

Stephen Partridge

Video: incorporeal, incorporated

'... video has only a conceptual, and not formal connection to any previous medium... formalist research into magnetic videotape seems absurd, whereas the development of film's photographic essence was actually the foundation of experimental film,'

Marc Mayer

'...nothing with a history can be defined...'

dictum by Nietzsche

In recent years, there has been a gradual re-awakening of interest in film and video artworks from the late sixties and early seventies, and I have found myself re-experiencing much of this work alongside young enthusiastic and knowledgeable audiences. One of the interesting aspects of these events and many others like them all over Europe is the absence of partisan distinctions between the mediums of film and video. The new generation viewing this now historical work inevitably has a different relationship with it to its contemporaries, and this is related to the convergence of mediums - where digital technologies are producing a confluence of all previous media: sound, text, image and their various forms and placing them within a new stage or setting, which is partially the library, the theatre, the cinema, or the home or personal (computer) space.

Convergence: uniting, or merging tendencies that were originally opposed or very different.

Continual and changing, convergence places us (artists and audience) in a post film and video era, where digital forms (mostly) replace, substitute, or simulate the previous media. This process of substitution and simulation explains the current lack of (perceived) distinctions between forms or media. For instance, it is common for us to say that we are going to watch a film on video or a DVD when what we actually mean is that we intend to watch a *recording* of a film or movie (without recourse to celluloid). It is possible that this lack of distinction is likely to erode even further with the advent of high definition television (HDTV) for broadcast and DVD with the improvement in picture quality and adoption of movie theatre aspect ratios. It may be worth asking whether this matters and why in the process of convergence, video has been substituted, while film has been simulated by digital technologies. To answer this question, there is a need to re-examine the development of video as a medium and its incorporation into digital form, while making some comparisons with film, and in turn, its simulation within the digital domain.

The convergence or incorporation of video with digital forms could be considered as almost complete. In any case, video as a term has had many definitions and uses, both culturally and technologically, and has become a generic word for a number of different things. As a specific term it refers originally, to an electrical analogue waveform produced by scanning the light (the latent image) focused onto a photosensitive plate in the video camera which is then re-created into the pattern (or raster) of horizontal scanning lines made by an electron beam onto the photosensitive surface of a cathode-ray-tube that in turn creates the image that appears on a television. This waveform in the digital domain is now essentially bit-mapped or sampled to appear on a contemporary television, computer screen or flat display panel. This converged analogue/digital use of the word can be referred to as the video-plane and as such was and remains incorporeal like its cousin, the audio waveform or sound sample, with which it is usually incorporated. This distinguishes it from the photographic and material-based medium of film – even though both film and video strive to produce one similar effect – a moving image as perceived by the human brain.

Video was from the start a bastard medium – and inherited a collection of conventions and properties from earlier media including radio, theatre, and, to a lesser extent film. However, early proponents were at pains to discover and exploit its singularities and establish autonomy. The doyen and pioneer of New York video art, Korean-born Nam June Paik revealed '.... the relative nature of time as the malleable component of video art...'; UK writer and video maker, Stuart

Marshall asserted, 'the video system is a very new and different mirror, not only presenting a non reversed image but also allowing for an observation of self which is not spatially or temporally fixed,'; In Germany, Wolf Kahlen noted 'Just as the mirror makes us forget it as a utensil, so the monitor obliterates the camera..'; the British, sculptor, artist-filmmaker, video artist, David Hall pointed out the 'peculiar' characteristics of the medium, '...which some artists have realised are integral phenomena and consequently inevitable components of the videological syntax,....'. In Vienna, the artist Peter Weibel reduced this videological syntax to – '5 qualities of VT and VTR: synthetics, transformation, self-reference, instant time, box.' These various statements led Sean Cubitt to suggest that 'the notion of medium specificity is a central one in understanding the development of video as a cultural form.' It is certain that the investigation of specificity gave rise to many important and key works by these and other artists, but video, even as practiced as a cultural form, did not achieve an established autonomy for itself. Sean Cubitt has further argued that 'video is neither an autonomous medium, free of all links with other forms of communication, nor entirely dependent on any one of them', and that video is not singular but a collection of 'video media'. Or as Marc Mayer would have it 'video is more an end than any one specific means;'

