

An abstract narrative form of film.

Can an abstract form of film successfully include elements of, the concrete representation based, narrative film form?

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Abstract

Films can be related to discrete or multiple positions along a continuum from clarity to obscurity, from the recognizable, pictorial and concrete, to the undefined, ambiguous, symbolic and abstract. This thesis discusses examples of films that in their rendition of light, color, moving image, sound and story successfully combine both abstract and concrete forms and treatments. These films work within an intersection between clarity and obscurity, in so doing they productively engage with the tension between audience and authorial produced content. These works span high and low art in early to present day cinematic forms. Visual Music is one contemporary film form that could give equal prominence to abstract and concrete forms. The current and future development of film in live performance contexts suggest the most fertile ground for further developing a form of film that productively engages concrete and abstract forms.

Sincere Thanks to,
Roger Alsop
Jacques Soddell

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1.0 Introduction.

Many years of experimental practice has led me to treat short film production work as a process of investigation and discovery. The integration of elements of abstract and narrative forms of film has arisen as a persistent interest over fifteen years of short film production. This fusion of varying combinations of elements of narrative and non-narrative, representational, illusion and abstract film, has developed as a logical extension of the practices of collage and juxtaposition. This thesis looks at the precedents, gains, and losses and future possibilities of this approach.

1.1 The personal background for this study.

In 2003 in response to seeing a short film I had made, a fellow artist commented via email, "I liked your work up until the point where a recognisable image appeared. I don't think you should mix representational imagery with abstract images." (Yonesho) This comment led me to follow a line of practical experimentation and investigative questioning into exactly what forms of abstract and representational imagery could, and may have already been, effectively combined in any incarnations of the moving image. Visual imagery is one important aspect of film but this research also investigates the kinetic and audio potentialities of film in creating complex interactions of concrete and abstract forms.

1.2 The structure of this study.

The overlap and separate distinct definitions of abstract and concrete forms in relation to film will inform chapter two. There is a continuum between the concrete and abstract yet there is also an overlap; any element of a film can be simultaneously a concrete and abstract representation of something.

Chapter 2 will also reveal a continuum that appears as a parallel to that of Abstract and Concrete forms, is the continuum produced by interdisciplinary work; for instance the continuum between Science and Art. The art movements that occurred early in the 20th century, of Cubism, and Futurism for instance are early examples of this interdisciplinary approach incorporating obvious influences of science and technology. Another parallel continuum is one that spans between planned /scripted productions and improvised, serendipitous, unplanned, less self-conscious content, this will be followed up in the later chapters on my own practical film and performance work.

Chapter 3 looks at the background context of this study in relation to several electronic audiovisual advertisements, a brief discussion of the abstraction of time in film and the inclusion of abstract animation in the concrete representational narrative film, *Punch Drunk Love* (Anderson) and *Blood Blossoms* (Anderson). These films have a close relationship to the idea of Visual Music.

Chapter 4 will look at several examples and variants of the field of Visual Music. Leading on from the integration of filmic visuals and music is the integration of music performance and film. The integration of live performance, music and film, enabled by new digital technologies but having its origins in artistic projects dating back to the 1800's, is presently emerging as a new form in itself referred by some as "Live Cinema". (Makela) I will discuss how live film performance can place film in a context of immediacy, improvisation and abstract representation. Live Cinema further develops a filmic parallel to the abstract narrative of music.

Chapter 5 will investigate the ultimate fusion of abstract and concrete forms that occurs in filmic attempts to recreate imaginary, dream, hallucination or "altered states" of perception. This chapter follows Anna Powells' Deleuzian concept of film as having an inherent potential of producing or affecting an altered or more simply dreamlike state. (Powell)

Chapter 6 explores differing relationships between concrete and abstract forms in my own short films that formed the practical component of this research.

In the 7th chapter, I will look at future directions for this study including initial experiments and tests I have conducted in relation to creating a form of mutable or performative cinema.

In the concluding chapter, I will state that it is entirely possible to create engaging short films that include a reduced narrative, and productively defy or at least confuse divisions between abstract and concrete forms of representation.

