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Cinema's Floating Point

Filmmakers like Paul Schrader (in his critic days) used to talk about the 'floating frame' in reference to a roaming free-floating camera that possessed a roving, subjective and restless eye. Microchips nowadays have inbuilt FPU's - floating point unit processors - their task: to do some of the heavy-lifting of the mathematical calculations modern computing and graphics-intensive 3D visuals require. In a way we are at a point in the digital age that has enabled Cinema's own floating point. The CFP is an amalgam of both these factors.

Cinema has 'floated' beyond the frame, and this has been enabled by new display technologies. The processors of these new screen devices now power emotional and 'cinematic' experiences rather than mathematical equations. The time of cinema well and truly floating beyond its traditional environments has come. Unbounded from a theatrical model the cinematic experience is going multiplatform, with exploded storylines and intertwining capsule narratives.

The title you see above is deliberately provocative, because as much as Hollywood has moved the movie industry forward, it has also stifled

innovation and plurality in the cinematic form throughout the world - not just in Western economies - through it's own domination in terms of production channels, budgets, financial success, and stranglehold over distribution and PR. It is long past the time we burnt Hollywood's conventions and creative strictures, to redefine a new era where the conventions of celluloid are left in the darkness, as we move forward, illuminated by the possibilities of the digital screen.

I wrote this in an essay entitled 'From Reality to Illusion' for my 2004 book, The End of Celluloid: "Between the hegemony of Hollywood moviemaking machine and arthouse alternatives, very rarely are we able to glimpse the way forward for cinema. The digitization of cinema means elements can be fused and altered by the processor, blurring the lines previously dividing these established schools and their traditions. The 800lb gorilla of moving image, the feature film, is increasingly coming under attack. It needs to shape up, mutate, and evolve if it is to stay relevant in a universe of changing hardware, content, and, ultimately, the thing that matters most: viewer expectations. This is an exceptional time of transition, offering an opportunity to create transformational works. More and more filmmakers are choosing to push their work in this direction."

While change is often slower in coming than we might wish or expect, significant changes have taken place in the last decade to indicate a post-Hollywood future for film, and the wider spectrum of moving image this entails. Digital technologies and software foster content innovation, and online platforms accelerate and amplify this. They allow the fresher moving image elements of the Seventh Art to flourish.

In the 90s, the mainstream music video was becoming moribund. It's vitality was suppressed by lack of distribution, and the focus and domination of MTV and the needs of major labels needs to break their, 'product' onto limited video playlists for maximum promotional worth. In a double whammy of constriction, budgets were focussed on highly commercial music artists, creating bland high budget video spectacles, and more marginal musicians who preferred more adventurous videos had their budgets blown away and marginalized by the cost savings in digital production.

Out of this mire, the music video landscape was transformed and delivered through the maturation of streaming video and the coming-of-age of technologies such as Flash and podcasting. YouTube and other video-sharing platforms have heralded a renaissance in the medium. Adventurous, inventive video tracks are able to go viral, are coveted and consumed, and

fan easily. Once again music video has become a territory where the mainstream of moving image meets the avant-garde. Leading exponents such as Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze broke through into the film world, infusing that form with a sprinkling of the inventiveness they had already shown in their music videos. Others such as Chris Cunningham appeared in shows such as 'Apocalypse' at the Royal Academy, London 'blurring the lines between music video and video art. His video for the Apocalypse' show, *Flex*, borrowed heavily from music video language, with ultra-tight, synced editing of video with soundtrack. Meanwhile his experimental work for musician Aphex Twin meant a short film, *Rubber Johnny*, shot in grainy
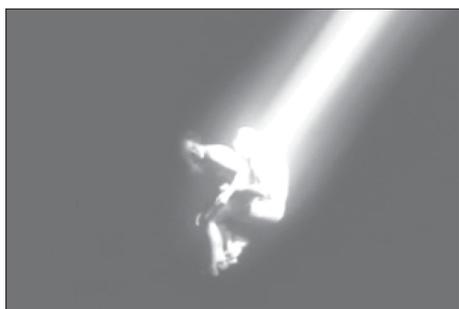

Flex

Rubber Johnny

nightvision on DVcam impressed the language of video art in service to album promotion. The loosening of the boundaries between genres has become ever more evident. An artistic Shengen agreement has come into effect, where free passage can be made without visas or passports between these countries.

Within a UK context, moving image manipulators such as United Visual Artists, D-Fuse, Addictive TV and The Light Surgeons have moved from VJs - video jockeys who remix video sources live as backdrops to DJ sets and music shows - to the foreground. They have taken this cut-and-paste style to remix the way filmic experience can be edited and constructed to make non-linear live film experiences, and expressionistic cinema, with an edit unique to every performance. Mike Figgis took a minor detour down
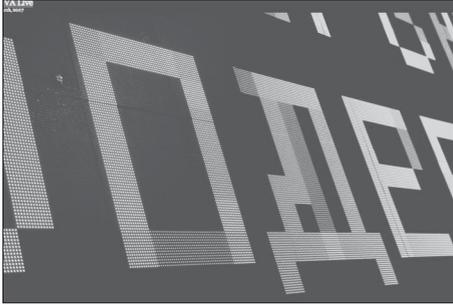
United Visual Artists
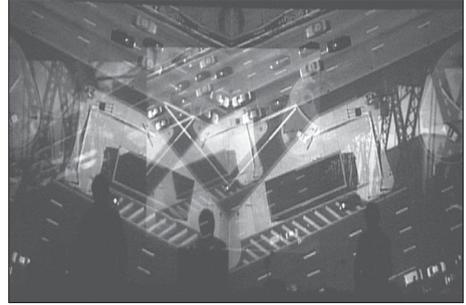
The Light Surgeons