The specificities and autonomy that were being sought by the early international proponents were apropos a medium that was transient. This transience is partly due to the fact that television (or video) has been part of a process of constant radical change since its invention. Television was designed in the early 20th century as **primarily** a system for transmission and reception. For the first thirty years it could be said that the language of television was illiterate. There was no form of 'writing' of the television signal or waveform until Alfred Dolby and his team at the Ampex Corporation produced the first commercially viable Quadruplex Video Tape Recorder (VTR) in 1957, which used 2-inch magnetic tape to record the television raster. It was not until the early sixties that broadcasters adopted the VTR as a means of recording productions for later transmission, and artists would not have access to the technology until the late sixties, after Japanese companies had developed various industrial and relatively low-quality smaller gauge formats (1/2-inch EIAJ). Roy Arnes said that: 'continual technological development makes it increasingly difficult to pin down a fixed identity'. The VCR replaced the VTR, which in turn is likely to be replaced by disk systems and then by solid-state memory. The video monitor has mutated to the VDU display or LCD panel; black boxes or cards are now needed to display the TV raster upon them.

Most of the video specificity therefore being articulated in the late sixties and seventies was tied to the particular technologies of those years: the vidicon tube in early cameras, and open reel-to-reel video tape recorders, both long obsolete. Associated with this was the virtual impossibility of editing with the early VTR, which drove artistic interest and experiment away from filmic conventions such as montage, towards the performative and particularly the use of closed-circuit systems (installations) and instant playback. Central to this approach was the notion of intervention into a *process*, manipulation of the video plane in time or space. The intrinsic properties were emphasised: immediacy; transmission; the 'live'; the closed circuit; record-replay with time delay; feedback oddities; synthesizer manipulations; and synchronicity with sound.

Some of the properties, if not strictly the specificities, have transferred to the new digital domain but most notably, synchronicity with sound has not. Sound is now recorded as a separate data stream separate from the image stream, and in digital post-production and broadcasting, synchronicity (especially the crucial 'lip-synch' of speech and dialogue) can easily be lost or compromised, (a situation with which filmmakers have always been familiar.) Some specificities that have disappeared along with their associated words and acronyms include: electrovision, videotaping, VT, VTR, video shooting, video editing, and video switching.

Convergence has meant that video has been both incorporated and subsumed, (in line with Marshall McLuhan's assertion that new media do not replace old, but almost always contain them). Within the digital domain video is further merged with the adoption of the filmic conventions of picture origination, editing, aspect ratios and cinematic presentation, but remains incorporeal.

It is significant to examine the convergence between film and video by focussing on the video projector, which provides *prima facie* evidence of the progress of convergence in its technological form and functionality. No longer trapped within the tube, video can be viewed 'cinematically' on large screens or utilised in installation, either within the gallery or any suitable public space. It is worth emphasising however that by the time video projectors became of sufficient quality, reliable and relatively inexpensive, it was certainly not *videotape* that was being projected but the video-plane, derived from the stream of data coming from a disc read by laser light and interpolated by a computer chip, whether inside the computer or a specialist device such as laserdisc or DVD. Foretold by Nam June Paik in 1968 when he declared 'TV without a box is no longer TV, but a video 'environment''. Furthermore the optical device used for originating the images is just as likely to be a film camera as a video camera - be it digital or analogue.

The idea that the video projector has merged film and video into a new unified electronic cinema isn't totally exact. It is still relatively easy to distinguish film from video (and especially computer derived text and vector graphics) when they are projected. Some of the distinction can be attributed to the higher production values still prevailing within film production (for example, superior lighting and art direction). Other distinctions lie within the cinematographic: the much higher contrast ratio of film stock, and the human perception of the grain of film emulsions and the film weave within the camera. However, the video projector throws light upon a screen, just as a film projector and very unlike the television tube or LCD or plasma panel, all of which are a source of light. It does appear though that film has lost some of its fixed-ness - in a machine or technological sense and as material. Compared to video, film technology (referring to the camera and projector) has remained relatively stable for eighty years, despite continual small refinements and variations of aspect ratio and gauge. The basic material, which gives the medium its common name (film), has changed even less following the abandonment of the volatile acetate composition of early stock and adoption of celluloid safety film.

