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Un-sitely Mediations: A Gestural Approach to Animated Citationality

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Abstract: This essay explores the critical affordances of *animated citationality* through ethnographic engagement with independent animation filmmakers and analysis of a scene in the animated short film *Have a Nice Dog!* (2020), by Damascus-born, Berlin-based filmmaker Jalal Maghout. I develop the notions of *animated citationality* and *displaced agency* to underscore how animated relays of agency (Manning & Gershon 2013; Gell 1998) and the semiotic dimensions of "liveliness" (Silvio 2010; Cholodenko 2014) entwine with practices of citation that reflexively displace discursive events from their contexts of emergence (Nakassis 2013a, b; Derrida 1988; Butler 1997). Here, I argue that Maghout uses animation's citational affordances to illuminate the tension between experiences of mediated freedom and geopolitical constraint. His film confronts us with a troubling chiasm: in the context of ramifying border regimes, the mobility of signs and their citations becomes inversely proportionate to the mobility of (some) persons.

Keywords: animation; citationality; displaced agency; mobility and immobility

Opening

"In Damascus, surrounded by war, an isolated man becomes increasingly lost in fantasies of escaping and the inner dialogues with his dog." This is the published log line for the 14-minute animated film *Have a Nice Dog!* (2020) by Damascus-born, Berlin-based filmmaker Jalal Maghout. While the tension between the protagonist's geopolitical enclosure and imagined escape emerges through the film's diegesis, it is also articulated formally

through animation's semiotic affordances—in particular, through the medium's capacity to reflexively cite and thereby unsettle conventionalized discourses of digital mobility and (im)migration. In what follows, I trace how Maghout uses animation's citational affordances to illuminate the contradictions between contemporary experiences of mediated freedom and geopolitical constraint. Although similar tensions inflect the works of other Berlin-based animation filmmakers with whom I engaged during two years of ethnographic research, *Have a Nice Dog!* offers unique insights into the critical leverage of *animated citationality*. For Maghout, the paradoxes of im/mobility became increasingly apparent during his decade-long residence in Germany. Not only does he sustain ties to family and friends in Syria, whose possibilities of movement are fraught, but he also continues to navigate document-based discrimination when travelling beyond the borders of the European Union. As he notes, *Have a Nice Dog!* can travel many places where he cannot.

The situation of im/mobility that the film depicts speaks to a tension inherent to contemporary "worldliness" and opens onto a larger problematic. Although this essay's analysis is grounded in semiotic and linguistic anthropological theory, it also addresses media studies literatures that emphasize the "utopian" dimensions of animation's mobility of forms. This emphasis runs the risk of backgrounding the contexts in which such formal mobility takes on a liberatory valence—namely, contexts of social, geographical, and political constraint. By drawing out the film's critique, I illustrate how independent animation filmmakers like Maghout embrace the medium's unique citational affordances while subverting its media-ideological associations. My hope is that this analysis can enrich semiotic anthropological theories of animation from the ground of artistic practice.

Animated Citationality

Before proceeding: what do we mean by citation and citationality? In Jacques Derrida's (1988) formulation, *citationality* describes the inherent propensity of signs to be displaced from their historical, spatial, social, and linguistic-syntagmatic contexts, and knit into new terrain (Derrida 1988:9; Wirth 2020:191). Taking issue with J.L. Austin's opposition between performative utterances and their "parasitic" citations, Derrida argues that the possibility of being cited (and thus "parasited") is a precondition for the performative as such. Only insofar as performative speech acts invoke preexisting conventions can they achieve "felicitous" effects within "appropriate" contexts (cf. Austin 1961).

Reframing Derrida's intervention in Peircean terms, Constantine Nakassis asserts: "citationality is the Thirdness of a First, the law that all signs must be *able* to be cited, even if they happen, in any particular context, not to be" (2013a). Nakassis further suggests that if *citation* describes the act of "re-presenting" a discursive event in a manner that marks the gap between the referenced event and its re-presentation, then

citationality describes this capacity as "a general property of (meta)semiosis" (Nakassis 2013b:54). For Nakassis, such citationality is necessarily reflexive about the quotient of difference insinuated in and by such acts of repetition. With Derrida, Nakassis is interested in the possible (and inevitable) "drift" of meaning that haunts a sign's reiterability.

Judith Butler likewise draws upon Derrida's notion of citationality to explore the disruptive and generative potential of citation. Most notably, in *Excitable Speech* (1997), she suggests that the gap between a sign's conventionalized meaning and its effects in context becomes a space for agentive intervention and/or subversion. Butler's on-the-wing understanding of agency as "an act with consequences" (1997:6) is critically counterposed to concepts of sovereign speech. Where sovereign speech seeks to secure an "authorized" discourse—to shore up a "proper" relation between words, their referents, and their effects—agentive citations leverage the possibilities of unauthorized, "expropriated" speech (ibid.:15). Elsewhere, Butler describes such modes of agentive citation as effecting "perpetual *displacement*" (my emphasis) and thereby evincing signs' irreducible "openness to resignification and recontextualization" (1999:176).

For the purposes of this essay, the relations that Derrida, Nakassis, and Butler articulate between citationality, agency, and displacement are salient. By virtue of being cited (more or less reflexively), a sign is displaced from one context and resituated in another, which it contributes to constituting. In such instances, the pragmatic agency of sign-users manifests in citational practices that deploy signs' inherent (re)iterability to unsettle their conventional(ized) moorings. If the reflexivity of citation includes the capacity to critically reflect on citationality as a process of displacement, then in *Have a Nice Dog!* citationality becomes a means of exposing the tensions between mediatic mobility and geopolitical immobility. Maghout uses animation film's citational affordances to highlight the fantastical reiterability of forms, while keeping sight of the elements that fall outside of citations' parentheses: the bodies that can be cited but that nonetheless remain *sited*.

So far, so citational. What does it mean to speak of *animated citationality*, though? What is the conceptual yield of drawing the concept of citationality into conversation with semiotic anthropological writings on animation? The latter offers valuable insights into the distribution of agency, multiplicity of roles within interactions, and semiotic dimensions of "the illusion of life" (Silvio 2019; Nozawa 2013). In these theorizations, "animation" not only describes technical processes by which agencies are distributed across bodies, human and otherwise, but also serves as an heuristic with which to parse complex semiotic interactions. Early contributors to this conversation elaborated Goffman's "participant roles" framework, using the concepts of "animator," "author," and "principal" to diffract the plurality of participants, roles, and interests at play in any given interaction (Goffman 1974, 1981; Irvine 1996). More recent theorizations (Silvio 2010; Manning 2009;

Nozawa 2013) deploy the concept of animation to complicate idioms of performance and "performativity" (Austin 1962; Butler 1993) that structure analyses of social and political life. The trope of animation, Silvio (2010) argues, can illuminate the striations of labor and agency that characterize contemporary capitalist modes of production and circuits of "mediatization" (Agha 2011; Briggs 2011). Through ethnographic analysis of televised Taiwanese puppetry, Silvio links these broader processes to media techniques that imbue nonhuman objects with personality, life, intention, and agency (2019). Anthropological studies of state-funded puppetry in Kazakhstan (Barker 2019) and experimental, indigenous stop-motion animation (Dowell 2018) further explore the processes of animation through which figural objects become vehicles of social and political agency.

Although semiotic anthropological accounts of animation have engaged theories of performativity, the associated notion of citationality is conspicuously absent. Yet there are grounds for suggesting that animation is inherently citational. First, artistic animation media, unlike video effects (VFX) that aim at verisimilitude (cf. Lefebvre 2021), tend to thematize the gap between empirical realities and diegetic worlds. In banal terms: a drawing of a dog is not(-quite) a dog. The disjuncture between sign and object is more palpable in animation than in photographic representations, where a presumed indexical bond between image and referent sutures this difference, securing the reality of the latter (we don't usually doubt that there *is* or *was* a dog). The animated drawing becomes, in a certain sense, a citation of dog-ness that is achieved through visual, kinetic, and sonic resemblances. (If it looks like a dog, walks like a dog, and sounds like a dog, then we can presume it to be dog-like.) Second, a key aspect of the "animatedness" of animation film —the endowing of something with movement (Cholodenko 1991:15)—emerges through a citational process whereby images are reinscribed with minor differences. It's these calibrated differences between frames, between figures that remain identifiable as "the same," that engender the impression of figural movement across a given temporal duration. This process is reflexive insofar as the animator must always be attuned to the play of sameness and difference: to that slim threshold of perception wherein a sense of continuity is sustained while forms shift and change.

