



The paper formerly know as

**good vibrations**

**time as special effect**

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## 1. Why digital realism is not indexical

I've been discussing time and digital media for a while now. It strikes me that alongside arguments we need to make about, for example, the crash as a specifically digital temporality that brings the ephemeral to centre stage, we also need to understand what history means, no longer as a mode of monumentalisation, but as a coming to terms with the kind of loss that confronts us everyday when a freeze or a crash takes our hard work away. As it happens, I bumped into an essay a few days ago that provides the opportunity to think over the larger scale implications of transience as a characteristic of digital aesthetics.

The essay appears in a new publication from the Edinburgh College of Art, *TwoNineTwo*. In the opening essay of the launch issue Paul Willemen asks some searching questions about the risks that emerge as the digital media alter the indexicality of the analogue. In the process of analysis he returns to Eisenstein, because, he says, of



the suspicion that sooner or later, some techno-fetishist is bound to invoke, abusively, Eisenstein's name in a celebration of the internet or computer-based art. I suspect that for this abuse of Eisenstein, his particular notion of mimesis, commented on by Misha Yampolsky in *Eisenstein Reconsidered*, will be invoked. Yampolsky quoted Eisenstein's speech to the filmmakers of *La Sarraz* in 1929: 'The age of form is drawing to a close. We are penetrating behind appearance into the principle of appearance. In doing so we are mastering it.' Yampolsky then went on to argue that for Eisenstein, the issue was to represent 'the essential bone structure' underpinning and shaping reality rather than its surface appearance. No doubt some techno-fetishist will latch on to that formulation to claim that this is precisely what digital imaging and 'new media' enable. This claim may be further elaborated with reference to Eisenstein's emphasis on drawing, painting and the iconic quality of the cinematic and the photographic image. (Willemen 2000: 7-8)

My interest is piqued, since I quoted this rather obscure article from a 1988 volume of conference proceedings in my book on *Digital Aesthetics* a few years ago. This was how I deployed the quote in a chapter on *Virtual Realism*, part of whose mission was to establish that mechanical perception in both analogue and digital forms retains its indexical quality through the relationship established among images, a relationship which, I argued, forms a 'society' which enables a socialised mode of communication otherwise disabled by the hyperindividuation characteristic of accelerated modernity.

In his debates with the radical Kino-Eye director Dziga Vertov,

Eisenstein replied to criticisms that his story-films were in hock to the fictionalisations of the entertainment film by critiquing Vertov's espousal of the documentary. Raw reality, unorganised, could never achieve maximal effectivity, and could never form part of the overall subordination of the film's moments to its architectonics, its montage (Eisenstein 1988). Instead, Eisenstein argued the case for a cinema which would escape the magical powers of mimesis through an emphasis on composition, on the *mise en scène*, the frame, the shot, the editing and the whole film. Documentary was mere imitation. Like the sympathetic magic that drives a betrayed lover to destroy photos of the philanderer, or the symbolic objects surrounding a dead pharaoh, or the stock markets trade in 'objects that only exist on paper', for the documentary, 'The difference between form and reality is non-existent' (Eisenstein 1993: 68). The speculative regime dreams of managing reality through formal manipulations. But these magical administrations, in mirroring form alone, ape events without grasping their structure. In their place Eisenstein argues for a vision that pierces the secrets of matter, that reveals what lies beneath the surface, the bones beneath the skin (see Yampolsky 1993). He declaims 'Mastery of principle is the real mastery of objects' (Eisenstein 1993: 67), and in an early draft even speaks of 'Man as means'. Not even the human is sacrosanct in the demand for a visual art dedicated to unearthing the paucity of the present and the immanence of the future. . .