Another technological development which suggests a merger of media is the suite of boxes that include a wide-screen television or plasma display, surround sound amplifier and speakers, sat-box, and digi-box, which is marketed as 'home cinema' - although cineastes (i.e. those subscribing to the convention of the word cinema to be characterised by a *public* space, darkened for projection, experienced peripatetically as an event), might groan at the inherent oxymoron of the term.

To re-iterate then: in the case of video the convergence process within the digital domain can be characterised as mainly a **substitution** of incorporation; in the case of film the convergence is marked by the digital **simulation** of filmic characteristics. Early digital devices produced for the television visual effects industry such as Quantel's Harry (1986) incorporated effects that would simulate, and impose upon the video-plane; film grain and film weave to make the resultant product (usually a TV-ad or pop video) look as though it had been shot and produced on film. Software 'plug-ins' are now widely available even for prosumer packages such as Adobe After Effects, Final Cut Pro, desk-top-video editing and effects software applications, that will simulate the entire range of Ektachrome film stocks used in motion-picture making. Further plug-ins can simulate scratches to the film emulsion, dye-fading and ageing and so on. The 50-field per-second alternate odd-even cycle of the video-plane can be converted to 25 or even 24 full-frames per second to further emulate the frame rate of film, and smooth out motion artefacts to more closely resemble film's characteristic motion blur. Furthermore, many digital video cameras incorporate options for shooting in anamorphic 16:9 wide-screen ratio, and will also shoot in 25 or even 24 full-frames per second mode. These digital effects or sub-technologies were not designed to simulate the look and feel of video; the motivation was to simulate the idealised film paradigm and aesthetic.

This simulation is only possible because of film's inherent fixed-ness, its immutability. Perhaps simulation only works for something that we are very familiar with, not with something that has been constantly evolving. Moreover, from a commercial point of view, it is also only worth simulating something that has perceived value: film's material nature, its sheen and associated glamour of production and distribution infrastructures. Why would anyone want to spend time

and money trying to simulate the look of early video? – It possesses no ‘aura’, to use Walter Benjamin’s famous term. Another contributory factor to film’s fixed-ness lies in associated craft practices and the attitudes embedded within them. One distinctive aspect of craft is that the craftsman has an affinity and relationship (not to mention vested interest) with a particular material, which can be characterised as inherently conservative or even nostalgic.

The concept of ‘aura’ could explain why some video material, which would not hold the attention of many people when displayed on a TV monitor, transforms to an artwork when projected, particularly in a gallery space. (The gallery or museum adding extra aura, validation and authority, certainly.) Compare this to a statement made in 1976 by David Ross, one of the first American museum video curators: ‘Video works created with an understanding of the audience often seem out of place in the context of an art gallery – the works become filmic (in delivery) and their original intention is easily perverted.’. Ross was referring to monitor based works, whether single screen or installations. The works produced by the YBAs in the nineties and the explosion in video-based art-pieces since, also point to a lack of distinction of media. Setting aside these artists’ market-led need for separation and distancing from an experimental film or video history, the works directly reflect the process of convergence.

The new approach is non-materialist – in the sense that there is little interest or even recognition in the video media or the digital media employed. It has a tendency towards commoditisation and a denial of the reproduction properties of media in favour of granting and pursuing uniqueness and the ‘aura’ of the art object. Similarities with ‘expanded cinema’ abound but the intent of the artists confounds this comparison or recognition. The approach is inherently post-film and post-video, and points towards a convergence within a digital time and space, without medium specificity or material condition.

Video was invented primarily as a means of communication and its development driven by military/industrial agency and imperatives. Film, or more correctly cinema originates as a medium of illusion, and its history can be traced particularly through the proto cinema devices created by the gentleman scientist, the amateur, magician or trickster of the nineteenth century. This leads to the argument of film itself being only a constituent part of a continuing development that has been referred to as the ‘cinema of attractions’. The total history of cinema suggests a much wider suite of technologies than the film camera and projector. The digital domain collects, incorporates and simulates whole suites of past and present technologies and is the contemporary expression of the development of cinema in its broadest sense.