2.0 Definitions and Terms of Reference.

I will be exploring this subject from a practical and personal artistic approach. The literature review for this thesis is assimilated into every one of its chapters. The delineation of this field of study is not one discrete canon of work, located in a single place or time. The key figures I have selected for this study are the writings of Malcolm Le Grice, Pamela Turner, Anna Powell, Maureen Furniss, Doug Aitken and the film's *Ballet Mekanique Allegretto* (Fischinger), *Dreamwork* (Tscherkassky) *Blood and Blossoms* (Anderson), *Formula* (Ikeda). There are of course many other influences and film works of interest for their interaction between narrative and abstraction a few but not all can be included in this study.

The key terms for this study needing investigation are; the concepts of abstract and concrete forms in relation to film and the concept of narrative and non-narrative or abstract film.

In the medium of film, sound and moving image can serve the concrete services of realistic representation and linear narrative. Sound and moving image can however be applied in film for more abstract purposes; where narrative is not the main concern and where the primary, and perhaps only, interest is the non-narrative exploration of one or more of the following elements - color, shape and movement, rhythm, pattern, flow and discontinuity. This thesis is an exploration of the creation of engaging films that integrate both narrative and non-narrative approaches.

“Experimental Film” is the label most often applied to this sort of film. Films of many different persuasions can contain an approach that embraces some degree of experimentation or creative chaos. Experimenting with film form and content is not the sole province of any one particular school of thought, dogma or artistic

style. Examples of the extending of film form, beyond either pure abstract or representational narrative, exist in some, but not all, short films referred to as experimental. An equally interesting integration of abstract and concrete forms exist in some mainstream feature length films, advertisements, digital video in various formats, live performance and gallery installations.

Malcolm Le Grice provides this positive definition of narrative film as being a form that has equal potential for repetitive, formulaic assembly or unique, complex, subtle variation.

“The classical narrative is constructed through the representation of characters who interact with each other through a series of incidents depicted in a social or natural environment. The story or plot is a schema made up of the events in a ‘causal’ sequence in which they are represented to have taken place. The narration itself is more complex than the plot in that it may reorder the disclosure of these events, through representing recollection, premonition or separate exclusive viewpoints – flashback, jumpcut, parallel action- and may incorporate the represented subjectivity of the narrator or even reference the subjectivity of the reader. Both plot and narration may conform to structures of dramaturgy – the controlled psychological effect of phasing the release of information to create intrigue, suspense, apprehension and pleasure in resolution.”(Le Grice, 1977 , 1982)

Le Grice notes that the most popular understanding of abstract film is associated with the use of “non-representational elements like color and shape” (Le Grice, 1977 , 1982). Le Grice prefers a description of abstract film that does not necessarily exclude representational photographic imagery. “ The majority of non- or anti-narrative works are based on or include photographically representational imagery” (Le Grice)

Le Grice prefers to define ‘abstraction’ as “the process of separation of the component features and qualities from the ‘whole’ of an object.”(Le Grice) What is most interesting to me is whether the recombination of the separate component features of abstract and concrete films can in fact synthesize a new form.

Le Grice's description of abstraction "as the process of separation of the component features and qualities from the 'whole' of an object" (Le Grice) is an almost mechanistic definition of abstraction compared for instance to, Visual-Music film maker, Stephanie Maxwells' emphasis of abstraction being more about feelings and sensations. Detheux in his article *Visual Music Marathon: Musical Fine Art Animation Benchmark* quotes the following correspondence from Maxwell,

"Hidden beneath our routine generalized encounter with life, we actually experience a continuous, more sensuous encounter with our surroundings and within ourselves that we routinely ignore, pass by, and through time lose our ability to tap into. These are the multifaceted encounters with motion, light and sound and the inter-sensory richness that we are immersed in moment to moment. ... Through my abstractions I attempt to heighten attention to a physical, perceptual experience of living."

In my own film-making I would be happy to achieve Le Grice's subtlety and complexity of narrative structure comfortably incorporating abstract and photographic or figurative representation. I would consider a richer exploration of the potential of film to be one that could combine this sophistication of formal structure whilst also containing some degree of the spontaneity of musical improvisation, an almost lyrical poetry of images, motion and sound and the foregrounding of perceptual experience that Maxwell alludes to.

