The Open Void – Embodiment and Experience – In Film/Video/Numeric-Computer Art and Immersive Environments

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Abstract In non-Western cultures including those of the African and Eastern continents, the relationship of the individual self to the cosmos and the progression of life is established through spiritual and ritual practice. In Western cultures, the relation of the individual self to society as well as the notion of truth is based on empirical forms of knowledge. The following reading will discuss current trends in New Media theory, including computer technologies in film/video, digital and analog and their relational influences to non-Western forms of thought.

Referencing models of phenomenology and African and Eastern philosophies, the reading will draw a connection between current trends in computer and scientific systems of logic and the influences of non-Western forms of thought. Included are examples of various filmmakers and computer artists cited to establish the necessity for a critical framework which can construct a continental philosophical discourse toward New Media Theories.

> *We want to know how by its own vitality, and without carrying complementary material into a mythical unconscious, consciousness can, in course of time, modify the structure of its surroundings; how, at every moment, it's former experience is present to it in the form of a horizon which it can reopen--if it chooses to take that horizon as a theme of knowledge-* (Phenomenology of Perception, M. Merleau-Ponty)

The computer has become the vast network of telecommunications shaping the lives of our world population daily. Mediated experiences through visual stimuli bombard our everyday experiences. The internet, cyberspace, AI (artificial intelligence), webcams, cellular phones, YouTube, interactive graphic displays, virtual realities are only a few which comprise the array of communication technologies.

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Idealism in the age of technology, constructs a language founded on the principles of empirical forms of gathering knowledge. It imposes the status of truth, relative to the process of human evolution.

Current models, based on empirical forms of knowledge also include forms of non-Western thought which have had a profound influence in the development of contemporary technological discourses and have also shaped the foundations of this phenomenon.

How do we begin a discourse of language, semiotic or structural models, which can complement empirical language, metaphysical language and intuitive processes of human awareness? In this model, creating a space for new forms of philosophical inquiry.

The beginnings of such inquiries can be found in the creative works of the experimental video-film community. As such, the following paper will discuss various filmmakers and artists and examples of their work which have been influenced by both Western and non- Western forms, seeking to understand the relationship between empirical forms of reason, and experiential forms of knowledge.

The discussion will divide into sections; beginning with Cartesian renderings, then interspersing the works of various filmmakers and artists and ending with technologies of the obsolete.

Immortal Beloved: Cartesian Renderings- the Mind/Body and the Apparatus in the Face of Immortality

"And, finally, on these grounds, we are necessitated to conclude, that all those objects which are clearly and distinctly conceived to be diverse substances, as mind and body, are substances really reciprocally distinct…."For we are not able to conceive the half of a mind, as we can of any body, however small, so that the natures of these two substances are to be held, not only as diverse, but even in some measure as contraries………the human body is no longer the same if a change take place in the form of any of its parts: from which it follows that the body may, indeed, without difficulty perish, but that the mind is in its own nature immortal." (Descartes; summary of the meditations; 1641)

Descartes can be interpreted in the following writings as putting forth the distinction of the mind – body and forming a foundation for the construction of a language based on logical empiricism, establishing this function of reason.

In the language of technology, " contemporary" culture, a body-consciousness can enter the virtual space of a computer, uncoded by signifying cultural markers, an anonymous identity, floating, traveling within the void of the virtual machine, the space and time continuum. An individual self creating a unifying consciousness transcending territorial and global boundaries. A form of thought based on the language of empirical idealism. These discussions have continued throughout technological discourses, and shape the current dialogue. The next passage is an example of this discussion in the community of experimental film.

The transition from a culture that considers leisure a 'problem' to a culture that demands leisure as a prerequisite of civilized behavior is a metamorphosis of the first magnitude. And it has begun. The computer is the arbiter of radical evolution: it changes the meaning of life. In laboratories all over the world, biochemists are drawing ever closer to the secrets of the genetic code. Younger readers may within their lifetimes, rub shoulders with pre-programmed humans. (pg 180; Gene Youngblood; Expanded Cinema; 1970)

   This description of corporeal embodiment, resembles the final plane of immortality; a consciousness no longer bound to the adherence of its physical destination. A presence within an apparatus of mechanical form. The mirroring phase of the self reaching its potential as the disembodied project of thought.