In conclusion I would argue that digital technologies provide a flexible platform for cultural practice where hybridisation, and the lack of distinctions between historic media do not matter, but ignorance of the process might, just might, at least for the scholar. Video continues as a proxy within the digital domain, while film is flattered by digital simulation of its material qualities.

‘...computers have gone way beyond the TV that they are about to subsume and are the first machines able to make use of all modes of language and expression, and to transform one into another and modulate them any way anyone wants.’

Raymond Bellour

‘...cinema so clearly traces a history from mechanical to digital time...’

Sean Cubitt

PAGE

PAGE 5

Meyer Marc, 'Digressions Toward an Art History of Video', *Being and Time: The Emergence of Video Projection*, (The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, NY, 1996), p 8

For example: A day devoted to Michael Snow's *Wavelength* at CCA in Glasgow; two days devoted to the prolific output of Woody and Steina Vasulka at the Candida Arts Centre, London, and the Old 'Lumiere' Cinema, University of Westminster; *Early British Video Works* at Tate Britain; *Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!* at Tate Modern; Wojciech Bruszewski performing with his film *Points* at the *Evolution Festival 2004* in at Leeds; and Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* at DCA in Dundee, 2004.

X-screen, Wein, Austria, 2004; *Future Cinema*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany

Oxford English Dictionary

Ross David A, 'Nam June Paik's Videotapes', in *Nam June Paik*, ed. John Handhardt, (New York Whitney Museum of American Art in assoc. with Norton and Company, 1982)

Marshall Stuart, 'Video Art, The Imaginary and the Parole Vide', *Studio International* May/June, Vol.191, No. 981, 1976, p 245

Kahlen Wolf, 'Video – El temps I L'espai, Series Informatives 2', *Collegi d'arquitectes de Catalunya y Institut Alemany*, Barcelona, 1980, pp 148-150.

Hall David, 'Towards an Autonomous Practice', *Studio International* May/June, Vol.191, No. 981, 1976, p 249

Weibel Peter, 'On the Philosophy of VT and VTR', *Heute Kunst*, Internationale Kunstzeitschrift, no 4/5, Dec. 1973-Feb. 1974, Milan, Reprinted in: *Video-Apparat/Medium, Kunst, Kultur. Ein Internationaler Reader*, ed. Siegfried Zielinski, (Frankfurt a. M/Bern/New York/Paris, 1992), p 125

Sean Cubitt. *Videography, Video Media as Art & Culture*,(Macmillan, 1993), p 32

Ibid., 'Introduction'

Meyer Marc, 'Digressions Toward an Art History of Video', *Being and Time: The Emergence of Video Projection*, (The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, NY, 1996), p 17

Nam June Paik is credited with being the first artist to buy and use the legendary Sony Video Rover in New York in 1965. The subsequent event at New York's Café Au Go Go, was well-documented but another forgotten half-inch format must have been used, as Siegfried Zielinski has proved that the Rover was not on sale in either Japan or the USA until 1967, see *Zur Geschichte des Videorecorders*, (Berlin, 1968), p 155

Armes Roy, *On Video*, (Routledge, London, 1988), p 1

Paik in his proposal to the *New School for Social Research*, New York, Spring 1965, p 1

McLuhan Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964)

The 'V' in DVD does not stand for video but versatile.

Paik Nam June, 'Aphorisms', catalogue for *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, (MOMA, New York, 1968), Unpaginated

Ross David, 'A Provisional Overview of Artists' Television in the US', *Studio International*, May/June, Vol. 191, No 981, 1976, p 265

See eds. Laurent Mannoni, Werner Nekes, Marina Warner, *Eyes Lies and Illusions*, (Hayward Gallery and Lund Humphries, London, 2004)

Bellour Raymond, 'La querelle des dispositifs/ Battle of the images, art press', No 262, November 2000, pp 48-52

Cubitt Sean, *The Cinema Effect*, (MIT, 2004), p 8