Even though all films can be analysed to reveal abstract and concrete dimensions, the majority of film consciously foregrounds one or the other. Some filmmakers and writers believe that the inclusion of representational images and narrative content diminish the effect and value of abstraction. (Pffaffenbichler) Walt Disney felt that the inclusion of "vague or messy abstraction" would spoil their narrative films. (Moritz)

Here I define Abstract Narrative as a form of film that contains a substantial integration of both abstract and narrative film forms. Two film works that create their own unique synthesis of abstract and concrete forms are *Formula*, (Ikeda) and *Dreamwork* (Tscherkassky).

2.1 How do the terms abstract and concrete relate to film?

Walt Disney was quoted by the film historian William Moritz as defining abstraction as a “conglomerate mess” and for being of the view that there are degrees of abstraction from “pure” and connected to something known, or “wild” and totally unconnected to anything, completely unfamiliar. When Oskar Fischinger was working on early versions of the film *Fantasia*, Walt Disney suggested, "If we can get a little connection behind this, the public will take to it. It would be better than some wild abstraction that you can't get anything out of at all."(Moritz)

Definitions of “concrete” are generally more succinct and sparse than the multitude of meanings presented for Abstract, a comment in itself on the more straightforward nature of “concrete”. Concrete is used to refer to actual materials; solid, concise or visible in nature. Concrete is the antonym of vague. (Brown) The most interesting definition of concrete is the solidifying process, a coalescing. A concrete form is the result of a process involving amorphous forms and reactions: a process starting in abstraction. Conversely a concrete series of material objects filmed moving or changing in sync with a piece of music can begin to form some level of abstraction. “The concrete is always a collision of abstractions.” (Cubitt)

In relation to Film, there is much confusion and subjective association of the terms Abstract and Concrete. I am sure that differences in perception of abstract and concrete forms is likely to be influenced not only by an individuals own perspective but by the influence of specific cultural perspectives. One persons’ concrete could be another’s abstract. Fischinger’s original work for Disney’s *Fantasia* was rejected by Disney who considered it too “messy’, “vague” and therefore “too abstract’. (Moritz)

However the non-narrative, non-representational interplay of color, shape, sound and movement, can be the most exciting, essential qualities of cinematic media. "The essence of cinema is precisely dynamic movement of form and color, and their relation to sound". (Youngblood) Youngblood sees these qualities as being concretely clear and states that the process of abstraction is in the eye and mind of the perceiver. "Jordan Belsons' films are usually referred to as "Abstract films, with few exceptions his work is not 'abstract'. Like the films of Len Lye, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, and the Whitney's, it is concrete. Although a wide variety of meaning inevitably is abstracted from them," (Youngblood)

Deleuze is in no doubt as to the confused nature of using the terms abstract and concrete to describe experimental cinema, "The distinction is thus not between the concrete and the abstract (except in experimental cases and, even there, it is fairly consistently confused)." (Deleuze) However, Deleuze acknowledges that, they are simultaneous processes and authors may be attracted to compose with one, the other, or both abstract and concrete dimensions (Deleuze). "The two states of concretion and abstraction are interdependent and can easily become intertwined; this may be a prime source of their consistent confusion." (Deleuze) Despite the confusion that springs from everyday usage of these terms, I find the concept of an intertwining of concrete and abstract forms centrally useful for my work. Abstract and concrete forms in my films are intended to be as if interwoven or complimentary pairs rather than binary opposites.

It would be possible to label various narrative film structures as more or less abstract or concrete. A non-linear narrative film that contained many incomplete branches of story lines could be seen as more abstract and a single delineated linear narrative with a clear causal chain of action and resolution seen as more concrete.

The equivalent of the confusion of figure and ground in abstract painting might be a useful metaphor for concrete and abstract forms in film but this is not something I have resolved in this present research.

For this research, I will refer to Concrete Forms as being the elements of film used for the purpose of Representation or Mimesis within single delineated narratives, and Abstract Forms as standing for elements and phenomenon of undefined, open, or unfixed meaning.

2.2 The development of distinct abstract and narrative film forms.

One of the earliest films to be made with actors and a substantial narrative element is *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) which is an example of a film based primarily in the domain of concrete representation.

