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Analogue Film, Digital Discourse:
Sean Cubitt's The Cinema Effect

Sean Cubitt

[The Cinema Effect](#)

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The last several years have witnessed the mass transfer of old (pre-digital) films onto digital formats. Remastered versions of classic movies are released on DVD every week. Though the exhibition of feature films on 35mm continues, the day when all but a handful of archive cinemas will have switched to digital projection cannot be far away. When that finally happens, virtually every time a pre-digital film is seen, it will be in a

digitally mediated manner. The incursion of digital technology into analogue film will be complete. In the light of this physical digitization of cinema, it is not surprising that someone should try to effect an analogous conceptual digitization. Sean Cubitt's brilliant, infuriating new book, *_The Cinema Effect_*, attempts just this. It looks at the (largely analogue) history of cinema through the filter of the (digital) present. As the fly-leaf puts it, 'Cubitt proposes a history of images in motion from a digital perspective, for a digital audience.' In this review, I explore what this entails.

Cubitt's scope is, of necessity, as broad as cinema itself. The subjects that he discusses 'from a digital perspective' are accordingly diverse. He traces the development of mise-en-scene in the Lumieres' first films, from the haphazard framing of *_Workers Leaving the Factory_* to the spatialized narrative of *_L'Arroseur arrose_*. He explores the use of line in early animation and looks for coherence in the apparently diverse output of the RKO studio in the 1930s. He suggests interpretations for the slow-motion deaths in Peckinpah's westerns and accounts for the pleasures of the long-duration steadicam shot. He discusses the aesthetics of CGI and places the hermetic digital environments of modern Hollywood effects films into a political context. If *_The Cinema Effect_* has a dominant theme, it is that of film's increasingly complex delineation of space and time over its eleven decade history. But in the end it is down to Cubitt's 'digital perspective' to make the book cohere.

How is it possible to look at analogue art from a digital perspective? The most obvious way is by singling out elements of digitality in individual pre-digital works. The pointilism of Seurat and Pissaro can be seen as anticipating the pixel. The visual loops in Zbigniew Rybczynski's animations can be seen as anticipating the repeat button. An example of such criticism is a recent article by Marsha Kinder which highlights digital aspects of Luis Bunuel's films. For example, the multiple entrances in *The Exterminating Angel* are seen as a form of database narrative. [1] Instead of following the convention of using one take from each slate, Bunuel used multiple takes. The resulting repetition and variation draws attention to the database of shots from which the film was constructed, and to the existence of the multiple options that prefigure each narrative choice. Kinder's article is a lively piece, faultlessly argued. However, finding evidence of digitality in pre-digital films almost inevitably leads critics towards the same, somewhat obvious conclusion that the artists behind these works were ahead of their time. Pre-digital digitality is seen as an anomaly, restricted to occasional works by visionaries like Bunuel. So the conceptual separation between analogue and digital remains intact.

Cubitt goes further. He attempts to break down this separation and apply digital terminology to cinema itself. He summarizes his intention in the following way: 'I want to supplant the metaphors of film as language pursued by Metz . . . and film as psychology pursued by

Bordwell . . . with a more digital analysis of the mathematical bases of motion' (7-8). For example, Cubitt refers to cinema as a pixellation of reality, dividing the continuum of time into individually imperceptible frames just as a scanner transforms a photograph into individually imperceptible dots. Early one-shot films are the analogue cinematic embodiment of the pixel. Within the filmstrip as well as in the history of film as art, the pixel is followed by the cut: 'Cutting literally puts an end to the eternal now of the non-identical . . . Terminal (but not final) the cut defines the term and the terms of objection, transforming raw perception into an object for consciousness, establishing the object as a perception of which an 'I' is conscious' (71). Formally, the cut replaces one group of still images with another, while historically it gave audiences their first inkling of film form, in both cases initiating a new trajectory towards an open-ended future. Cubitt refers to this new line of movement as the vector.