Eisenstein's purpose as pedagogue and practitioner was to move from [the] purity of autonomous illumination to a social relation between filmmaker and audiences through the establishment of a social relation between shots, a relation which would transform the contents of the individual frames or the sequence. In place of the economic model of exchange, Eisenstein aims for the social model of dialogue between frames. Unlike Baudrillard's succession and erasure of every image by the next, Eisenstein creates a society among his images. However, the internationalist ambition of Eisenstein's cinema bred a sense of cinema as universal language, or more specifically, a universal translation machine, whose purpose, to join human to human in the revolution, transcended and subordinated the claims of images to their own reasons for being. In the attempt to make a generalisable technique, montage falls prey to rationalist universalism. (Cubitt 1998: 43-4)

The model in the back of my mind was that proposed by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Task of the Translator', which offers a metaphor which seems as apposite to the transitions between analogue and digital as it is to both the problem of translation and the ethics of interpretation:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater

language, just as fragments are part of a larger vessel. (Benjamin 1969: 78)

The great difference between the Eisenstein and Benjamin is that the latter believes the universal language is made in the process of translation, while for Eisenstein it is already presumed as a Leninist class faculty that needs only to be mobilised in the machinery of the Party.

One of the problems with Willemen's approach is that it defines its aesthetic in terms of indexicality: in terms of visual coding. This is already weak as a way of understanding some key codes of cinema, especially editing but also music. It is entirely too parochial a view for digital aesthetics, which is only partially visual. It is also, very obviously, sonorous. Crucially, it is also dependent on a set of practices which humanist intellectuals have become loath to discuss: practices associated with the workplace, notably cartography, cataloguing and double-entry book-keeping. In geographic information systems (GIS), statistical data is arranged in correlation with spatial data to provide maps for scientific and marketing purposes; the database is an extended catalogue that adds record-keeping, filing and complex, multi-dimensional records to the old index card, and uses early twentieth century concepts of library information retrieval to power search engines and bots; while the accountancy procedures became the Lotus 1-2-3 definitive killer app for the first desktop machines. In this context, trying to define digital media by analogy with storytelling and realist depiction is like trying to define an ocean liner by means of its furniture.

Most of all, however, the humanist approach advocated by Willemen misses entirely what Gelernter (1998) calls the aesthetics of computing: the specific elegance, simplicity, effectiveness and sheer aesthetic pleasure of software design. Why is Windows 2000 so much less attractive an environment than Mac 1984? Why is Word 98 the clumsiest of all possible word-processors (with the exception, of course, of the next version of Word)? Gelernter uses Ted Nelson's term, 'feauritis'. Critical Art Ensemble (1996) use the phrase 'redundant functionality' for the same phenomenon: the excrescence of features and functions added on to the basic programme, ostensibly to increase its usefulness but actually to get it to do useless and unwanted actions that eat memory and clutter the screen with pointless objects and unnecessary advice (I particularly dislike Word 98's desire to correct my English and presumption that I want to edit whole words rather than individual letters -- yes I know I can turn it off, but it takes fifteen precious minutes burrowing in appallingly nested sub-menus to find the button, and meanwhile I can't even preview the font menu).

Digital aesthetics has to do with the engineering and technology of computing as well as the superlices of image and sound: [the Jodi site](#), for example, makes a wholly different sense if you use View Source to dip into the code beneath the apparently random scatter of blinking ascii characters. What is at stake is code, not representation. Tim Druckrey's 1995 Ars Electronica paper catches a critical aspect of this when he argues that 'Programming determines a set of conditions in which the represented is formed as an instruction, while language destabilizes the conditions through the introduction of formations in which the represented is extended' (Druckrey 1999: 311). The imbalance of instruction and extra-textual formations forms a new crisis in the theory of representation, itself already reeling under the twin blows of consumer capitalism and the dead-end theorisation of simulation. The act of interpretation does not become

impossible, faced with the interminable question of the truth of the representation, but becomes necessary, since the construction of truth now becomes an extra-textual effort engaging anyone who comes into contact with it.