Edwin S. Porter (1869-1941) developed narrative structure and film language; with the use of camera angles and movement “pans and tilts”, parallel action and non-chronological ordering of shots. (Levy),(Bordwell and Thompson)

In 1921, Hans Richter (1888-1976) made *Rhythmus 21* (translated as *Film is Rhythm*). Although preceded by the Italian Futurists, now destroyed film experiments, *Rhythmus 21*, is one of the earliest still surviving abstract films. (Le Grice, 1977 , 1982) *Rhythmus 21* consists of nothing more or less than rhythmic and visual compositions of squares and rectangles on a black background. Curtis describes this film as “the elemental play of light”. (Curtis)

Maya Deren and Mary Ellen Bute are two important American experimental filmmakers that followed these earlier filmmakers, following, among other concerns, films as dream-state (Deren) and film as visceral experience (Bute).

(Curtis) suggests that *Rhythmus 21* (*Richter 1921*) informed the development of a type of film exploring “kinetic studies (abstract animation and single-frame photography)” and that Leger’s *Ballet Mecanique* informed the development of a type film exploration concerned with “the film as the only subject of the film”. (Curtis 1971)

Kinetic oriented films have been developed by Mc Laren, Hebert, Len Lye and many Visual Music proponents, the film as film direction explored by proponents of film forms sometimes referred to as “structuralist” (Curtis) or “materialist” (Le Grice).

Proponents of film as film include, Le Grice, Snow, Landow, Sharits. Even between differing types of abstract film Curtis notes however “the division between sensibilities is by no means rigid.” (Curtis)

Rhythmus 21 and *The Great Train Robbery* signpost two distinctly different approaches that filmmaking has been busy reworking and developing over its short century or so of development. This thesis looks at the less common coming together of these two seemingly opposite directions of filmmaking. The film work of Man Ray and Dziga Vertov follow this less common approach where concrete and abstract forms intersect.

Dziga Vertov made *Man with a movie camera* in 1929. On viewing this film, almost one hundred years later, it is striking how fresh and modern this film appears. Its’ inventive split screen and superimposition compositions match if not surpass any of the comparatively effortlessly digitally created equivalents. A good part of this films’ richness and apparent uniqueness comes from its very

successful equal embracing and integration of concrete and abstract representation. Vertov wrote many manifestos or essays denouncing linear representational narrative for being “leprous” or guilty of manipulative seduction and encouragement of escapist fantasy. Vertov’s proposed Kino-Eye style of filmmaking affirmed the rhythms of film itself, “the poetry of machines” and “the art of inventing movements of things in space”. (Vertov, Vertov)

2.3 Digitally enabled synthesis of concrete and abstract representation.

The synthesis, made possible by digital technology, of the individual materials of cinematic media, such as sound and image, are crucial to enabling work that encourages a productive intersection of abstract and concrete forms. In my own work this digital technology allows me to create, for instance, images that can appear as a lake or mountain range derived from quite abstract processes such as “noise functions” (in software such as *Armatic™* and *Voyager™*.) These same noise generators can also produce sound and music in an increasing number of software programs of which *Metasynt™* is one.

2.4 The significance of cultural and technological changes.

Our evolving media literacy, accelerated by digital technology and scientific discoveries has changed how we view our world, and the ways in which we can view our view of the world. “ While humanities scholars still inquire into the possibility of escaping the stranglehold of narrative, digital media are already clearly working inside an equally powerful, equally dominant post-narrative paradigm.” (Cubitt, 2006) Filmmaker and writer Doug Aitken talks of the “hurricane of life”, a landscape of fragmentation, responded to in “multi layered story lines, fractured perception, or disjointed images”. (Aitken)

The artistic preoccupations of short film work by for instance Tscherkassy, Brakhage, Ikeda and myself include collage, juxtaposition and assemblage and fragmentation, these techniques all relate to technologically influenced

understandings of our world and involve a meshing of abstract and concrete forms.

Changes in technology, and scientific theories have altered our perception of the concrete and abstract; “the concept of a concrete, quantitative reality, of the ‘rational and enlightened’ scientists and philosophers, crumbled into specks of particles on a shifting field.” (Taylor) The understanding of our world is now more than ever a media and mediated experience. We are however, often without a tour guide or single narrative through line, and find ourselves navigating through many multi-layered representations both concrete and abstract.