Cubitt's metaphors are elegant. The fact that they are rooted in the filmstrip, the lowest common denominator of film production, is particularly satisfying. But are they enough to reconfigure the language of cinematic discourse? The simple answer is no. Unlike Metz and Bordwell, Cubitt does not provide a metaphor for cinema as a whole but a collection of metaphors for specific aspects of cinema. His various uses of digital terminology -- 'pixel', 'vector', 'keyframe', 'parse', 'rasterize' -- all imply the presence of a governing metaphor, but that metaphor is never stated. It is not

stated, one has to assume, because it does not exist. Metz's individual linguistic metaphors (for example, that of the shot as sentence) are extensions of a governing metaphor of cinema as language. Cubitt has no equivalent governing metaphor to offer the world. In fact, on closer examination, what his digital terms are metaphors for is constantly shifting. As mentioned above, his use of the term 'cut' is both historical and aesthetic. Cubitt's vector is even more multi-faceted. It is variously a line in an animation (80), a long-duration shot (110, 228), a label for the period in cinema history that corresponds to 'the Lacanian Symbolic' (70), and more generally 'the becoming of something as yet unseen' (72). The way in which he uses the term depends on its context. From a distance, Cubitt's uses of digital terminology appear to fit together within a larger structure. Seen up close, often their only connection is their digital origin.

The amorphous nature of Cubitt's metaphors reflects the fact that he provides no new theory of cinema to underpin them. Metz and Bordwell did more than just develop a (linguistic) metaphor -- they provided a new (conceptual) perspective. Bordwell's view of films as an accumulation of sense data and his exploration of how viewers process information revolutionized the study of narrative. His new psychological metaphors became established because they were the linguistic expression of a new way of analyzing film. Cubitt's new metaphors are not accompanied by any equivalent conceptual reconfiguration. They do not force the reader to reassess what film is. For example, his metaphor of the

filmstrip as temporal pixellation may provoke in the reader many worthwhile strands of thought: about what is analogue and what is digital, about the interdependence of time and space, about the structures that underpin images of reality as well as reality itself. But for all its power, it remains just a metaphor.

Perhaps, despite his initial statement of intent, Cubitt is not actually trying to provide a new digital language for analogue film. It is telling that he never provides a complete explanation for why analogue film should be analyzed 'from a digital perspective' at all. Early in the book he explains that his pixel metaphor has come about because 'we look back from an age in which images are encoded mathematically, and because in a digital age the humanities can no longer afford to remain innumerate' (33). Cubitt here comes dangerously close to suggesting that digital discourse should be used (and to implying that he himself uses digital discourse) in order to appear cutting edge. Two chapters later, he provides a more mythologically-tinged explanation when he justifies his use of the term 'vector' by invoking cinema's 'digital destiny' (70). Considering the intensity with which, later in the book, he critiques the fatalism of 'neobaroque' and 'technological' cinema for its refusal to acknowledge the moral responsibility of the individual to help shape humanity's future, his use of the word 'destiny' is clearly rhetorical. Perhaps Cubitt's project of digitizing the language of cinema studies is also rhetorical.

Rhetoric plays a pivotal role in *_The Cinema Effect_*. Cubitt's mixture of academic terminology, technological metaphor, and elaborate syntax contains frequent evidence of rhetorical technique. For example, he describes the repetitive patterns implied by *_Workers Leaving the Factory_* in the following way: 'Not only is the film always already a repetition of a profilmic event; not only is it ready to be shown over and over; not only is it a series of very nearly identical frames; but the event it records takes place daily, and though every day in a unique manner, nonetheless also in some degree the same' (21). The way in which he uses repetitive patterns to discuss repetitive patterns is almost literary. Cubitt provides his reader with a double pleasure -- that of cogent ideas, eloquently phrased. However, one sometimes feels he is so much in thrall to the power of words that he is more interested in his words than the images described by them. When a chicken in *_Felix the Cat_* is referred to as 'burglarious' (78), one can almost visualize Cubitt's delight at having just conjured up such a word. And does he really need to use such words as 'anthropophagy' (284)?

Often Cubitt's theoretical and linguistic rhetoric merge -- he often skips a few logical steps or avoids the prosaic task of defining his terms, thereby achieving a sentence that sounds just right and carries a meaning that cannot be precisely pinpointed. For example, he says that: 'Digital film proposes a mode of communication in which the central purpose is to create subjects for the object of communication, subjects that exist only to be subsumed into the object, and thus to achieve a

plenitude in which no further communication is desired or necessary.' (270) There is a fundamental truth here, but doesn't Cubitt mean 'recent medium to high budget Hollywood spectacle' rather than 'digital film'? The term would look clumsy in his highly polished prose, but through the partial abstraction of 'recent medium to high budget Hollywood spectacle' into the undefined concept of 'digital film' Cubitt weakens an otherwise persuasive argument.