The Status and the Function

The Status of Truth

It will be necessary to understand the empirical model which establishes this language of discourse, setting as its main function and status: knowledge and truth, as technology will continue to found its many principles on logic and reason. The following describes several examples of the status of truth in its potentialities of variation.

(a) Universal truth; Truth as in universal law of the human condition. (Metaphysical model). One in which we seek to understand the human condition. A set of universal principles which order the human condition for all of humankind.
(b) Truth investigated as the moral process of thought. If moral obligation = to the contemplation of the self = is relative to experience and existence, knowledge will be gained in the effort to understand the morality of the human condition, to which each being will trandscend in the evolutionary process of humankind. A perception of truth in its idealist sense.
(c) Empirical knowledge = the function; = in its pursuit of the language of truth; empirical knowledge as a variable in the pursuit of truth. (empirical model); logical empiricism. x to y = variable: proof and existence of a model of "truth".

Thought and Its Processes of Investigation

The Mechanical Apparatus and Its Relationship to the Variable "truth"

> *The medium of video art is the psychological condition of the self, split and doubled by the mirror reflection synchronous feedback …Implicit in this question is the idea that auto reflection and reflexiveness refer to the same thing, that both are cases of consciousness doubling back upon itself in order to perform and a separation between forms of art and their contents, between the procedures of though and their objects.* (Rosalind Krauss, Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism, 1976)

The Film and the Photograph

The camera- photography, developed to render images of the real. Dating from the Age of Enlightenment in which scientific inquiry and rational thought became prevalent, forms of medical photography were used as an investigation of the human

form to current day uses of the photographic and filmic image which are to reveal "truth" of the real.

Although, current technological advances such as photoshop and other digital programs, have brought the proof of the so called "real" or "true" photograph into question, the camera is still seen as the instrument used for the purpose of presenting an image, a gathered form of knowledge.

The Computer

The speed of light does not merely transform the world. It becomes the world. Globalisation is the speed of light. Paul Virilio (Armitage 2000).

Speed: A form noted by the variable and duration of a quantitative element. One in which duration is characterized by spacio temporal movements. The phenomenon of speed; movement; characterize the collective consciousness and the machine. The faster the signal, the more vast its structure of movement, the more broad its territory. Here exists Knowledge in its pursuit of truth. The Form: consciousness = the variable Speed = the instrument = computing engine. A model of inquiry based on an empirical structure.

There is collective conscious beyond our grasp an innate, experiential knowledge of the self, attuned to each subject. It is with this realization of our intuitive experience that we perceive a model of philosophical inquiry which constitutes and adapts to our experiential understanding of the world, this plane of mirroring revealing a complex set of relations between thought in its symbolic form and its intuitive and experiential processes.

Consciousness and Its Methods of Representation – Intuitive Knowledge and the Symbology of Thought

### Filmmakers and Artists-Creative Interpretations

Filmmakers have continued in current times to present work which reflects the conceptual nature of the medium, responding to the medium as an apparatus which uses a material base to render an image. There are several categories of film which can be designated which include: Art Cinema; Interactive and Numeric Cinema and Live-Expanded Cinema practices also referred to as Performative Cinema. Writers such as Gene Youngblood, P. Adams Sitney and Annette Michelson have been key figures in writings on cinema as a form of expanded consciousness. The following sections will discuss filmmakers and video artists who pursue this medium in these forms of practice.

The Framework of Conceptual Language

Conceptual language is characterized by the intentionality of the artist, the approach to the medium, the direct use of the material base for the creative projects either in

sculptural form and-or dealing directly with concepts relating to the materials. In cinema, a breaking with the traditional cinematic codes such as; the stationery camera on the tripod, continuity in narrative editing structure and-or the 180° rule of cinema.