3.0 The development of film in relation to concrete and abstract forms.

Although film production has been dominated the adaptation of literary and theatrical forms, many practitioners have sought to further explore the unique properties and affects of film. "From an historical point of view, the experiments with abstract films were inspired by the search for true features of the cinema art, at its beginning."(Galeyev)

For Le Grice, Brakhage and many others there quest is to liberate film from the perceived constraints of linear representational narrative film.

For Busby Berkeley, and PT Anderson, the intersection of concrete and abstract forms appears to be about heightening the emotional or visceral affect.

Berkeley's films create an intersection of narrative, dance and moving geometric patterns. PT Anderson, in *Punch Drunk Love* and *Blood and Blossoms* created an intersection of an offbeat narrative romantic comedy with visual abstractions including animated color washes and foregrounding of filmic aberrations such as blurs and lens flares.

For Sitney, Belson, Youngblood, and Deren, the filmic quest is to extend filmic form to encompass the stimulation and expanding of our thought processes. "The often unacknowledged aspiration of the American avant-garde film has been the cinematic reproduction of the human mind "(Sitney 1974)

For Fischinger, Lye, Maxwell, and many other practitioners who may or may not align themselves with a concept of "Visual Music", film is about expressing the affect of music through image and movement using any desired mix of abstract and concrete forms. Whilst layering and the erosion and recreation of memory,

are the focus and impetus for integrating abstract and concrete representation in *Solaris* (Tarkovsky), *Decasia* (Morrison and & Gordon), and *Castro Street* (Baillie).

Decasia (Morrison and & Gordon), and *Man with A Movie Camera* (Vertov), are two films that work as abstract montages drawing many narrative fragments together. *Decasia* is of particular interest to my thesis for it literally dissolves representational images into abstraction. Each sequence of imagery in *Decasia* contains a range of clear to completely disintegrated images due to a natural breaking down of these nitrate-based film stocks. In *Decasia*, the sequencing of the imagery seems driven by musical patterns rather than narrative functions. These images literally dissolve or decay in and out of representational images and abstraction, metamorphosing for instance from children walking along a courtyard to cloudy blobs and textures.

3.1 The avant-garde in advertising contains rich intersections of abstract and concrete forms.

Fischinger and Lye were two early pioneers who out of employment necessity applied their abstract and experimental or avant-garde artwork to the utilitarian function of delivering advertising messages. (Moritz, 1977) Many television advertisements today contain the concrete message of, “buy this now” wrapped up in all manner of abstract or surreal spectacle and vaporous abstract narrative or image (Darley). “The coke side of life”, a recent coke-a cola advertisement, presents a hyped-up Visual Music montage that combines geometric and kaleidoscopic abstractions reminiscent of work by Fischinger and Berkeley. These are abstractions inserted within concretely representational images of wildly dancing and gesturing actors uttering a nonsense word to describe some magical power of a sugar, chemical and water based soft drink.

There are many other product advertisements of which Lynx [™] after-shave and several alcoholic drinks come to mind, that have lavishly produced, micro short films, combining highly condensed abstracted narratives. These advertisements, or short films, intersect known stereotyped images and icons of established filmic genres with more surreal and abstract images.

Turim refers to Avant-Garde films as containing “an undercutting and transformation of representation”(Turim) I see this process as one that sits at the very centre of the intersection of concrete and abstract forms. Popular media and particularly advertisements in their search for the impossible and ever new and surprising attention grabbing image, often contain a knowing and perhaps less earnest “undercutting and transformation of representation”.

Michel Gondry’s *Smarienberg* advertisement, included on the DVD, *The work of director Michel Gondry*, undercuts and transforms its representation by its obvious references to established film genres and over the top implausibility for the sake of action and spectacle. It is also a fabulous example of condensed narrative that uses a compendium of strategies previously explored in isolation in various experimental films. Like a distillation of twenty different Hollywood films in multiple genres from action, romance, spy, war, crime and western, it is an abstraction of narrative through its condensation and brevity. Similar to Chin’s description of *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, this advertisement revels in “surface effects and style”. (Chin)

Electronic media Advertisements are likely to incorporate elements of concrete “fact” with abstract concepts, for instance this is a picture of the product, and this product will give you freedom and sophistication. New Media writer Andrew Darley speaking of television advertising generally states “the meanings they resonate are abstruse, indeterminate and vaporous” (Darley). This seems like a strange echo of the most successfully provocative experimental work. It is

fascinating to consider this level of abstract quality at work in the concretely focussed context of advertising actual products.