The composite notion of *animated citationality* draws attention to how animated relays of agency and the semiotic dimensions of "liveliness" entwine with practices of citation that reflexively displace discursive events from their contexts of emergence and graft them into others. The reflexivity of citation includes the capacity to critically reflect on citationality itself; in the context of cinematic animation, this translates into critical reflection on a life of images that intersects (but is not reducible to) authorial intent, and on the elements that fall outside of citations' parentheses. My gambit is that closer attention to *animated citationality* pushes us to reconsider both animation and citation as semiotic processes that *distribute* agency by *displacing* it. Through animated citation, both aspects that

comprise Kockelman's equational definition of agency (flexibility + accountability) (Kockelman 2007) are subject to displacement. While I counterpose *distributed* and *displaced* agency in what follows, the latter is less a critique than an alternative accentuation of existing anthropological theorizations of distributed agency; in short, *displaced agency* accents the asymmetries at play in animation-citational distributions of agency.

Have a Nice Context!

Before sinking into the scene that this essay unpacks, a sketch of the contexts of creation, diegesis, and uptake is warranted. A few things are worth noting at the outset: Maghout is the film's sole director, writer, animator, and editor; the film's total budget was 15,000 Euros (an almost unimaginably low sum); it took five years from conception to completion; and it was tremendously successful at international film festivals, even garnering a place on the 2020 Academy Awards longlist for animated short films.

I first met Maghout in October 2021, having seen *Have a Nice Dog!* (2020) at the Festival of Animation Berlin (FAB). The COVID-19 restrictions had begun to ease, so he was traveling between screenings in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. In between trips, however, Maghout graciously agreed to meet to discuss the film, his other works, and his artistic process. During our conversation, I was struck by his remarks regarding the pandemic lockdowns, which began in Germany soon after the film's completion: "I was in self-imposed quarantine while working on the film, so I moved from one quarantine to another." Maghout further explained that he primarily works alone on the narrative and visual aspects of his films, and then collaborates with sound designers, musicians, and voice actors. Given the time-intensive nature of animation filmmaking, this can mean working in isolation for months or years. Maghout's films are especially demanding in this respect, since he creates the environments and figures on paper, drawing them frame-by-frame (at 12 frames per second) and then compositing and animating them digitally. A single frame can contain ten or more distinct pieces, which means that one second of an animation may comprise 120 (or more) different visual elements. In *Have a Nice Dog!*'s 14-minute runtime, there are roughly 10,000 distinct frames (animated at 24 frames per second, with each drawn frame stretched to two), each of which is digitally-composited from multiple elements. In short, the labor of independent animation can be astronomical if filmmakers work alone, which Maghout has tended to do for creative, financial, and logistical reasons.

Maghout's description of his "self-imposed quarantine" resonates with aspects of *Have a Nice Dog!*'s diegesis, which depicts a man's retreat from the chaos of war: a twofold retreat into a home that has become both refuge and prison, and into the dark recesses of a captive mind. While Maghout is careful to distinguish between his own biography and

the events depicted in the film, the narrative is informed by his personal experiences and those of his friends and family in Damascus during the early years of the Syrian war. Maghout left Syria in 2013 and "witnessed the first two years of the war and revolution there, at the beginning" (Annecy 2021). Although he resists tethering the film's diegesis to a specific place (it explores a situation that is salient beyond Syria), Maghout explains that the initial inspiration came from personal observations. In an interview for Annecy Festival, he reflects on the bizarre juxtaposition of life-as-usual and wartime violence:

> At that time, Damascus was still a comparatively safe city. People there, in the city, tried to have a normal daily life. The restaurants, markets, cafés, schools, and so on were still open, but at the same time the sounds of battles could be constantly heard […] The life situation there was shaped by this absurd and surreal contrast between the normal daily life inside the city and the ongoing conflicts in the outskirts. And I always asked myself if this pretended normality is actually *normal*. The permanent fear is suppressed by most people because life must go on. (Annecy 2021)

In the same interview, Maghout explains that nonhuman animals do not hide their feelings, and instead express the fear that humans tamp down. One of the key inspirations for *Have a Nice Dog!* was a dog called Baroud who still lives with Maghout's parents in Damascus. As helicopters and military jets passed over their house every day, Baroud was perpetually terrified and would often try to hide or cower in a corner. For Maghout, this was "an exaggerated display of the real feelings people wanted to hide" (Annecy 2021). In the film, the eponymous dog is also called Baroud, and he is cast as the companion, counterpoint, and perhaps proxy of the unnamed protagonist.

Here, I only briefly outline the diegesis, both for the sake of space and because a description of *what* happens risks eclipsing the more important point: *how* it happens. Moreover, in Maghout's own words, "there is no usual storyline in the film, but there are different scenes from the introspections and destroyed memory-images and dreams of the protagonist" (Encounters 2021). The film opens with a scene of drowning, which could be a nightmare or grim reality. Amidst other aspiring (im)migrants and capsized boats, the protagonist struggles to stay afloat. As he sinks into the ocean's depths, he sees the shape of a dog paddling at the water's surface. The title phrase "*Have a Nice Dog!*" appears onscreen, and then we find ourselves on a Damascene street (figure 1). The protagonist walks towards the camera. His eyes flit back and forth nervously, as he scans the faces of those he passes. We hear a low voice in Syrian Arabic, although his lips don't move. The subtitles read: "I just can't stand it here anymore. I can not anymore."

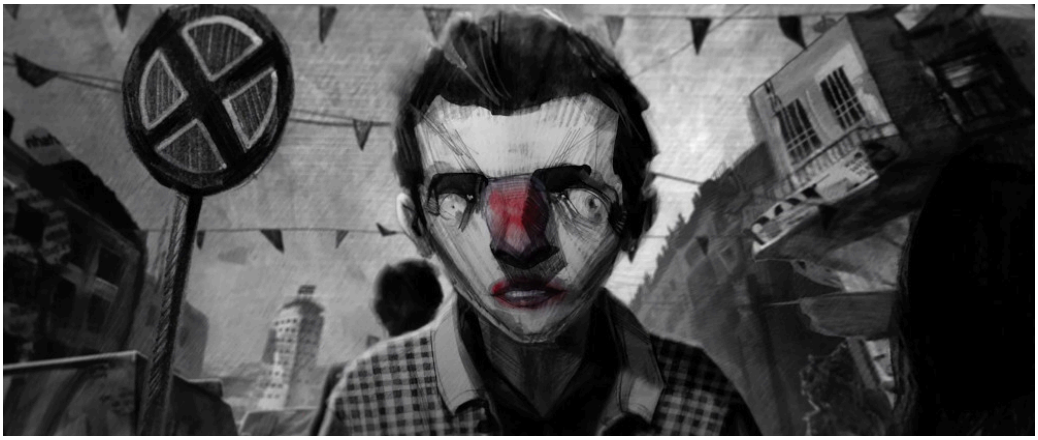


Figure 1 - © Maghout 2020

The passing faces appear strange, misshapen, mask-like (figure 2). The man muses:

> I have seen you all a thousand times, but do I know any of you? You're all walking around as if you can't see anything, as if nothing had happened. You just pretend as if everything is normal. I can't recognize this city anymore. This is no longer a city at all. It's just a backdrop and nothing more, and we are the extras.

Figure 2 - © Maghout 2020

Leaving the street, the man enters his small apartment and the world recedes. He sinks into a surreal vision, before a four-legged shadow stalks across the screen accompanied by the sound of rattling gunfire. His dog, Baroud, has drawn him out of his reverie. The film progresses through a series of fantasies, nightmarish visions, and dialogues with Baroud (or rather, monologues addressed to Baroud). When the man learns that a friend has procured a visa to leave the country, his desperation and fantasies of escape intensify. These culminate in a sprint to catch a departing skiff, laden with other fleeing Syrians. But this is not quite the end, and we never know for certain whether the man has attempted

this route. Instead, the film closes with a scene in a bar, where the man and two friends have met to say goodbye (recall, one has acquired a visa). The man leaves his friends to use the washroom, and when they follow to look for him, they find that the entire place is underwater. The furniture and barware drift across the screen, and then the camera pans up to a familiar scene: a dog paddling back and forth at the water's surface. The credits roll.

