both as a visual and a conceptual motif, throughout the history of art and ideas. It would therefore help us analyze the video works of Ali Kazma under consideration.

After a formal description of the video works by Ali Kazma, I will stage the question of temporality in videographic images by referring to this tripartite basis. My first premise would be relating Aristotle's self-referential unmoved mover to the concept of time due to its attribute of eternity. My second premise is the expression of the idea of self-referentiality or the recursion as an external expression of human consciousness which shows itself in very sophisticated human activities such as arts. And the third premise of my argumentation is the methodology of pathosformel which would also serve as a bridge between the previous two premises.

### Strange loops in Ali Kazma's video work

Ali Kazma is an internationally established video artist whose working on video art since the last quarter century. In his series *Obstructions* he focuses on the working human body. During these activities related to work, bodies are indicative of repetitive movements that create an alienation effect on the viewer. As one art critic writes about him, he captures "time variations, gestures, and sometimes abandons spaces and attests to the need to save moments of human experience from oblivion." (Scordia, 2017) *Obstructions* are composed of videos produced between 2006 and 2011 such as *Brain Surgeon* (2006), *Clock Master* (2006), *Slaughterhouse* (2007), *Rolling Mills* (2007), *Jean Factory* (2008), *Dancer* (2009), *Casa di Moda* (2009), *Taxidermist* (2009), *Studio Céramiste* (2009) and *Clerk* (2011). These video works are concerned with human activity obstructed by time or resisting it.

Ali Kazma is obsessed with the idea of time and human activity and the videos "concern the processes through which time is controlled, arranged and re-organized" (Baykal, 2015:14). The artist himself describes his works in a way that engages significantly with the notion of time. Here is a quotation from an interview he made in 2017:

I started working on *Obstructions* about 12 years ago and the series is actually very much linked with the Second Law of thermodynamics and the idea of entropy. If I break a glass, I can never put it back together exactly in the same way. The minute we are born we start to develop, but this also means that we will die. During a survey I was doing in my neighborhood in Istanbul, I went to different types of shops and I noticed that a lot of the activities these people were involved with were linked with the maintenance and the repair of things, or with giving orders to things, that will end up turning into disorder. As human beings, we always try to keep a balance, but it's bound to deteriorate. This is why I called the series *Obstructions* to the second law of thermodynamics but then I cut it down to *Obstructions*. (Kazma, 2017)

*Clock Master* is a 15-minute single-channel video from *Obstructions*. The reason behind choosing this video as a sample work amongst others from the series is the idea that it could be seen as a meditation on the very concept of time. It is a video in the documentary style that demonstrates the complex process of making a mechanical clock. The talented clockmaker is seen in the video methodically designing and putting the fine parts of an antique pocket watch together by hand. The audience is made aware of the fine craftsmanship and perseverance needed to make such a precise instrument through a series of close-up images and detailed observations.

The video shows a close-up view of the clockmaker's hands, tools, and the clock mechanism, emphasizing the precision and skill required for the task. The movements of the clockmaker and the sounds of the tools produce a cyclical and repeating pattern that is looped throughout the entire video, highlighting the repetitive nature of labor and the cyclical nature of time. The loop in this video not only captures the essence of the clockmaker's work (he disassembles and reassembles an old pocket watch) but also serves as a metaphor for the human experience of time and labor. The cyclical motion of the clockmaker's hands and the repetition of the sound of the tools evoke the feeling of the monotonous repetition of daily life and the passing of time. In addition, the loop also represents the mechanical and rhythmic

nature of the clock itself, symbolizing human attempts to control and measure time. Overall, the loop, here, captures the complex relationship between time, labor, and human experience.

In his other videos from the same series *Obstructions*, repeated images are often those of gestures belonging to human bodies such as hands stamping, welding, weaving, or car-building. In each video of the series *Obstructions*, Kazma employs a series of rules or methods such as repetition and juxtaposition of images that force the viewer to focus on the recursive and self-referential patterns that create a sense of timelessness or infinity. The use of close-up shots and limited camera angles creates a recursive pattern that draws the viewer in and creates a sense of timelessness. These videos, focusing most of the time on the hands of the subjects and the repetitive motion of the work, create a strange loop of motion that seems to go on forever. By highlighting the beauty and complexity of human work, Kazma challenges viewers to reconsider their relationship with time and the natural world.