Djrabbi, aka MarkAmerika, produced a “video-art loop”, *Sos- Society of the spectacle-a digital remix (Amerika)*. This piece references the Situationists’ Guy Debord’s writing but it also borrows back from the style of commercial advertising, the hyped up fully saturated bombardment of effects and information. This piece treats multiple layers of sound, image and on screen text/subtitles as equally important elements in one relentless series of juxtapositions. *Sos- Society of the spectacle-a digital remix* works simultaneously with both concrete ideas and abstract patterns.

The works discussed in this section all compress maximal visual, kinetic and audio information and styles of representation into often very short, fast paced, films that operate within the intersection of concrete and abstract forms of representation. The context of these works is very different from my own gallery and film festival oriented work yet I find an interesting parallel in the techniques they use to achieve an interface between concrete and abstract forms.

Advertising media also shares with the current state of mainstream Cinema, the knowing self-conscious and often ironic playful display of effect and artifice, the happy acceptance of the “illusory projection of shadows of light and disembodied sound”(Pence). The foregrounding of this paradoxically simultaneously hyper-real, stylised obvious artifice, literal and poetic “shadows of light and disembodied sound” informs the demystification and low budget style and effects in my own work.

3.2 What is new is old; the historical precedents of the abstraction of time in narrative film

“What was achieved by cinema was not the moving image or a time based medium, as these were achieved earlier and in various ways, but a narrative medium, subordinating all forms of the temporal or moving image to the goal of telling a story and writing history at the expense of other concepts of time such as simultaneity, eternity, cyclicity.”(Arnold)

Creative representations of time can be seen as central to many experimental and mainstream film works by Tarkovsky, Snow, Viola, Goddard, Marker, Tarantino, Gondry.

Tarkovsky pushes concrete narrative illusion into abstraction, particularly in relation to time, by the extending of paused shots – the so called “long take” where nothing happens- eg when the main character of *Solaris*, Chris, lies down on a plastic bed in the *Solaris* space station. (Tarkovsky).

A subtle but effective undercutting and transformation of narrative time, and representation generally, exists in *Solaris*(Tarkovsky, 1972). When Snaut talks about the supposed mind-controlling organism of the ocean that exists on the planet *Solaris*, he could just as easily be talking about film when he refers to the organisms’ power to produce, “Inflammation of the associative zone of the cerebral cortex”. Interestingly twenty or more years later, cognitive film theorist Greg M Smith talks of his theory of “Film structure and the emotion system”(Smith, 2003) as being an *associative network* of mood cues. Snauts’ monologue in *Solaris*, “Suspense dragged out becomes an invitation to meditation... extracting islands of memory from the brain”, is a beautiful description of the way film can be seen to work on our imagination and memory. In my own short films, particularly their live performance versions, I am attempting to invite the audience to extract their own “islands of memory (and

imagination). In my version of “suspense dragged out” to become “an invitation to meditation”, I use what Arnold might refer to as representations of cyclical, simultaneous time. Overlaid imagery and small repeating and recurring sequences form patterns that play with suspense, familiarity and surprise. These time based patterns of moving image and sound hopefully also have some of the same mesmerising affect of a musical performance.

3.3 PT Anderson and Jeremy Blake’s production of abstract and concrete forms in their films, *Punch Drunk Love* and *Blood and Blossoms*.

When I started this thesis one of the first examples I came across of rich intersections of narrative and non-narrative film, concrete representation and abstraction, was the DVD release of *Punch Drunk Love*. Included on this two-disc package are a number of very short films using material seen in the feature film in what they call *Scopitones*. These short pieces appear as audiovisual poems; 10 to 30 second mini-compositions of music, sound effects and occasional voice fragments, including synchronised on screen character talking, as well as abstract color fields. Also included in this release is a longer short film *Blood and blossoms* – an edit of key narrative and abstract scenes from the feature film *Punch Drunk Love*, rearranged into a self contained 12 minute short film that is neither completely abstract nor concrete; neither totally abstract or totally character based narrative.