<u>**Art Cinema**</u>-Cinema as a form of expanded consciousness
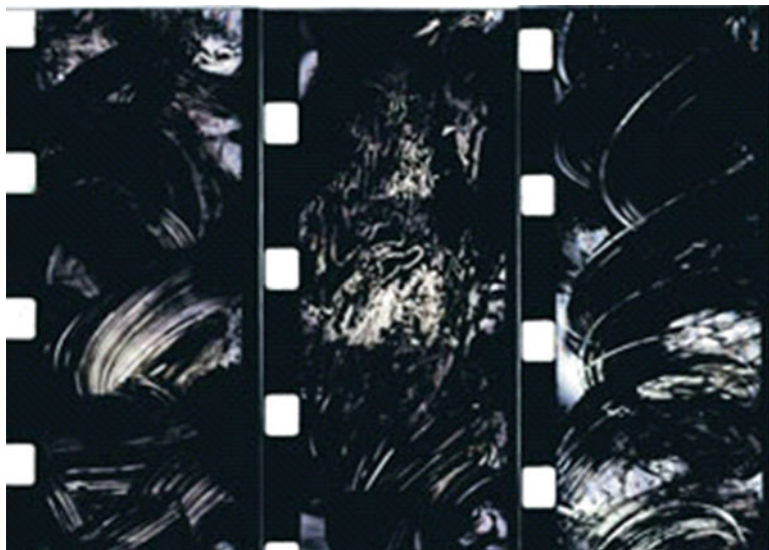
Big band; de Marcelle Thirache, 2001, 16 mm, 3'

Marcelle Thirache

FORÊT FUGITIVE, LA-2010/Mini DV/Couleur/Silencieux/7

   The conceptual, sculptural and painterly films of Marcelle Thirache use the camera to show imploding fragments of light in motion. Thirache's film takes the viewer

on a visual journey, by positioning the camera sometimes stationery and other times in movement. In the film, **LA FORÊT FUGITIVE**-2010, she spins the camera in a surge of circular movements, interspersing shots. Starting from a tree in a stable position and then continuing to rotate the camera creating floating fragments of light. The glowing patterns reveal the spaces between the static image of the camera in nature and the spinning mechanical device of the camera eye, taking us to another perceptual plane of visual experience, transcendental in nature.

Her films can be considered engaging, including both natural elements and forces of energy to create a fascinating display in the place where spaces converge between the sometimes static and moving image and the camera eye and the subjective space of the viewer. By Interrupting our stationary gaze of the image (a rule of cinematic code), and by rotating the camera eye, the viewer is placed into a space of transcendence and after, experiences a re-grounding into the "natural order" of visual representation. The work of Thirache, takes the viewer into spaces of transcendent experience.

The films of Frédérique Devaux;

K (ACUGHER3/ACIMI)
2008/16 mm/coul/son/8' 00

Frédérique Deveaux

Filmmaker Frédérique Devaux uses direct application techniques to work with the film material. By altering various codes of cinematic representation, sometimes shooting the actual film itself at varying speeds, she creates a visual symmetry of moving images, challenging our notions of perception and cinematic representation.

"I think most of my works are like mosaics." Devaux explains how she creates the film by placing one film, on another film and repeating the process**,** so on, creating a collage effect. "I like working on rhythm." She explains this as a form of interspersing shots, from one shot to a double shot continuing with this effect. "Everything is handmade, the film itself. I make my own copy of the film, so everything in my films are handmade." (Frédérique Devaux, 2012)

Numeric Cinema

The machinic apparatus – The Empiricist and The Metaphysician-Cinematic Illusion and States of vertigo

DVD Cosmogonies; 2007; HugoVerlinde

> *Verlinde actually reinvents a voluptuous and refreshing relation between the body and the cosmos.* (DVD Cosmogonies; Lowave)

Numeric cinema, as is termed by the art world, uses written code and computational values to create flowing visual experiences for the viewer. Interactive and immersive environments place the performing viewer on stage with the actual image. Through this form of artistic interpretation, we see the continued merging of Eastern thought and Western models of empiricism. States of vertigo characterize this form of cinematic representation. In the writings on existence, Levinas states the following: *"Nausea," as a feeling for existence, is not yet a depersonalization… Insomnia thus puts us in a situation where the disruption of the category of the substantive designates not only the disappearance of every object, but the extinction of the subject.* Existence And Existents *by* Emmanuel Levinas

If nausea and insomnia are given the status of disruption or distinction of the subject; how does the status of vertigo define the existence of the self and the nature of subjectivity? What assigned status is it given as a project of thought? These are the areas that filmmakers begin to explore in numeric installations. The following show examples of the works of artists through the past decades to current times which center on this language.