From the outset, *Have a Nice Dog!* points reflexively at its own mediality. For instance, the city that the man traverses *is* a "backdrop" (Maghout composites 2D layers within a 3D virtual stage to create what he calls "fake 3D") and the passing citizens *are* "extras," in the sense that they do not assume central roles as the film unfolds. Here and elsewhere, Maghout plays on the way that the voiceover utterance reverberates across film-internal and film-screening contexts. (This could be seen as a kind of double-voicing, in Bakhtin's terms (1981), insofar as the utterance laminates the voice of the film's protagonist and that of its author.) A similar tendency characterizes the scene that I thematize in this essay, where the agencies of protagonist, film, and filmmaker become difficult to disentangle.

Film festival participants and critics have remarked on the tensions articulated within the film, and on the way Maghout uses animation to visualize the impasse between imagined freedom and geopolitical constraint. In a video Q&A, one festival programmer, Ren Scateni, reflects that the protagonist "wants to leave but he somehow can't," and that "the streets are suffocating, so he runs to his house, but there's he's trapped in his own psyche" (Encounters Festival 2021). By leaning into the surreal possibilities of animation film, Maghout deftly weaves together these forms of entrapment and, as this essay argues, uses the medium's citational affordances to do so. Incidentally, Scateni highlights the scene that I unpack below. She comments: "there's this tiny little detail of social media which you cued, which is incredibly poignant for the time we are living in, and for these past few months we were in […] the fact that he's kind of like pasting his image onto a picture of Paris, trying to pretend that he's on holiday somewhere else" (Encounters 2021). Maghout's film had distinct resonance when it was initially screened at online festivals and in the wake of the pandemic lockdowns. A startling recognition was effected—people who had not experienced international immobility prior to the pandemic saw their own, unprecedented sense of enclosure reflected in the matter-of-course, geopolitical immobility experienced by many people around the world. In response to Scateni's comments, Maghout says:

> I should also mention that the topic of travelling and being able to move is a very difficult topic in my country, because you were born with a specific passport and with this passport you are not able to travel anywhere. You don't have—or you barely have—legal ways or safe ways to travel. So I also wanted to say something against this passport policy, the passport which is a worldwide-

> recognized discrimination instrument […] And because of that, many people in different places in the world, millions of people are living in a quarantine-like situation since decades and they are—and this situation makes the freedom of movement for them like a life goal or something they can barely achieve in their lifetime. (Encounters 2021)

The critique of border policies and passport regimes that Maghout voices in interviews and informal conversations is not articulated explicitly in the film's diegesis (in its narrative "content"). Instead, Maghout expresses this critique formally, through reflexive acts of citation that illuminate the contradictions between utopian discourses of transnational mobility and the lived immobility (or life-endangering mobility) of aspiring (im)migrants.

Writing for the online magazine *Ubiquitarian*, reviewer Marko Stojiljković comments on the way that *Have a Nice Dog!* counterposes embodied and imagined mobilities: "Where to go when everything around us falls apart, sometimes quite in [*sic*] physical way? Those resourceful or lucky enough would leave the place. The rest, however, can *emigrate only into the realms they have created in their own mind*" (Stojiljković 2020) (my emphasis). While Stojiljković and other critics thoughtfully engage *Have a Nice Dog!*'s political themes, their discussion of formal and technical aspects of the film tends to be limited. At most, reviewers mention the stark, monochromatic palette and scattered hits of strong color: red, aquamarine, yellow, magenta. Yet in Q&As, Maghout inevitably receives questions about his technique. Audiences are struck by the film's formal dimensions, but few can imagine how it was achieved. This observation raises a question with respect to this essay's argument and analysis: if Maghout's citational techniques largely escape audiences' understanding, then are we justified in describing them as such? To my mind, however, this is a nonissue. The effects of artworks (visual, plastic, linguistic, and sonic) are not predicated on the transparency of their construction. Moreover, as we will see, many of Maghout's animated citations enlist a presumptively shared context (e.g., the kinesthetic experience of clicking a mouse), while others tap into a deeper history of forms (a repository of implicit intertexts) that audiences evidently register, even if they cannot pinpoint specific references. To some degree, the ambiguities inherent in animated citation contribute to their effects; it's the price of play. Without further *dérive*, let's turn to the scene.

Enter Scene

Fade from black. A man sits facing us, his features lit by a computer's glow. The back of his monitor occupies two thirds of the frame. From our vantage, his mouse-hand looms, focalized, almost as large as his face, fingers clicking frenetically. Cut. We are now facing the screen display, a familiar Photoshop interface, in which a full-figure image of the man is selected, separated from his street-scene backdrop by a thin, dashed outline. The street

disappears and the man floats for a moment in a flat white void. Then the cursor darts towards him, dragging him from this evacuated space into another window, another scene: a river, a bridge, and the iconic diagonals of the Eiffel Tower. The cursor hovers and then situates the man's feet in a shadow that pools and stretches along the Parisian sidewalk. With another click, the stitched outline disappears—and with it goes all trace of the figure's digital transplant. Cut back to our previous vantage, the man's screen-lit face and rapidly clicking mouse hand offset by the back of the monitor. Cut again. The screen displays a floating window with the caption "create post" and a spinning wheel. After a moment, the Parisian gestalt materializes. Onscreen, the cursor wavers and then passes over the image, becoming an index finger, before moving away and reprising its classic arrow form. Cut to a screen's-eye view. The man stares fixedly at the "camera," gaze framed by fingers of the hand that props up his head. Cut back to the screen, a slow zoom in to the posted photograph. We wait. And then, beneath the image frame, a thumb's up icon pulsates, darkens.

This scene offers a sharp articulation of animation's reflexively critical capacity for citation. My subsequent analysis moves through four citational foci: (1) the mouse-click as an entextualized and reanimated gesture; (2) the *mise en abyme* of screens within screens; (3) the protagonist's use of Photoshop to transplant his own image from one scene to another; and (4) the scenes of waiting for the "photo" to be posted and for a thumbs-up "like." All this leaves audiences with an impression of the mobility of signs, images, and affects through citational mediation and the relative immobility of persons: a paradoxical un/freedom. In short, Maghout's filmic staging shifts the emphasis from unqualified mobility (a utopian understanding of "circulation") to a recognition that semiotic processes of citation and animation are always already acts of *displacement*.

(1) The Mouse-click: Gesture, Entextualization, and “Cramped Agency”

Figure 3 - © Maghout 2020

The scene’s opening shot (figure 3) thematizes a commonplace movement that becomes perceptible as a gesture of cramped agency within the diegetic context. The protagonist’s manual action of mouse-clicking, which serves as a metonym of virtual mobility, becomes a provisional substitute for geopolitical mobility. As the scene reveals, however, the fantasy of free movement that the protagonist rehearses can only culminate in disappointment and a renewed awareness of his geopolitical constraint. In creating this image sequence, Maghout cites both a typified movement, “mouse-clicking,” and a series of token instances of that type: his own hand and mouse engaged in the clicking interaction. While “mouse-clicking” is not among the collection of manual gestures deemed “emblematic” or “quotable” (Efron 1941), Maghout’s diegetic and compositional framing renders the movement gestural by endowing it with a communicative rather than strictly pragmatic purpose. The action may be practical for the protagonist, but for the filmmaker and audiences it serves other functions.

Maghout’s reanimation of an everyday movement can shed light on the relationship between citationality and gesture in the context of visual media. Within the filmic context, we are invited to notice the interaction of hand and mouse as *a gesture* (cf. Lempert 2019:201). The gesture becomes recognizable as such by virtue of its citation(ality): its entextualization and attendant susceptibility to reproduction and recontextualization across varied sites. What might this mean for an “integrative anthropology of gesture,” which is premised on “a densely contextualizing orientation” to the semiotics of bodily movement (Lempert 2019:199)? In this case, I suggest, contextualization involves attending to the weave of signs within the filmic frame, while recognizing the ways that the gesture of clicking points beyond its immediate diegetic and compositional context. Approached as metasemiotic commentary, this thematized gesture reads as a critical reflection on a central paradox of contemporary “worldliness”: the flows of globalized

media are not matched by a fluidity of bodies across national borders. The slight movement of the man's fingers not only indexes a process of citation— the artist's reference to his own mouse-hand and to a broader category of digital (inter)action—but also points to the force of circumstance that winnows a body's possible movements. But which "body" is at work in this digital movement? Is it Maghout, winkingly inserting his own mouse-hand into the frame, or is it the onscreen protagonist who (we shall see) is also involved in an act of self-citation? The answer, of course, is that it's both. Here and elsewhere in the film, it becomes difficult to disentangle the vectors of citationality. Moreover, agency is often murky when it comes to semiotic processes like citationality and animation. If we adopt Kockelman's definition of agency as the concatenation of *flexibility* to act and *accountability* for an action (2007), then we are led to ask: what counts as an action and in which context? Within the film-internal world? Or within the empirical world where the film is created, screened, and taken up? While gestures may be citable and thus mobile, Maghout and his protagonist are relatively immobile. Both within the film and beyond it, then, the (re)animated mouse-clicking gesture becomes an index of cramped agency: a winnowed agency that can only be expressed through mediatic displacement.