I find in *Blood and Blossoms*, that the employment of abstract techniques inserted within human character based narrative produces a strong affect precisely for its open ended-ness. These techniques would also appear to fit Anna Powells’ description of disjunctive techniques used to produce altered states in film. (Powell)

The incursions of abstract washes of color, most often combinations of red and blue and their various shades such as pink and light blue set against black and white for contrast could be seen to fulfil several functions. The colored shapes match the heavily constructed mise en scene and art direction of the film; the two main characters hero and heroine consistently wear blue and red/pink throughout the film. Symbolically these colors might be associated with concepts of masculine and feminine, matching the phrase; blue for boys pink for girls. On an emotional level the abstract colors and shapes suggest and evoke the inner mental and emotional state of the characters. This psychological affect might be hard to quantify or prove but perhaps these interludes actually provide more ‘free thinking time’ for the audience or viewer and in so doing enable more room for processes of identification and memory recreation.

To extend on the popular quote *a picture can tell a thousand words*, perhaps the abstract image in the context of a narrative film allows the open-ended reading of another thousand words. This is my understanding of a productive intersection between concrete and abstract forms.

4.0 Visual Music made from the intersection of abstract and concrete forms.

Visual Music is important as a potentially rich site of intersection between concrete and abstract forms of representation and expression found in music, visual imagery and motion. Visual Music exploits “the power of film to fuse abstract and representation together”.(Brougher and Mattis, 2005)

“A consistent thread in the conceptual approach to abstraction in film has been the attempt to establish an analogy with music. This has been both the attempt to apply musical compositional concepts to film structure and to seek a parallel between colors and musical notes.” (Le Grice)

Turner describes the elements and functions of Visual Music as an art form where, “pure forms – points, lines, planes-can, like chords and scales, be arranged in time and space”. Turner then adds that this analogy of a Visual Music is “ free from the limitations of representing objects which already exist”. Whilst this freedom is undeniable, and beautifully applied in any of the films by for instance Jordan Belson, Oskar Fischinger and Mary Ellen Bute, I argue that a greater freedom is one that accepts the element of representation in abstraction and vice versa and finds a way to move between these interdependent forms.

The concept of Visual Music has become popular with many writers and curators, ironically, as a way of constructing a sort of narrative continuity to a story of the many disparate works spanning the last two hundred years. The development of Visual Music can be traced back to color organs in the 1800’s through to abstract film in the 1920’s, through to “expanded cinema”, light and sound shows that started in the 1960’s, to contemporary digital multimedia installations and video dj performances. (Brougher and Mattis, 2005)

4.2 The Visual Music of Oskar Fischinger

Among the most prolific, inventive and inspirational pioneers of Visual Music is.

Oskar Fischinger,

“His work involved engineering feats and inventions; early techniques of transcribing music from gramophone records to graph paper, the invention of a wax slicing machine, and invention of his own color organ, the Lumigraph”. (Leslie.E.)

Fischinger’s description of his metaphor of a subtle flowing relationship between sound and moving image, as being like a wandering meander alongside a river, the river being the flow of music, the wanderer representing the visuals, is as relevant and just hard to achieve today as it ever was. (Fischinger)

The concept of Visual Music may currently be gaining a wider exposure and following at least partly influenced by the synesthetic capabilities of digital technology. However as early as 1986, Moritz was concerned that Visual Music’s potential delicacy and artistry was in danger of becoming diluted or forgotten: diluted as merely another style for advertising media to use blandly and repeatedly, or forgotten through erasure by digital technology using it as a recipe to be fixed and instantly generated by a computer algorithm.