As anyone who has ever struggled with a balance sheet will know, accountancy is a creative art. Without abuse of the facts, there are legitimate ways in which a company's performance can be shown to have resulted in a profit, a loss or a break-even, according to the audience for whom the figures are intended. A struggling charity, for example, has to avoid profit in order to keep its tax status, generate loss in order to attract key funding, and show profit in order to keep its directors and its bank manager happy. This is achieved not by changing the facts but by using different formulae to account for them. The spreadsheet has become a hermeneutic engine for testing out possible modes of accounting for a year's trading: to ensure that a movie makes a record profit for variety, but nevertheless never succeeds so well that players with points in it take significant revenue streams. It's illegal to alter the facts but massaging them is the reason we pay for accountants. The effort it takes the lay observer to grapple with these issues and to run through the what-if scenarios that accountants love is precisely the operation Druckrey hints at: the difference between instruction as machine coding and interpretation as the destabilisation of encoding in language.

The digital, like the accountancy spreadsheets that are such a feature of it, is indeed indexical, but it is not engaged with the visual regimes of resemblance, rather with semblance as such, which, considered as the execution of a set of instructions, is also doubled by a mimetic performance, rather as a recording of a piano recital is a semblance of the score but a mimesis of its execution. In fact the digital record is less perfect than the analogue, or rather has abandoned the claim to perfectibility of the analogue -- and this at its heart, not in the technoboosterism of "very soon we will be able to . . ." that Willemen quite rightly castigates -- though for the wrong reasons. To extend the metaphor of the piano recording, the mimicry of idealised acoustic conditions in the recording studio chronicled by Chanan is wasted effort: as Altman argues, the fallibility of playback ensures that the acoustic I hear is the acoustic of my living room, not that of the Cleveland orchestra. In effect, the greater the attempted control over reproduction, the more control is handed over to the receiver, who is thereby forced into the position of interpreter. This is just one aspect of the democratisation process in the digital domain.

Indexicality is in any case only one aspect of a cinema which, in the digital era, is also transformed as to its iconic and symbolic functioning. Willemen makes a play for the centrality of Charles Sanders Peirce's category of the index in film but does so in a naively realist tradition that ignores the power of Peirce's semiotics as a triadic rather than Saussurean and binary structure. Willemen wants a 'return' to the index, claiming that any image taken with a camera has an irreducible relation with embodied and physical reality which is precious, vital and political, and which digital media have destroyed. But a little media-social history will help understand why the index was never unique and never an unmitigatedly good thing. The camera and wet photography thrive in almost exactly the same chronological period as the ideology of privacy. One of the cheerier ways of looking at the 'death' of photography is that it coincides with the termination of bourgeois individualism and its abuse of identity and its

sacrosanctity as a defence for private dishonesty and domestic violence. The rise of the manipulable image and the emergence of a manipulable (schizophrenic) self are synchronous developments: what is occurring is not the end of truth but the end of an ideology of identity. Identity of the subject to itself has acted as the ground of truth since Descartes, and it is this ground that Willemen mourns. The law too has been grounded on the concept of individual identity as the basis of truth in arguments over privacy, intellectual and private property. As the measure of truth as identity breaks down -- the Microsoft trial is a wonderfully public forum for demonstrating the imbecility of identifying truth with property -- the rewriting of photographic truth becomes symptomatic of a global and highly political change in the nature of truth, identity and property. The logic of the digital, with its ease of surveillance, fraud and hacking, denies the sole right of ownership: if anything, the digital belongs, in its wider sense, to the dialectic of liberation in a way which a century of cinema has clearly failed to achieve. If the digital is no longer a credible medium for indexical representations, what does this mean for the surveillant regime of the passport photograph? Surely it requires more than an education that promotes 'assessing the 'likely' verisimilitude of any account or representation of the world' (the scare quotes, which are so revealing, are Willemen's own): surely it demands an education based not on picturing and mastery over the world, something more like an education based on the power to communicate in a globally interdependent society?

There's another curious and rather typical elision in decrying blockbuster cinema as 'physical sensations' as opposed to the 'emotive-intellectual' cinema. The 'sound prisons' of club culture Willemen vilifies can surely be understood analogously as the utopian if temporary promotion of psycho-somatic wholeness in an age in which its very possibility is erased in daily life. But just at the moment in which you think you have caught the argument: digital media are too embodied, too physical, not intellectual and emotive enough, we discover that the tirade will be directed towards the exclusion of embodiment from digital media. What is going on inside this apparent contradiction.?