So how does this work? First, I am proposing that the motion of clicking a mouse becomes identifiable as a gesture—which is to say, a "meaningful body movement" (Chandler & Munday 2011)—by virtue of its entextualization and (re)contextualization. Phrased otherwise, a gesture is animated as such (implicitly *re*animated) through an act of citation that thematizes it and thereby renders it significant. Both diegetic and compositional[1] framings are essential to this citational act. Diegetically, it's critical that this scene occurs after the man's geopolitical immobility has been established through an intertwining of voiceover narration with image sequences that reflect his sense of entrapment and concomitant yearning to escape. Compositionally, the minute movements of the man's mouse-hand are focalized and, in a sense, amplified by their framing: two thirds of the screen are occupied by the back of a computer monitor, a mute opacity that renders the remaining slice of screen all the more visible. In this sliver, the man's half-lit face hovers behind the mouse-hand and madly clicking fingers. While his features remain deadpan, animated only by the shivering glow of the monitor, the cramped hand movements become intensely expressive. Through its diegetic and compositional framing, then, this frantic digit-al[2] motion becomes the distillation of a desperate desire to move, to leave Damascus, where the sounds of shelling resound through walls that are not only paper thin but also, by virtue of the medium, literally paper.

In my conversations with Maghout, he explained that he had used himself as a reference for the movement: he had observed how his palm rests on the body of the mouse, how his knuckles crest with the alternating rhythms of the pointer and middle fingers. Viewed

through a Peircean lens, this cited gesture is both an indexical and iconic sign of its creator's hand and mouse. (It should be noted that this is often the case in "auteur" animation, where artists tend to work alone and use their own bodies as references for both form and movement.) The image is *indexical* insofar as it bespeaks a relation of causality and physical contiguity between the artist's hand and the pencil-drawn contours and shading. Arguably, the tactility of the image renders this indexical ground all the more palpable. But there's another, less perceptible indexicality at play. While the drawings that comprise the animation were created by "classic" means (with the use of a pencil, paper, and lightboard), Maghout used Adobe Photoshop and After Effects to edit, augment, and composite them. The final image sequence, accordingly, evinces another indexical relation: the intervention of the artist's mouse-hand, his intentions and physical motoricity mediated by the computer's hardware, interface, and digital editing/ compositing software. If we imagine this second site of creation, then the *iconicity* of the image—its qualitative resemblance to that which it designates—is also doubled. Which is to say, in re-presenting the act of clicking a mouse, the animated drawing not only rehearses a typified motion but also (re-)enacts a concrete token of this type: the manual interaction that underwrites its digital conception.

In order to be "cited," to be reflexively re-presented in another context, the physical act of clicking a mouse must be entextualized as a discrete movement, which can be extracted from its given context (Bauman & Briggs 1990). Maghout's initial process of referencing and translating the motion of his fingers into a finite sequence of drawings, then, can be seen as an entextualization of the mouse-clicking movements. If we look more closely, we find that this entextualization is reinscribed at the level of digital composition. Maghout's technique involved rendering the man's figure as a composite of discrete layers that are animated independently: the hand and fingers are comprised of one set of bundled layers, while the man's face, his body, the mouse, the background, the monitor in the foreground, the light, and the camera are distinct elements with their own distinct animation paths. This entextualization and subsequent recontextualization of mouse-clicking within the film is precisely what renders the action (i.e., the interaction between hand and mouse) intelligible as a gesture, while expanding the ambit of gesture beyond the human body and beyond a strictly visual modality.[3] If citationality demands a "unit" that can be de- and re-contextualized, then this unit would seem to include the iconic form of the mouse and its audible click (at the very least). This citational (re)animation of gesture raises a more pressing question, though: what does the gesture *gesture to*?

In its reflexive citationality, the gesture of mouse-clicking points to the conjoined powers and limits of citation (and of mediation more broadly). While the artist's manual gesture can be cited and thereby reanimated across a multiplicity of sites (contexts), this magical power of transportation remains partial. As Nakassis (2013b) notes, a citation always

marks its difference from that which it re-presents. In this case, the citation suspends a spectral image of Maghout's hand movements in a digital trace, but Maghout's flesh-and-bone hand remains elsewhere, beyond citation's brackets. An analogy could be drawn to Streeck's discussion of gestural "emancipation" (2021), wherein a manual movement's original reference is "displaced" through a process of abstraction; Streeck describes how an instrumental action is first decoupled from "its material object" and then "emancipated" from its pragmatic context through a process of conventionalization. This is not exactly what occurs in *Have a Nice Dog!*, however. The clicking hand is not only "emancipated from the world of things [and] liberated from the shackles of labor" (Streeck 2021:104). Critically, it is also re-materialized and re-purposed within another context. Having been cut loose from one fleshly and environmental context, the gesture is recaptured within another "flesh" (that of the onscreen protagonist) and within another discursive context. We can agree with Streeck that the movement's pragmatic refence has been displaced. Within its new flesh and new context, the once-instrumental click becomes an index of the protagonist's situational angst: his fingers tap across the mouse-body with a frenetic yet circumscribed force.[4] The jittery quality of movement bespeaks an almost overwhelming force distilled into an almost imperceptible movement—a movement that would be unremarkable in any other context.

Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, however, the reanimated gesture acquires a reflexive capacity to comment on its own (conditions of) digital mediation. This mediation—at once conditioned, conditional, and conditioning—is what the gesture *gestures to*. Through its cinematic thematization, in other words, the gesture of clicking becomes perceptible as an expression of mediated action (while the cursor becomes a graphic instantiation of the phenomenological arrow of intentionality). By the same stroke, the click becomes recognizable as a ubiquitous type of contemporary gesture. (Albeit one that is no longer bound by the hardware of a corded computer mouse [cf. Bogost 2024].) We might add "the surf" and "the scroll" to this bestiary of digital gestures, while acknowledging that each of these terms involves a distinct physical operation and figures a distinct virtual movement.[5] Although the typified clicking gesture is most often referential (in the sense of pointing to something) and/or "phatic" (in the sense of establishing or prolonging contact), *Have a Nice Dog!*'s reanimation renders it both poetic and metasemiotic:[6] through its reflexive framing, the gesture of clicking a mouse becomes an expression of cramped agency.[7]

This gesture of cramped agency reanimates a paradox identified by contemporary scholars of (im)mobility. By depicting the concurrence of digitally mediated mobility and geopolitical immobility, Maghout figures the disjuncture between rhapsodic discourses of transnational flows (Castells 2000) and unevenly distributed experiences of being "stuck," upon which anthropologists writing on (im)migration and diaspora have remarked (Hage

2015; Khan 2016; Nguyen 2012). While communication technologies can link users across vast distances, and while transportation technologies may enable "flows" of material goods and bodies, other technologies (like borders, walls, passports and visas) explicitly aim at institutionalizing the immobility of other(ed) bodies (Rumford 2006). From this vantage, borders and mobility must be seen as co-constitutive elements in an assemblage that Salazar and Smart describe as "the key […] otherness producing machine of our age" (2011, v). Reanimating these tensions does not mean simply illustrating them, however. In what follows, I further explore how anthropological understandings of im/mobility can be informed by Maghout's film, which I approach as both an ethnographic inscription and a theoretical intervention in its own right.