> We are witnessing a growing hybridisation of physical space and the virtual sphere. This is the objective assessment to which digital technologies are driving us. Let's try to make a link, for this juxtaposition of the visible and the invisible has a precedent: that of (principally

Chinese, Indian or Tibetan) representations of the human body. In these Eastern traditions, the physical body is crossed by a web of energy, invisible to the naked eye, made up of major and minor centres. There are also thousands of secondary centres irrigated by channels of invisible matter. (**The visible and the invisible**; **Hugo Verlinde; La Cube Review; Creation and Digital Society; March** 2012**)**

Verlinde works with numeric code to create visual installations and projections which immerse the viewer in visually moving environments. Upon entering the space, the viewer is submerged into a space of vibrating and flowing visual imagery.

The Cosmic Cinema of Jordan Belson: Film-Allures; 1961

In the work of filmmaker Jordan Belson, Gene Youngblood describes the work, "The films are literally superemperical- that is, actual experiences of a transcendental nature. They create for the viewer a state of non-ordinary reality, similar in concept at least, to those experiences described by the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda. He regards the films not as exterior entities, but literally as extensions of his own consciousness." ibid (pgs. 158–159). Gene Youngblood; Expanded Cinema

Youngblood continues to describe Belson as a practicing Mahayana Buddhist. Here we see the influence of Western and non-Western forms of thought, through the use of mandala symbols and references to metaphysical language, visually represented in the analog computer film works. Once again, the mechanical apparatus of the machine used to convey a form of extended conscious awareness, as described through the language of Eastern theologies.

The Films of: James Whitney: Film-Lapis; 1966

"In general the term Lapis held the same meaning for the ancient alchemists that the mandala holds for the Lamaist, tantrist, taoist Hindu: a kind of 'philosopher's stone' or aid to meditation." ibid; G.Youngblood. According to Youngblood, the film, Lapis was created on an analogue computer, in 1966. Visual images are created to show the model of the mantra, a symbol for the plane of finite and infinite.

Expanded Cinema Practices: Expanded Consciousness: Thought and the Symbolic Plane

Film Artists: **Hyperbang; Trinchera Collective; Scratchbursts; Sally Golding; Bruce McClure- Performance events staged: 2006–2012- Region: Paris, France**

The expanded cinema practices of the following groups can be characterized as such: Experimentation; elements of chance; random events; experiential happenings; the body as a site of performance; the Intuitive.

The discussion will focus on the film group: Hyperbang. The collective, a live performative film group, uses raw stock and found footage along with built -constructed cinema environments using everyday materials. The exhibitions comprise of live performances; real time events. The live performances are an open stage for chance, random events creating a space which challenges the viewer to go beyond patterns of thought, relying more on intuitive experiences. Much of their work can be traced to artists of the Fluxus movement.

Flickering light and flashing optical effects are part of the performance. Cinema is brought to its basic material form, the projection of light and images on perforated surfaces through the mechanized apparatus. In one section of the performance, the hand of the filmmaker shadows the screen, creating an awareness of the operational values inscribed as cinematic code. Thought, in its wake of intentionality- anticipation, derives from its symbolic sense, an awareness of the self and its signification as a project of symbolic thought.

In my own work I began looking at the body as a point of reference, to explore structures of corporeal embodiment. Mounting visual live feed and interactive situations in which the perceptual space of the viewer is enhanced through the use of live video signals. I also began downloading video signals and using digital materials from the web. And returned to the kinesthetique, cameraless film a way of dealing with the computer at very different bodily experience.

The tactile experience of the handmade film, cameraless film, created a new way of sensory perception, working directly with the materials, with more of a sense of touch, and then loading them onto computer graphs. It produced a very different challenge between the kinesthetique and meticulous form of the actual film object itself and the more visual language of the computer graphing system and keyboard circuitry. I also began the use of West African cloth, sewn directly onto the film and re-photographed. This was in an effort to better understand, or come to terms with the absence of my own cultural, ritual knowledge of the continent. In this respect, I began to notice the patterns on the African cloth, the formation of symbols and fluctuating geometric patterns and shapes. I was intrigued upon reading the following statement comparing computational algorithms and African patterns.