What Willemen seems to be missing is the negativity of the body in contemporary society, joining in the industrial production of nostalgia for real bodies that began in the gay clubs and gyms of the 1970s and now permeates commercial culture. Willemen's love for the lost bodies of an imaginary working class, his promotion of their images as innocent triggers of 'intellectual-emotive' responses, reeks of the closet. The only way the body can permeate the cinematic OR the digital; is either as data-image (Mark Poster's [1990] term for the cloud of statistics which gathers around any participant in consumerism) or as absence. If anything it is the latter that marks the genuine digital art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We cannot wish away the division of body and mind effected in the foundations of modernity -- that wishing is characteristic of the bogus, content-full utopia castigated by Bloch and realised in the fashion industry with its cheesy evocations of blue-collar sweat in the processing of gym-and -isotonics-sculpted models. The contemporary body is itself untrustworthy and outwith the realms of truth because it is every bit as manipulable as the digital image of it. The body no longer counts politically: it is a construct of a historical process of abstraction noted already by Marx in the sublimation of labour power from the labouring bodies of the proletariat. The body becomes a disposable good under industrial capital, and an investment under finance capital. On the way, it moves from reproductive to service to

consumer sectors of the economy, concluding an arc from use via exchange to sign. In the re-engineering of contemporary capital, even that level of value is subsumed within a higher order of abstraction, that of the statistically normative database, where the body takes on the role of statistical fiction. The operation of digital media in recording, analysing and extrapolating from data is not an attack on indexicality: it is the new order of the index, and one entirely in tune with a trajectory already established in the twist of photography towards the instrumental rationality of the surveillance state in the middle of the 19th century. It is only a higher order of realism.

Like so many luddite commentators, Willemsen pretends to be obsessed with work, but not with looking at the changing conditions of work. Instead his major concern, like those of Kirkpatrick Sale (1996), Neil Postman (1992) and Sven Birkerts (1994), is with protecting the rights of an intellectual caste defined only negatively but disallowed the negating role that a true dialectical model would demand of them. Such arguments are stranded defending what Caldwell had already defined in 1939 as a dying culture. In fact, what all four fear is not the demise of indexicality but the rise of iconicity, 'the diagrammatic sign or icon' (Peirce 1991a: 181). But what if the true connection is, or the possible or potential relation were, symbolic, 'which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas' (Peirce 1991a: 181). This after all was Eisenstein's basic tactic in the montage aesthetic. The problem is that the symbolic relation in film turns indices into symbols -- the image of this babushka becomes the type of all victims of Cossack oppression (and incidentally all Cossacks are denied specificity) Willemsen's intellectual-emotive cinema is itself at odds with the embodiment he ascribes to indexicality, because every photographed body, as soon as it escapes from the purely representational regime of the index 'without definition' (achieved for the first and last time in cinema in the *Sortie des usines Lumières*) becomes symbolic, and as such throws itself into the regime of 'association of ideas or habitual connections (Peirce 1991a: 181) -- the realm of metaphor OR, and this is the danger Willemsen fears, the realm of ideology. Here is how Adorno expresses it:

montage disposes over the elements that make up the reality of an unchallenged common sense, either to transform their intention or, at best, to awaken their latent language. It is powerless, however, in so far as it is unable to explode the individual elements. It is precisely montage that is to be criticised for possessing the remains of a complaisant irrationalism, to adaptation to material that is delivered ready-made from outside the work. . . . the principle of montage therefore became that of construction. There is no denying that even in the principle of construction, in the dissolution of materials and their subordination to an imposed unity, once again something smooth, harmonistic, a quality of pure logicity is conjured up that seeks to establish itself as ideology. It is the fatality of all contemporary art that it is contaminated by the untruth of the ruling totality (Adorno 1997 :57).