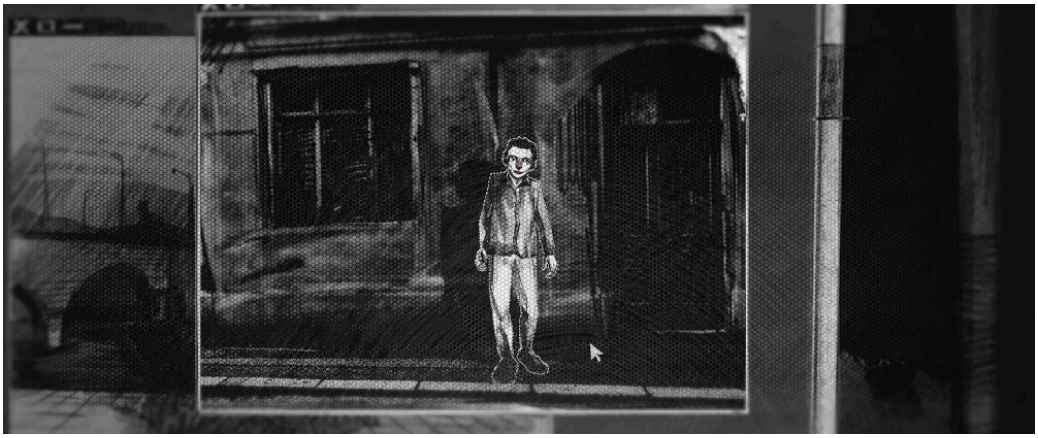
(2) The Screen within a Screen: Reflexive Citation and *Mise en Abyme*

Through the subsequent sequence of shots, Maghout (re)animates the interactions involved in the film's creation, including the mouse-clicking action discussed above. By citing aspects of his own process of creation, he also cites a longstanding trope within visual artistic practice: the *mise en abyme*, which involves the reflexive depiction of an artwork's structure within the work itself (Snow 2016). The vectors of citation are dizzying: Maghout cites his own creative practice by showing the film's protagonist engaged in an act of digital creation, which is soon revealed to be self-citational. By mobilizing the reflexive citational practice of *mise en abyme*, Maghout effectively draws one context of citation back into the frame. In so doing, he exposes the occlusions and omissions upon which citational practices are premised.

The scene's self-citationality hinges on a visual iconicity (a formal resemblance) between the scene (re)presented in the film and the scene of its digital composition. Yet significant differences emerge through this citational re-presentation. What we see onscreen is, in a sense, the foregrounding of a behind-the-scenes action, but it's worth remembering that Maghout is quick to distinguish between the film's story and his own, and between the protagonist and himself. While *Have a Nice Dog!* draws upon his own experiences and those of his friends and family, it is ultimately a work of fiction. Indeed, in citing its own scene of digital composition, the film reflexively foregrounds its status as (fictional) creation. At the same time, by situating the artist's hand and tools within the filmic frame and thereby reanimating the device of *mise en abyme*, Maghout engages an art-historical genealogy of artists reflexively figuring their own practice within their works.[8] While examples abound in early animated films (with Max Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* being a go-to for animation scholars), I'd like to engage another intertext: Velasquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, a canonical example of *mise en abyme* in visual art (figure 4). By setting this scene from *Have a Nice Dog!* into dialogue with *Las Meninas*, via Foucault's analysis (2012), I highlight how both artworks turn on a reflexive citation of representational

practice that simultaneously *renders* and *interrupts* the presumed relations between artist, model, and "spectator." In the case of *Have a Nice Dog!*, this reflexive citation carves out a space for reflection on the affordances and limits of digital mediation.

Figure 4 – "*Las Meninas*", Velasquez



Figures 5 & 6 – © Maghout 2020

In both *Las Meninas* (figure 4) and this scene from *Have a Nice Dog!* (figures 5 & 6), the artist-figure peers out from behind the turned-away surface upon which he works: a surface whose contents are (at least initially) obscured from the spectator's view. For Foucault, this obfuscation is central to *Las Meninas*' "subtle system of feints" (2012:31), which is to say, the turned-away canvas (re)presents an essential absence or invisibility: in the midst of all the "signs and successive forms of representation" (ibid.46), a stubborn opacity intrudes. It is this opacity amidst a play of gazes, Foucault suggests, that ultimately frees Velasquez's painting from the strictures of Classical representation and allows it to "offer itself as representation in its pure form" (ibid.:47). Phrased otherwise, the refusal of facile resemblance (of a supposed "subject") allows *Las Meninas* to represent (the act of) representation. Although Foucault does not name it as such, the *reflexive citation* of artist, medium, and typified gesture is integral to this meta-representation. Further, I would argue, the possibility of representing representation (in all its complexity) hinges on a citational accenting of difference: the insertion of a gap between the represented scene and the scene of representation. In *Las Meninas*, this gap is rendered two-dimensionally in the obscurity of a turned-away surface, the contents of which are withheld from view. Likewise, in *Have a Nice Dog!*, the back of the computer monitor interrupts what might otherwise transpire as a fluid exchange of gazes. Yet the differences

between these two scenes are consequential. Whereas *Las Meninas*' artist appears to have just stepped out from behind "what is virtually a sort of vast cage projected backwards by the surface he is painting" (Foucault 2012:31), the artist-figure in *Have a Nice Dog!* remains partially obscured by his tools: his face and clicking mouse-hand are offset by the dark mass of the computer monitor, which occupies two-thirds of the image. Rather than the artist framing his work, here the artwork and its requisite technologies enframe the digital creator and his manual gesture. While *Las Meninas*' artist can momentarily slip outside of his "vast" virtual cage, *Have a Nice Dog!*'s creator-protagonist can only move incrementally within a much smaller enclosure. Approached as a metacommentary on contemporary practices of representation, this scene highlights the constraints of digital media creation.

The time-based nature of cinematic animation affords an alternative perspective on movement than painting, which freezes a moment and crystallizes all its implicit trajectories. In *Las Meninas*, Foucault observes, the painter's arm is "motionless," his hand "suspended in mid-air, arrested in rapt attention on the painter's gaze," which correspondingly "waits upon the arrested gesture" (2012:31). Through this reading, which multiplies terms of fixity—"motionless," "suspended," "arrested"—we are given an impression of movement held momentarily in abeyance, in suspended animation so to speak. Not incidentally, it is the painting's freeze-frame quality that allows Foucault to trace the lines of attention that crosscut the depicted scene. Conversely, *Have a Nice Dog!*'s animations are not "suspended" but instead circumscribed within a narrow slice of the filmic frame… at least in the first shot, which I have foregrounded to this point. The next shot, however, performs a critical pivot, in which the opaque recalcitrance of the monitor dissolves into another *mise en abyme*. From the obscured back-of-monitor vantage, the film cuts to a frontal view of the screen, which displays a familiar Photoshop interface. A "photographic" image of the protagonist perches within these nested frames: computer screen, Photoshop, active window, Damascene street. Now, Foucault's remark resonates: it is as if the artist "could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities" (2012:32). In *Have a Nice Dog!*, these opposed visibilities are realized through the sequence of shots (not "at the same time"), but with an added twist—the view of the onscreen canvas, with its serial enframings, serves to transform the creator-figure into an iconic citation of himself. The citational aspect of the onscreen figure is accented by a thin dashed-line that separates him from his backdrop (which we might read as an iconic-index of entextualization). As I elaborate in the subsequent section, this scene's reflexive citationality allows Maghout to comment on the im/mobilities inherent to acts of citation.

While in *Las Meninas* the turned-away canvas establishes an "opaque fixity" that destabilizes the exchange of gazes between spectator and model (Foucault 2012:33), *Have a Nice Dog!*'s sequence of shots traces out the relay of attention as an infinite quadration.[9] The film spectator first sees the protagonist, who is absorbed by the contents of his computer screen, which the spectator does not (yet) see. Then, the spectator assumes the perspective of the protagonist, looking at his own figure on the computer screen. This figure, in turn, looks outwards, at an invisible point occupied by the spectator, the protagonist, and (implicitly) the animation filmmaker, Maghout. Rather than a proliferating interplay of persons, objects, and gazes, this scene presents a condensation: the positions of artist, spectator, and model overlap in the figure of the protagonist, as he works to transplant his own virtual image. At the same time, the functions of obstruction, illumination, and reflective duplication (which Foucault ascribes to the canvas, the window, and the mirror) are resolved into a single, ambivalent object: the monitor with its opaque backing and luminous screen. Through these functions (obstruction, illumination, reflective duplication), the monitor constellates the gazes of the filmmaker, the protagonist, and the spectator. In short, citation of the monitor as means of digital creation, distribution, and display serves to draw filmmaker, protagonist, and audiences into a common position vis-à-vis the representation; like the *mise en abyme* of *Las Meninas*, the self-citationality of this scene from *Have a Nice Dog!* underscores the artwork's own constructedness and thereby provokes reflection on the broader dynamics and contexts of mediation that entangle creator, characters, and audiences alike.[10]