> *Fractal geometry has emerged as one of the most exciting frontiers in the fusion between mathematics and information technology. Fractals can be seen in many of the swirling patterns produced by computer graphics, and have become an important new tool for modeling in biology, geology, and other natural sciences. While fractal geometry can take us into the far reaches of high tech science, its patterns are surprisingly common in traditional African designs, and some of its basic concepts are fundamental to African knowledge systems.* (Ron Eglash; African Fractals, Modern Computing and Indigenous Design)

Here begins a mathematical model of analysis. There is still yet another cultural and philosophical model which would describe a complex order of inter-related movements of form. Were they symbols of ritual? A gestural symbology of language, specific to a form of cultural ritual and-or the establishing of a system of logic based on principles of organization. Those of the structures of a thought pattern in relation to a system of ritual, linguistic or gestural knowledge and spiritual symmetry.

It is evident that there is a very strong connection between the striking figures of the cloth patterns and symbolic systems of logic in mathematical and diagrammatic sequences. An obvious relationship between Western Empiricism and African systems of symbolic logic. But, the larger question to pose is what are the philosophical models on which the principles are based? These questions must be explored to have a greater understanding of a philosophical model which can constitute a complex array of various forms of perception.

Techologies of the Obsolete

Picture a vast wasteland of computer bits, parts, keyboards, circuit boards, hard drives. A deserted plane where the space is populated with disposable technologies of the obsolete. Scattered film canisters, raw film footage, old Cd's, DVD's, cassettes, no longer functional as the current machinery no longer supports their timely use. A deserted plane, like the vast desert of the Sahara or Death Valley. Unpopulated by life. A ghostly presence envelopes the landscape, like a haze painting the air in varying hues of color, rising in the form of an ascending phoenix, its wings arched in the frame of the landscape, sculpting the wind, capturing a flustering moment in the open void.

Creative Projects

Images from the Series: Vanishing Point: 2010;
Marguerite Harris

The following are images-installations, created through live visual feed.

Toute l'équipe du Collectif Jeune Cinéma
vous souhaite une très belle année.

Lapse de Marguerite Harris / photo : Daphné Hérétakis © 2010

A series of downloaded video signals from the internet broken down to their basic form through re-recording several rotations of the looped image.
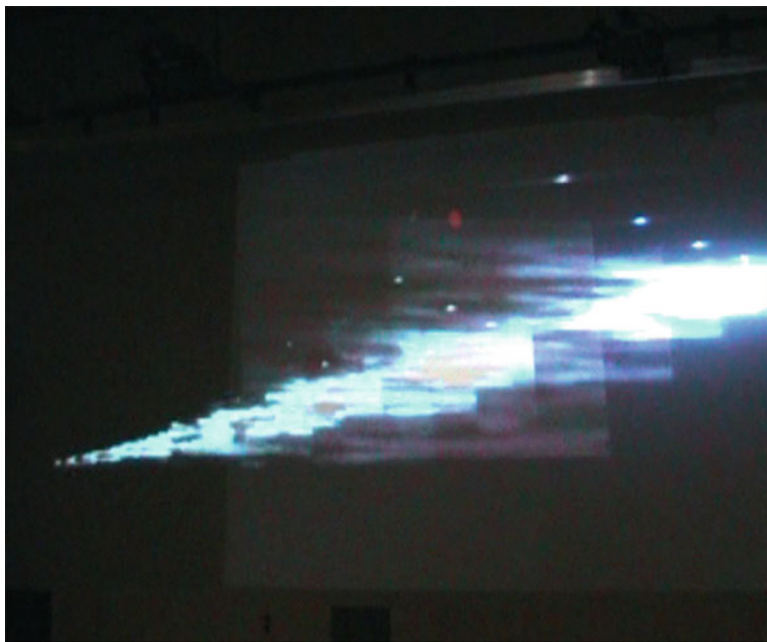
Downloaded video signal from the internet: computer visual images. Stretched video signal from internet set at various speeds from none to rapid movement.

Film Groups

Hyperbang; Trinchera Collective; Scratchbursts; Sally Golding; Bruce McClure; Silvi Simon; Lumiaks-Performative Video Installation

Film Collectives

Experimental Film Collectives (Paris, France): CJC/Collectif Jeune Cinema; Braquage; L'Etna.

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Writer's Note

This is a continuation of the first publication: Thought, Object and Experience. I have borrowed from this writing and continue to expand on the concepts.

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