



Retrieving an Old Thesis: gazing at the SCREEN

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Is cinema the necessary precursor for the new media?

It depends.

It has always been assumed so.

It is an open debate.

It can be a productive line of thought.

... ..

For sure, a few discourses should be noted in history:

The reading of motion pictures as an extension of the photographic image with an added temporal dimension prescribes the essential status of the picture itself – and therefore, the frame, the screen, the illusory world of representation, the diegetic...

Eisenstein sees the screen process as parallel of the process of the mind. Deleuze sees the screen as emotive energy vectors traversing in the present continuous tense.

The once emphasized practice of textual analysis made all that mattered confined to what's on the screen. So we have the big screen, the movie screen, and the small screen, the TV screen, and the yet smaller screen, the screen of the computer monitor.

Then the little box in the living room alerted us to screen differences when images, no longer received intensely in the dark, had to compete with the banal objects and furniture in the surroundings as well as insignificant everyday activities for the viewers' attention. Many wrote about the two different modes of viewing: concentrated viewing of the movie images in the dark versus distracted, interrupted viewing of TV programs. Thus the essential themes of Television Studies in the 1980s: TV time versus film time, TV editing, episodic (soap) narrative structure, the question of "flow," and further differentiations in screen grammars alongside reception studies.

... ..

Is the Screen all that matters?

Consider the evolvement of (systems of) symbolic notation in art as a possible historical trope:¹ thus the manuscript to the mass-produced print form, the painterly and sculptural to the mechanically reproduced photographic images, the analogue to the digital... The identity of the artwork and the art object is constantly changing.

¹ This idea was captured and discussed in Hector Rodriguez's presentation at Videotage's Microwave Festival 2001.

Consider Fluxus member Dick Higgins' proposition, which I summarize as follows: all avant-garde (ground-breaking) moments in the histories of arts are **intermedial moments** that encourage the collapse of rigid categorization, the challenge against the idea of "pure media," and the critique of objects of familiarity.²

Consider the moving image as a location, a site of congregation, or dispersal, of horizontal networking, as a public/private cultural/social/virtual sphere.

Consider "the images that move" within the history of computing capabilities...

Consider the centrality of the body, (dis-)/embodied vision, virtual presence, disengagement of the mind from the body, time from space, machined interface ...

Consider

Displaced screens, dispersed screens

And yet much of what is happening draws us back to the Screen.

One worthwhile task for today is to reconsider imaging in today's diverse new viewing contexts. They vary from distracted viewing (in VHS/VCD/DVD formats) on the TV set, or home-movie installations in the domestic space, to fragmented, truncated viewing of road shows on public transportation, to viewing without hearing with digital display hovering on the crowd at nodal points of the urban space, or viewing in front of the home computer that enhances participation, the juxtaposition of the private with the public in the web world, and multiplicity of time and space. A "micro-narrative" contest in Europe invites creative digital works for the mobile phone mini-screen. Screens of all sizes are mushrooming in unexpected corners in our living space. Take stock of the number and variety of screens next time you go on to the streets.

Given that one way to make sense of what's happening in the new media is the effort to (help human beings) see differently, the new reception contexts alone deserve a refreshed look at the conventions of moving image creation and their state of decomposition.

Micro-narratives; micro qualities

As for the makers, their task still largely hinges on the anatomical-level manipulation of the (moving) images. How do the new screen contexts cited above re-define their creative conception? Many of the standard industrial conventions in cinematography, sound, editing and narrative are based on unspoken assumptions that are obsolete. Standard narrative conventions presume causal logic and linearity, equating perception/reception with story *comprehension* emphasizing the cognitive and a resolution-oriented mode of narrative unfolding. The conventions of sync sound, spatial-temporal unity, continuity/invisible editing and so on are firmly entrenched in realism, sustaining a theory of diegetic absorption based on unidirectional, passive, concentrated viewing.

² Dick Higgins, *Horizon: the Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). See the first two chapters.

Imagine editing, photographing and narrative construction to be freed from the domination of conventions based on a singular set of assumptions...

Some of the SCM student videos in Third Text (mostly shown at SCM) demonstrate what I call "micro qualities" that transcend existing genre categorizations and standard image practices. They respond to a new milieu of image culture that begs flexibility, diversity and intermediality. They are free in attempting intermedial dialogues, no matter how immature, between poetry, theatre, cinema, philosophy, and even critical theory in general. They articulate new modes of space and temporality, many worlds in one world (one single image). They study time with mathematical interest. They re-define what is interesting as narrative. They are playful with the principle of singularity, whether in interpretation, authority, or experience of time and space. Single channel, single focus, single space, single time, single theme, single possibility, single meanings ... are all opened up for queries. The identity of many of these works is to me ambiguous. They often look extremely serious on the immediate, and yet they smell popular culture and the sentiments of Hong Kong's young generations. They may not be explicit in rhetorical engagement with culture and society – no grand thesis, and yet they are quietly and obsessively entrenched in everyday life. We may feel the baggage of (Western) theories and (Western) art histories in these works, and yet they are uniquely local and individualistic. And most of all, they defy convenient, outdated and unnecessary binary oppositional division between the commercial/mainstream and the experimental.

Third Text's international program features works by "properly classified" media "artists" of the "experimental" camp -- a series of terms that unfortunately divide rather than unify many image consumers as well as media educators in Hong Kong. We might as well let go the burden of the nominal, and simply look at them, with anatomical interest, as acts of pushing boundaries, games of deconstruction, and the quest for untapped potentials.

Screen as "place"; Screen as the play of "space"

Other works in Third Text, such as *Fruztum* and *Enfold*, re-examine the assumption of convergent perspectival space, which has dictated many centuries of visual arts. A simple take-off from the idea of light traveling in a straight line, deviation from realism, defiance of the viewer as a stationary observer after the Modernists, and the development of "minor" technologies from heavily marketed and patented "major" technology (the SEGA Dreamcast) generate a fantastic world of unseen spaces, reaffirming the potentiality of the apparently exhausted screen space.

Third Text is far from a comprehensive showcase of what the term "new media" embraces. But perhaps the return to the Screen is a good place to begin, and to highlight.