(3) The Photoshop Operation: The Sited Body and the Cited Body

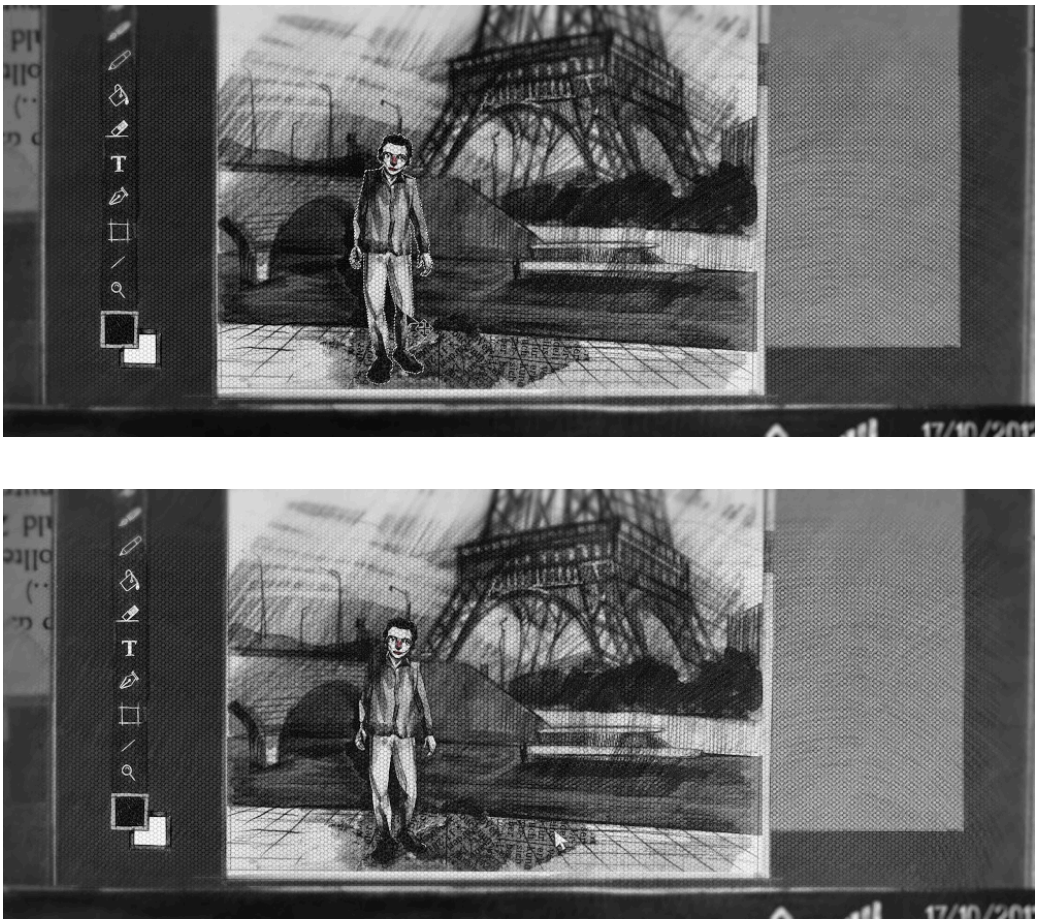
The juxtaposition between the process of digital transposition and the behind-monitor view of the protagonist further illuminates citationality's affordances and limits; it displays the mobility of citations while disclosing the relative immobility of their referents. Although the image of a man can be entextualized, and thereby de- and re-contextualized (Bauman & Briggs 1990), the corporeal man remains geopolitically sited. Whereas extant linguistic anthropological discussions of citationality tend to highlight the surplus introduced by citational repetitions, I want to emphasize animation-filmic citations' capacity to reflexively (and critically) comment on what falls out of their parentheses: the bodily, interactional, and environmental contexts from which signs are culled. Such commentary not only consists in a marking of difference (the citation is not quite what it re-presents), but also shifts focus from the citational act to the contexts that it sheds. In the scene from *Have a Nice Dog!*, this focal shift manifests as: (1) a digital shearing of figure from ground; and (2) a back-and-forth between the view of the Photoshop interface and the view of the protagonist hemmed-in by his computer monitor. This juxtaposition indicates that agency is not evenly distributed between an intentional actor and their instruments, but rather, displaced from one body (where it can be minimally realized) to another that has greater

flexibility. From this vantage, the protagonist becomes an animator in his own right, insofar as he bestows his own “photographic” double with movement through a process of digital editing. Maghout’s own (filmic) editing invites us to notice, however, that the motility of the doppelgänger-portrait is inversely proportionate to its creator’s.

Figures 7 & 8 - © Maghout 2020

When the scene cuts to the computer screen view, the protagonist has already begun the process of transplanting his image from a Damascene street to an iconically (and indexically) Parisian locale (cf. Lefebvre 2021). He has lassoed his onscreen figure, separating it from its background with a dashed line (figure 7). With a few clicks, the background disappears, leaving the figure suspended in flat, white space (figure 8). The street that the man inhabited, which provided the ground to his figure, is neatly evacuated. It’s worth noting that this deletion of place is not strictly necessary to the operation of transplanting the man’s image from one scene to another. Rather, it reads as an emphatic “F*ck this place, I’d prefer to be nowhere.” Or perhaps, “F*ck this place, it’s become a non-place.” As a gesture, it also bespeaks a promise of entextualization and citation: a promise that something (be it speech or image or otherwise) can be carved away from its inaugural context and hermetically bracketed. The subsequent movements are no less expressive. Rather than copy-paste his figure, the protagonist drags “himself” from one

window to another. Specifically, we see the cursor move to hover over the selected figure, at which point it transforms from the classic arrow [ ] to the move-selection icon [ ]. Then, the cursor drags the figure from the now-empty canvas into an adjoining window, which displays a river-side vista and the unmistakable iron feet of the Eiffel Tower (figure 9). Once the figure is situated on the awaiting drop shadow, his dashed-outline disappears in a matter of clicks (figure 10). It's as if the promise of citation has been fulfilled: to be cited is to be re-sited, without remainder.



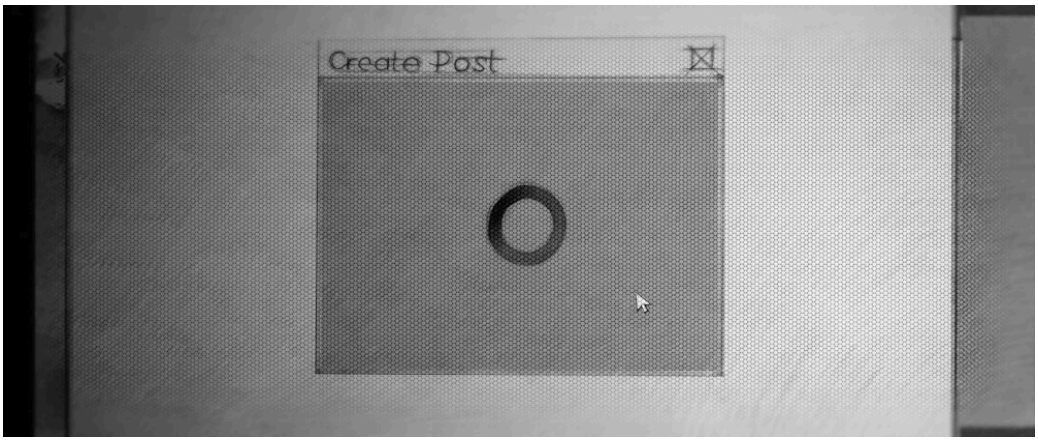
Figures 9 & 10 - © Maghout 2020

Except there *is* a remainder.[11] Cut back to the protagonist seated behind his monitor, pupils twitching and fingers mouse-tapping (in what I have described as a gesture of cramped agency). The contrast between these two views—of virtual mobility and corporeal immobility—sharply articulates the paradoxical un/freedom afforded by globalized media in a context of geopolitical deglobalization. By the same stroke, this sequence of digital citation critically comments on citationality itself: while citations travel (by definition), their referents cannot necessarily claim the same mobility. This scene illuminates the ways that imagined and empirical realities intertwine in the felt experiences of im/mobility (cf. Salazar 2011; Khan 2016; Büscher & Urry 2009). Namely, Maghout stages the disjuncture between discourses of globalization and experiences of

impermeable borders by showing how an impeded desire to move is whet by the "imaginative travel" afforded by "images of places and peoples appearing on and moving across multiple print and visual media" (Büscher and Urry 2009:101). In other words, Maghout's citational reanimation discloses how a sense of existential "stuckedness" (Hage 2009) can arise through the collision between discourses of mobility and experiences of corporeal immobility.