The book's structural unity is also rhetorical. It comprises twelve chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, separated into three sections -- 'Pioneer Cinema', 'Normative Cinema', and 'Post Cinema'. The chapters have titles such as 'Graphical Film', 'Classical Film', and 'Technological Film'. Each chapter, by implication, appears to refer to a distinct class of film. The implication is also that together these twelve categories encompass the entirety of film history. In fact, neither is the case. For example, *The Matrix* is used as an example of both neobaroque film and technological film. So too, many types of films are not covered by any of Cubitt's analyses. His chapter on 'Classical Film' in fact focuses only on a specific subset of classical film -- the RKO films in the 1930s, and even more specifically on their use of dialogue.

What does this illusion of theoretical and structural coherence conceal? The answer can be gleaned from the book's acknowledgements. These reveal that *The Cinema Effect* is derived from two published articles and over twenty talks, lectures, and conference papers.

Cubitt has clearly spent much time and ingenuity reworking his source material, but there is no escaping the book's fragmentary genesis. In this, *The Cinema Effect* is typical of the recent academic trend of creating books out of pre-fabricated units. However, the fragmentary structure of Cubitt's book is far more deeply rooted than that of most concealed anthologies. It is almost post-structuralist. Not only is each chapter on a different subject, but even within chapters, Cubitt's arguments move lightly from subject to subject. Sometimes an argument is sustained for several pages, and sometimes it barely lasts a paragraph before a new connection is made, and Cubitt's focus shifts to follow a new vector. Sometimes this new line of argument loops back to reference previous lines of argument, sometimes it doesn't. Even within sentences, Cubitt frequently slips in quick parentheses when he has an idea that cannot wait. In fact, many of his most brilliant flashes of inspiration occur parenthetically. For example, in the middle of a line discussing photography and film, he interjects, 'in England we still use the plural form when going to the pictures' (23); in his analysis of *La Règle du jeu* he refers to 'the film -- which I have been calling 'Renoir'' (145); when discussing global markets he observes 'from 'Have you seen X?' to 'Have you seen X yet?' -- the hallmark of the event movie' (269). The book comprises dense matrices of ideas rather than clear, linear arguments. The result, in short, is a database narrative.

So, though it fails in its (apparent) goal of providing a

digital language for analogue film, The Cinema Effect can be seen as an authentically digital artifact after all. Not only is it a database of articles, arguments and asides by Cubitt himself, it is also a database of others' writings, as the awe-inspiringly long bibliography demonstrates. The book provides an almost hypertextual network of references. Phrases such as: 'As Benjamin (1969) suggested, Zielinski (1999) argues, and Crafton (1997) demonstrates' (162) are commonplace throughout its 400-odd pages. (Indeed, the paragraphs are so dense with references that it is sometimes quite difficult to unpick which are Cubitt's ideas and which are not.) Through those most digital of tools, the cut and paste commands, Cubitt creates an astonishingly complex intellectual database.

So it is as a database narrative that this book should be read. Freed from looking for sustained arguments, and of feeling the need to understand every word of every sentence, it is possible to enjoy the book's brilliant fragments without the accompanying frustration of having been made to work so hard for so little theoretical result. Approached this way, Cubitt's use of the same words for various metaphorical ends also ceases to be a problem -- each new usage can be seen within a different conceptual context. One meaning gives way to multiple meanings, as in Bunuel's alternate takes. But even taking its database nature as a given, The Cinema Effect remains a slippery work. If Cubitt is indeed rejecting determinate meaning and deliberately avoiding meta-narrative, why does he conceal this fact? Why does he organize his material

chronologically, divide it into seemingly schematic chapters, and even occasionally utilize conjunctions ('but', 'therefore', 'so', etc.) to provide the appearance of causal connections when none exist? *The Cinema Effect* is a contradictory work. It feels like the progeny of both Habermas and Lyotard. This contradiction begs the question -- what is Cubitt actually doing here? Why did he write the book in the way he did? Why such complex language and such a schematic structure? What is his primary intellectual objective? Having lived with the book for the last two months, I still don't understand.

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Note

1. Marsha Kinder, '[Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever: Bunuel's Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative](#)', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 55 no. 4, Summer 2002, p. 12.

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