this route with his quadrant-screened *Timecode 2000*, in which four cameras continously followed four characters within split frames throughout the length of the story. In live performances, Figgis directed audience attention to give a particular frame and character action prominence by judicious use of audio tracks related to each section of the full screen.

Be in no doubt, online ideas will infect every section of film, right up to the feature form. David Lynch's last long-form film, *Inland Empire* was shot with digital cameras, in a style informed by the confessional unselfconscious recordings of the YouTube generation. The moebius strip-like narrative was shot through with borrowings from his online video experiments, in particular, *Rabbits* (in their original incarnation a series of shorts Lynch shot on a set he built on his own LA backyard, with actors donning Rabbit masks). The JJ Abrams' *Cloverfield*, at the other end of the spectrum, used the conceit of being soley filmed via a protagonists' DVcam to reframe the monster movie action and high-octane, action movie concept via intimate, pseudo-candid footage.

We are being increasingly comfortable jumping our attention between frames just as we are flitting our eyes over multiple Internet browser windows. Jake Scott (part of Ridley's clan) was able to make a rear window for the net generation for the online project, *Voyeur by* HBO. Viewers could choose to reveal the action behind a Manhattan brownstone's walls to spy on the drama taking place within these apartments, and unravel a murder. HBO is ahead of the game in pushing interactive drama formats online, it's Cube concept (hboimagine.com) offers a number of Rashomon-type

David Lynch: *Inland Empire*

Jake Scott: HBO's *Voyeur*

interactive scenarios, where viewers can alter which side of the cube they view, therefore changing the camera and angle they are viewing it from, and revealing another perspective to the story, usually focussing on dialogue and action from one or more characters that may have been only briefly been glimpsed on another side of the cube. Viewers are allowed to discover where to go next with the story, and repeatedly playing with the narrative offers up multiple layers of action.

Molotov Alva by Doug Gayeton

Immemory by Chris Marker

The virtual worlds enabled by today's software allow filmmakers the opportunity to harness 3D worlds as a playground for their own imagination. They are ideal as both storyboarding, animatic and conceptual tools, and in some cases as the actual sets for films. Machinima (a conflation of machine and cinema) utilizes the 3D engines of videogames to drive virtual sets and actors, creating realtime animation for mini-movies and documentaries. From the medieval fantasy action of the first feature-length machinima, *Bloodspell*, to the social commentary of French Democracy (made in response to racial tension which sparked riots around the housing estates of the Peripherique, the huge ring road on the outskirts of Paris) the form is becoming increasingly slick as the power of the gaming engines increases. *Molotov Alva* and

his search for the *Creator: A Second Life Odyssey* (produced by Submarine Channel in the Netherlands, the first machinima acquired by HBO in the U.S.) is a documentary where an avatar ruminates on what is is to exist in the virtual world of Second Life.

That restless cinematic innovator Jean-Luc Godard has said that "Somewhere between the videogame and the CD-ROM there could be another way of making films." Still it is left to the eldest living statesman of the experimentalists, Chris Marker (whose *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil* have been hugely influential on a generation of filmmakers), to show the poetry and blurred, complicated emotion that can be elicited from the hard pixels and clean vectors of the digital form. He created a multimedia memoir in 1998 in the form of a CD-ROM, *Immemory* which merges essay, manifesto, personal letter, documentary, and computer game. The old dogs may still have a few tricks left, but it is the young guns who are blazing the current trail.

Avatar

How can you reinvent these genres - build upon them, hybridize, extend, and make new ones? Fundamentally this is about what is 'cinematic'? When does cinema become something else, and how much can fall within it's compass? It is up to the filmmakers of this age to reconstitute and redefine the experience just as their forebears did. Strangely, Hollywood's idea of 'cinematic' has reinforced itself as a spectacular rollercoaster visual experience. Hollywood is flocking to the second coming of the blockbuster, energized by 3D - and this has reinforced this lurch to the experiential to a near abstract degree (the latest *Transformers* sequel is a case study in this, and a nightmare scenario for this trend's future, while James Cameron's *Avatar* is the poster child of just such all-encompassing, immersive cinematic realities).

As we come out of the first real decade of digital film, blockbusters are more visually experimental than your average 'indie film' - which is most suffering from what Peter Greenaway described as the Four Tyrannies - the text, the actors, the camera, and the frame. Paradoxically these 3D blockbusters have freed themselves from these confines - they have been unshackled from them. The social media landscape and web platforms that have enabled media sharing have democratized and to a certain degree equalized access to a fuller moving image spectrum. It has meant the frontiers have widened for artists concerned with these new territories of storytelling and visual form. And some filmmakers are now stepping up to the plate to redefine the medium.