(4) The Waiting (Is the Hardest Part): Immobility and Displaced Agency

The protagonist's cramped agency is underscored by two shots that depict suspended action: the "create post" image, with its maddening, ever-spinning wheel (figure 11), and the screen's eye view of the man awaiting a reaction to his now-posted image (figure 12). These shots, I contend, evince how acts of citation (and animation more broadly) *displace* agency more than they *distribute* it; simultaneously, they suggest that the spatial and temporal gaps introduced by acts of mediated expression can feel enervating, insofar as individuals are left waiting for consummation (the successful "post") or response (the affirming "like").



Figures 11 & 12 - © Maghout 2020

The protagonist has just completed his digital manipulations and has, in a sense, handed off his (own) image. At this point, the publication of the post becomes a matter of technological processing, the pace of which is beyond his control. Through this handoff, the protagonist renders himself "patient" to technologies that variously amplify and resist his intentions. Reading further into the diegetic context, "in Damascus surrounded by war" (Maghout 2020), we surmise that he is subject to the vagaries of bandwidth and upload speed, with an unstable internet connection and risk of electricity cuts.[12] It's worth noting an additional resonance between the practice of animation filmmaking and the depicted scene: regardless of the technique, animation involves an astounding amount of waiting, because artists are reliant on their computers' processing power. (Almost all contemporary animation filmmakers use digital techniques to composite their films, so creation is a process punctuated by long periods of waiting for images and image-sequences to render.) To unpack this relation, I'd like to turn for a moment to Alfred Gell's conception of artworks as nodes within dynamic interactional networks. Gell proposes a relational view of agency, in which "agents" (human or otherwise) and "patients" (also human or otherwise) are mutually constituted within interactional chains (1998). In this view, an agent is situationally defined as that which acts upon a patient, while a patient is defined as that which is acted upon (although not always passively, Gell notes). If we adopt these terms, at least provisionally, then *Have a Nice Dog!*'s shot of the spinning "create post" wheel becomes legible as an instance of artefactual agency, which enlists a complex technological assemblage including the computer's hardware and software, the internet signal and its implicit infrastructure, the power socket and encompassing electrical grid, the social media application, and so on. Within this sprawling assemblage, the film protagonist's position is not that of an unrestricted agent. For instance, as he waits for the post to be published, the man plays "patient" to the "agent" of his instruments. Likewise, as he awaits a response to his posted "photo," the man seems to have surrendered agency to his proxy or avatar, the image of himself sent out into the ether. Whereas Gell would likely gloss such an allocation of agencies as *distribution* (of personhood), *displacement* is a more illuminating descriptor, insofar as it highlights the differential capacities for movement and different degrees of flexibility available to would-be agents.

This scene of waiting has a specific context and affective valence, however. It cannot be reduced to a generalized experience of technological mediation within a tightly networked world. As alluded above, the banal frictions of technology (processing power, bandwidth, electrical connection) are intensified by the protagonist's geopolitical situation. For this reason, we must ask: what kind of waiting are we witnessing and participating in? Within the diegetic context, this scene laminates multiple kinds of waiting (cf. Hage 2009). The man is not only waiting *situationally* for his post to be "created," for his digital alter to be virtually transported to Paris, but also waiting *existentially* for a connection to the worlds beyond his apartment, waiting for his own escape (which his social media post either

anticipates or substitutes), and waiting for a future that the wartime situation has suspended (cf. Dwyer 2009). Waiting becomes a figure for multiple, recursive forms of suspended action or immobility, in which agency is not necessarily extinguished but instead deferred, rerouted, and displaced.

Above I have traced various citational moments within a single scene from *Have a Nice Dog!*, with the aim of elucidating how the filmmaker, Jalal Maghout, uses animation's citational affordances to reflexively rehearse contemporary conditions of globalized im/mobility. Central to my discussion are the ways in which the film's acts of citation point out the limits of citationality as such, by drawing attention to the elements of substance and context that resist entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization. The moments elaborated above are fringed by at least three kinds of immobility: (1) the physical immobility that attends independent animation filmmakers' creative practice; (2) the geographic immobilities imposed by pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions[13]; (3) the geopolitical immobility that Maghout faced when living in Syria, which he still navigates when seeking to travel beyond Europe, and which his family and friends in Syria experience as a matter of course.

Coda: The Animation of Things & The Suspension of Persons

In closing, I would like to sketch another scene that occurs later in *Have a Nice Dog!*, which I read as the accompanying pair-part to the images unfolded in the scene discussed above. Upon learning that a friend has secured a visa to leave Syria, the protagonist sinks deeper into fantasies of escape and nightmarish visions of entrapment. In one such vision, he stumbles down a darkened tunnel. From his vantage, we see a pair of fingers saunter past, followed by a stream of distorted emojis. The hand with which the protagonist had performed his Photoshop operation—his mouse-hand—ambles ownerless (figure 13), while the hovering emojis seem to mock their own iconic reference to human facial expressions (figures 14 & 15).

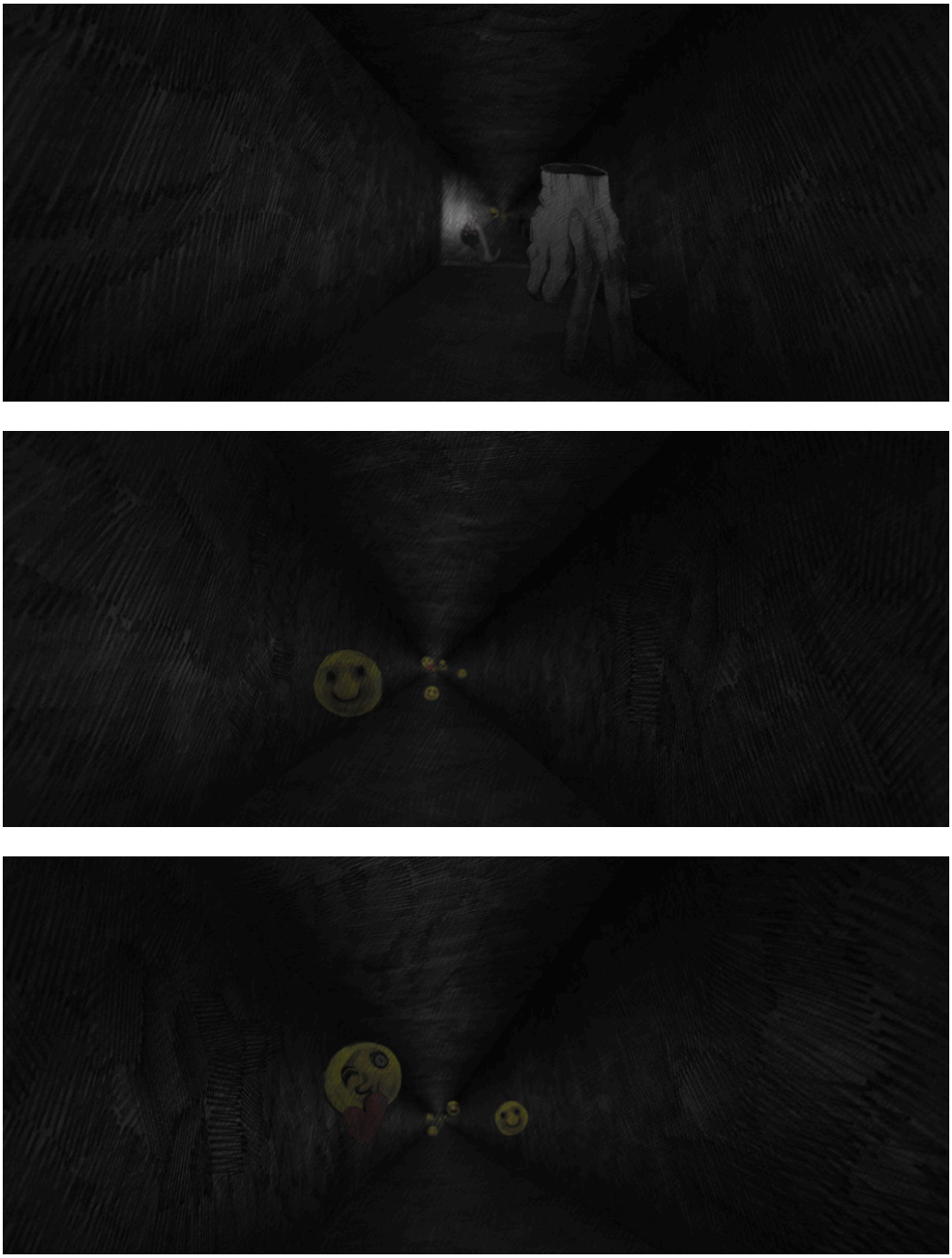


Figure 13, 14, & 15 - © Maghout 2020

We are given a glimpse of an inverted world, in which presumed relations have been upended. At the same time, however, this situation feels like a logical extension, an extrapolation of the chiastic exchange of properties figured in the preceding scene. Cinematic animation has, in a sense, always had the capacity to remark on this dialectic of fetishism and reification; we need only recall the unruly brooms in Disney's *Fantasia*, the dismay of the sorcerer's apprentice whose implements refuse his ordinance. But *Have a Nice Dog!*'s critique is more pointed, more specific to the contemporary situation it refracts. In the interplay between these two scenes, what emerges is not an abstract alienation arising from a Fordist division of labor (and from Capitalist derivation of value