### **Repetitive unconscious motifs: loops and infinity**

I argue that the technique of repetition or recursion that we see in Ali Kazma's videos, brings us to the idea of time. The loop itself is the visualization of the illusionary passing of time. With insisting on the recursive images, the feeling of duration disappears as if there is no past no future but an eternal present, recurring again and again. In addition to this, the repetition or the recurrence also communicates the feeling of rhythm. And the rhythm is about movement hence it is about time.

If we go back to our tripartite basis, we can interfere that the God of Aristotle as a self-referential, perfect circle has some similar characteristics to our intuition of time. The unmoved mover is eternally present, it exists in an eternal present. It does not have a beginning or an end. Similarly, its thinking does not have a beginning nor an end like the concept of time itself.

When we relate this idea to Douglas Hofstadter, then the perfect representation of human consciousness as a self-referential image could also be traced back to Aristotle's prime mover in the sense that the self-referentiality in human consciousness builds on the capability of the mind in representing itself as a recursive and self-referential image. The image is not physical, but rather an abstract representation of the mind's own functioning, similar to the image of a perfect-thinking being God.

At that step, using Aby Warburg's concept of pathosformel as a methodology would bring us to the persistence of unconscious motifs. And in that case, the motif of self-referentiality or recursion as a perfect circular motion is traceable in Aristotle's conception of a prime mover as a thought, Escher's men stuck in the circularity till eternity as an image, and in Ali Kazma's works as a moving image.

Aby Warburg's method for analyzing and interpreting the emotional content of images in art history involves identifying and tracing the recurrence of certain expressive gestures or forms, in our case, strange loops. These forms, for Warburg, are considered to be deeply embedded in cultural memory and can be seen as carriers of emotional content. Ali Kazma's use of repetitive movements and gestures captured in close-ups creates a sense of cyclical time and continuity that can be seen as a form of strange loops. In this way, strange loops as emotional forms (pathosformel) can be interpreted as the search for infinity and transcendence of human beings throughout history.

If we further analyze Ali Kazma's video works, we can relate the images to "memento mori", the Latin phrase meaning "remember that you will die." It's an idea referring to the mortality of the human body, which gives rise to the feeling of incapacity or helplessness in the face of time, like in the myth of Sisyphus. The video series *Obstructions* focus on labor, particularly the manual and repetitive kind, reminding us of human life's transient nature.

The human body's imperfectness against the perfectness of God or time. Can we say that the loop exists as an unconscious motif? Can we argue that the unconscious assumption of time as something eternal and perfect and the human body as something doomed to decay, imperfect is the very motif that is recurring throughout not just the history of images but also the history of thought in the form of self-referentiality, and recurrence? I argue that the moving images make this idea more explicit as it exposes time as it is. Thus, the moving image is always in a state of becoming in time. The time is presented / communicated in a more mental way where becoming is made more explicit.

### Conclusion

Whether these strange loops can be found in Aristotle's prime mover, Escher's paintings, or Ali Kzma's videos, they create a sense of transcendence and depth through self-referentiality. The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the strange loop patterns in Ali Kzma's videos challenge us to contemplate the nature of time and our relationship with it. Whether it shows itself as a concept as the eternal prime mover of Aristotle or the recursive strange loop that was drawn by Escher, these patterns of recursiveness and self-referentiality encourage us to consider the deeper aspects of our collective memory.

Moreover, the idea of memento mori has been a common theme in art history, particularly in still-life paintings, where objects such as skulls, hourglasses, and wilted flowers serve as reminders of mortality. Future studies could fruitfully explore the motif of "memento mori" in Ali Kzma's video art, not only in the series *Obstructions* but also in *Resistance*. For instance, his videos can be seen as a modern-day interpretation of the "memento mori", using the medium of video to capture the beauty and transience of human labor, which can be an interesting topic for future research.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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