Adorno's complex dialectic needs a gloss: montage abstracts elements -- shots - from their place in order to subordinate them to an artistic plan. In doing so it at once deprives them of their rational place in the world, but simultaneously supplants that with its own rationalism, an obverse of the instrumental rationalism of which it is attempting to be the negation. But because montage

fails to analyse and expose the elements, it fails because they bring with them their existing ideological associations, now freed of the complexities of their existence outside the constructed artwork.

We can use another of Peirce's triads to explore this in a different light :

The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation (Peirce 1991b: 188-9)

Untouched by the camera, the peasant's toil is firstness. Imaged, it becomes secondness. Assembled into a montage with other shots between which it mediates, it becomes thirdness, a language latent in the peasant's existence, but exclusive of the peasant. What Willemsen seems to want is for the peasant to be equally present in labour and in montage, but for that to happen the peasant must recognise that she is already a mediated entity, not a 'natural', pre-linguistic or more properly pro-filmic one. Adorno voices two fears. Firstly, in montage, the stage of secondness infects that of thirdness -- the tragic crucifixion of the peasant to the land as eternal verity in the style of Millais' *Angelus* or the cunning born of bitterness and tragedy in more contemporary accounts. Secondly, whether or not the montage takes account of the trailing ideologemes associated with the shot, the shot is assembled into a whole which, as artwork, aspires towards a totality which both subsumes the peasant's reality and mirrors, albeit negatively, the rationalist universalism of the society it attempts to critique. I've been using a related argument in a forthcoming chapter on problems of convergence in multimedia: neither hierarchical nor organic metaphors hold good of the democratising principles of emergent media, but montage only works if either its audience can be presumed to share the value system that powers the construction of the montage (as in MTV editing and televisual flow in general), or by irrational abnegation of the call to meaning (surrealist montage, sites like [Potatoland's Landfill](#)).

So what else is on offer? (and how is this going to bring us to the topic of time?)

When I wrote *Digital Aesthetics*, I should perhaps have said in the preface that the writing was in effect an act of mourning for my mother, who died in my arms just before I began work on the manuscript. With her went a way of life, at least as far as I was concerned, a courteous, literate, considerate way of living. I wanted at one and the same time to find a way of holding her legacy in some form of permanence, and of drawing from it a negative analysis of the present. As a result I missed a crucial factor: that both the dominant and the vanguardist cultures of our times already present themselves as negative. It is as if everyone from Madison Avenue to Garbage had read Adorno, and that Baudrillard's jeremiads had been taken to heart in every Hollywood blockbuster. If in the early sixties, as Adorno penned his masterpiece, Joyce's exile, silence and cunning had become the core tools of the last avant-garde (Sartre, Beckett, Celan), by the 1990s they were the tools of every Tarantino, Guns and Roses, Tracey Emin. As a result, I am increasingly of the opinion that the role of contemporary criticism is to go beyond negativity, but without surrender to

nostalgia; to go beyond Adorno, but to do so with cold, clear eyes.

The negation of the negation is positive only in the end result: it is still as meticulously stark a programme as Adorno set himself forty years ago. The task commences in the interrogation of time, and especially in the construction of the eternal present not only in consumer capital and the spatialisation of cyberculture, but in the triumphal nihilism of the best of North Atlantic thinkers from Baudrillard to Vattimo. It is essential to understand in the present the actually existing moment of the becoming of the future. Under the conditions of accelerated modernity, the present is already past redemption. The battleground is now the actual emergence of the future. Corporate long-term planning is not the only force at stake in digital culture: we can learn from the cunning exiles of modernity that stealth and initiative can succeed in the guerrilla war at the frontier between the colonisation of the future and its construction. Artists, activists, audiences are now in a better position than ever to take up arms in the struggle for what does not yet exist. To do so we cannot afford nostalgia. We have to seize the instruments available, and make work that is better than *The Matrix*.

How better?

## 2. Precepts for a digital artwork