more generally). Rather, the protagonist encounters the uncanny autonomy of his own hand and prosthetic expressions (🙂 😘 😀) at the precise moment that his own entrapment has become unbearable. The force of this encounter (its horror) lies in the citational reanimation of fragments of the protagonist's earlier activity, the fantasy of escape rehearsed in his Photoshop transposition. Like the scene I discuss above, this scene deploys citation reflexively—citing both the preceding scene and typified gestures of digital communication—in order to express the commingled fears and desires that cleave to the technological possibilities (and limits) of mediation. These possibilities, it's worth emphasizing, include the possibilities inherent to citation itself and to animation as a thoroughly citational medium.

By tracing out aspects of the complex citationality at play in *Have a Nice Dog!*, I have sought to illuminate Maghout's reflexive staging of contemporary im/mobility: the asymmetries and contradictions that attend experiences of mediated "worldliness" in contexts of geopolitical constraint. At this point, in the 11th hour, so to speak, I would like to elaborate on how this analysis speaks to semiotic anthropological theories of animation. Through *Have a Nice Dog!*'s citations, a chiasm emerges wherein the mobility of media (of signs and their citations) is inversely proportionate to the mobility of persons. I read this as an illustration of filmic animation's citational affordances and as a critique that turns on the dialectic inherent in technical and semiotic practices of animation: the dialectic of liveliness and deathliness, movement and stasis, animacy and inanimacy, mobility and immobility, and freedom and impediment (Cholodenko 2014). Animation scholars have approached this dialectic in terms of the uncanny liveliness of objects and corresponding reification of human actors (see Beckman 2014). Such observations regarding media more generally have proliferated in the context of the so-called digital turn (while anticipated by writers like Friedrich Kittler). Here, however, the onscreen creator is not alienated from his work by a division of labor and vast system of distribution (which is not to dismiss Silvio's [2010] assertion that the trope of animation powerfully elucidates neoliberal striations of agency).[14] *Have a Nice Dog!*'s artist and protagonist is not rendered "thingly" or immobile through his labors—rather, such mediated, virtual modes of expression are his only possibility. Regarded as an ethnographic inscription in its own right, the film becomes a relatively mobile expression of geopolitical immobility, even as it foregrounds the ways artistic agency is *displaced* and *condensated* in artworks, rather than symmetrically distributed between creator and creation.

The displacing dimension of *animated citationality* is central to the political implications of filmic animation media, insofar as such artworks make visible the act of making visible (regardless of the "what" or content). Cinematic animations create space for reflection and critique precisely insofar as they suspend and displace representations' "propositionality" or "truth content" to a fictive ground (or "universe of discourse" [Peirce 2.536]) that bears

a mediated relation to broader worlds. In such cases, the gap between diegetic and extra-diegetic realties does not impede conversation or reflection but instead impels it. Through citational play with the gaps between fictional and nonfictional "universes of discourse," then, animation films spur reflection on the social, technological, and geopolitical worlds that filter into the filmic frame. In other words, through citational thematization—the concurrent thematization of that which is cited and of the dislocations effected by citational acts—artworks like *Have a Nice Dog!* obliquely comment on their own conditions of mediation.

Approached as a metacommentary on animated mediation (and its enframing media ideologies), *Have a Nice Dog!*'s rendition of animated im/mobility challenges discourses that celebrate the medium's utopic freedom through the metonym of the infinitely mutable and "plastic" line (Eisenstein 1988:6-7; see Beckman 2014). While Maghout plays with the spectacular possibilities of transformation and transfiguration that cinematic animation affords (in the film's more surreal sequences), he also uses the medium's citational affordances to disclose the rigidity and intractability of geopolitical formations. In so doing, he suggests that animated freedom is most fascinating and attractive in contexts of constraint. Eisenstein voiced a similar observation with respect to Disney, but accented the *fictive* dimension of such works: "Disney [...] is a complete return to a world of complete freedom (*not accidentally fictitious*)" (7) (my emphasis). Within *Have a Nice Dog!*, in contradistinction to Mickey Mouse (notwithstanding the centrality of animals), we encounter both the plastic freedom of animation and the "grey" world that forms its foil and ground (figure 16): "Grey squares of city blocks. Grey prison cells of city streets. Grey faces of endless street crowds. The grey, empty eyes of those who are forever at the mercy of a pitiless procession of laws, not of their own making, laws that divide up the soul, feelings, thoughts…" (Eisenstein 1988:8). By folding an encompassing context into the filmic frame, independent animation filmmakers like Maghout critically recast our perceptions of the realities that traverse, inflect, and are transformed by such artworks.

Figure 16 - © Maghout 2020

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. My use of “compositional” and “composite” follows the discourse of my interlocutors. I do not mean to suggest that “composited” image sequences involve the ordering of discrete, individually meaningful units whose combination adheres to a describable syntax. Rather, “composition” refers to the interrelation of visual elements within a frame and to the technical process of digital compositing, wherein multiple images are combined.↩

2. Etymologically, “digital” relates to fingers, deriving from the Latin digitus "finger or toe." The meaning of "using numerical digits" dates from 1938. It was only applied to computational processes, which use data in the form of digits (opposed to analogue) after 1945. The contemporary reference to recording or broadcasting dates from approximately 1960.↩

3. Viewed from a different angle, this expanded gesture invites us to consider the boundary of the human body—is the mouse a prosthetic or a physical interface or both?↩

4. We might turn to affect theory to describe the forces that seem to thrum between the man’s hand and the body of the mouse. This constrained movement could be seen to index a non-spatial movement: an “immobile movement” of intensification (Deleuze & Guatarri 2004).↩

5. Consider the term “doomscrolling,” which emerged during the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns to describe (and pathologize) a compulsive mode of news consumption. The term attaches symptomatic significance to a typified gesture of virtual mobility (in the vertical space of the “feed”). We might note the shift in agentive flexibility implied by the transition from “surfing” to “scrolling,” as the virtual space of the internet has come to feel increasingly regimented.↩

6. While Jakobson saw these functions as antithetical in linguistic utterances—"Poetry and metalanguage, however, are in diametrical opposition to each other..."—others have argued that poetic and metalinguistic functions are often copresent. I contend that animation filmic scenes are often both poetic and metasemiotic, by virtue of the medium's tendency to reflexively foreground form while implicitly commenting on its own capacity to do so.↩

7. Perhaps expressions of "patiency" (Mazzarella 2021).↩

8. By recreating this established art-historical trope, *Have a Nice Dog!* participates in a deeper movement of forms and figures that traverses time and media (cf. Didi-Huberman 2017).↩

9. On the relation of screens, onscreen doubles, and interfaces vis-à-vis the "digital uncanny" see Ravetto-Biagoli 2019.↩

10. While also foregrounding what Foucault might call the conditions of visibility (and their conditionality).↩

11. And perhaps there is always a remainder; Nakassis identifies "a resistance to the bracketing force which the citation attempts, always partially, to instate" (2013b:72).↩

12. The war in Syria has not officially ended, so the film's events could theoretically take place any time between 2011 and the present (although I would place it in the mid-2010s).↩

13. While the second of these was not a factor in the film's creation, the impression of computer-bound immobility had a distinct resonance when the film was screened at online festivals. Pandemic contexts of screening lent unintended purchase to the film's depiction of digitally and analogically mediated interactions.↩

14. Although it's worth mentioning that larger-scale (read: commercial) animation productions do involve extensive divisions of labor, and animators working in such conditions often express a sense of alienation from the final product and disillusionment with the creative industry writ large.↩

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