“The delusion of technology, and the delusion of rhythm”, produces films or “products” that are “often more of a syndrome than a piece of Visual Music- a particular style of pattern appears and “does its thing” repetitively for 5 or 10 minutes (often accompanied by attractive music) and then stops, for no particular reason. Remember, no machinery can offer you a sense of graphic design, a sensitivity to color, or a sensibility for choreography and timing. (Moritz)

I greatly admire the lyrical dance-like animation that Fischinger achieved through intricate frame-by-frame animation. Perhaps this appeal comes from the Fischingers’ aesthetic sensibilities alluded to by Moritz. Generative Artist Scott Draves despite using the machinery of programming code and computer synthesis still attributes human sensibilities to the success of his work. Draves sees a difference between the animated image systems he actively selects

according to his own aesthetics compared to what he calls “the lowest common denominator Las Vegas effect” - bright colors and fast motion.

Scott Draves digitally generated, *Electric Sheep* (Draves), and many digital video works produced for instance with the open source software tool *Processing*[™], have a beautiful seductive endlessly flowing quality. Yet it is this same quality, that can display a kind of sameness and lack of distinctive interest or absence of changing moods and atmospheres.

4.3 Generative Artwork and Visual Music

Scott Draves sees creative potential in computer algorithms that are of the complexity of ‘artificial intelligence’ and biological simulations of genetic breeding, evolution and mutation of sound image and motion. (Hilborn) This work is quite different from the immensely simpler automated music-visualiser in I-tunes[™] or Windows Media Player[™]. Even though the design and choreography may be generated by “machinery” there is a fascinating organic familiarity to the forms and evolving growth-like changes and mutations of the colors and shapes generated in for instance Scott Draves’ *Electric Sheep*, Keiko Kimoto’s *Imaginary Numbers* and John Mc Cormacks *Turbulence*. Drave’s most recent project *Dreams in High Fidelity*, builds on his networked artwork, “the Electric Sheep screen-saver”. Draves talks of the development of, “more expressive genetic codes” and in common with Brian Eno’s recent *24Million Paintings*, calls his artwork; “Paintings that Evolve.”

The Visual Music, or Lumia, artist Friedlander shares an interest in a form of moving image that can evolve over time. “I prefer a form without time limits, where you can watch for a minute or an hour”.(Donnell) Draves also is not interested in short length finite narratives. *Dreams in High Fidelity* (Draves) at its current state in March 2007, would take 18 hours to play as one continuous sequence and is intended to play as an ambient attraction similar in effect to a painting in a frame on a wall. Whereas Friedlander uses physics experiments

and physical phenomena, Draves uses computer modelling and generation of virtual phenomena.

The lack of any narrative momentum or motivation, in these indefinite length works, is a source of both attraction and repulsion. Some may see the beauty of “no fixed form, ever changing,” subtle slight differences, whilst others may just as easily see this same feature as a lack of “content” and “story” amounting to what they might derogatorily refer to as “wallpaper”.

4.4 Visual Music and the full potential of film soundtracks.

In filmic terms, the majority of so-called Visual Music consists of film image with non-diegetic sound or music. That is the soundtrack consists of sound that does not appear to come from any source seen in the filmed image, eg the source of the sound such as a music ensemble, sound system, pianist etc are not seen to be in the film, the sound is coming from another source to the film. This is the relationship of “mood music” in traditional narrative films; the predominant use of film music is to cue, support or affect emotive responses. A slight twist to this system of sound and image structuring occurs in the Visual Music films of many artists interested in literal and precise synchronisation between sound and image, for instance Jordan Belson and more recently Ryoji Ikeda and Robin Fox. In these artists’ films there is a concrete relationship between sound and image, the colors and shapes changing and moving on screen, appear as if they are the sound-making source. In the case of Robin Fox’s “Backscatter”(Fox) DVD, the audio heard on the DVD is the same signal used to create patterns filmed off the screen of a cathode ray oscilloscope. Whilst this creates a an impressive synchronicity between moving image and sound, if every beat of film has the same relationship between sound and image it becomes a kind of monotone unison.

Mike Figgis in interview with Aitken talks of the value of treating sound and image as separate flexible streams of information, “If you can fragment and separate the visual images from sound, the overall picture functions in a really interesting way. It becomes a device for representing fragments of memory. The interesting thing about cinema is its potential for a non-linear timing of events and the ability to revisit those events.” (Aitken) I agree that a consistently rigid supposedly perfect synchronisation between movement or timing of images and a film's soundtrack may limit the potential for film to treat time flexibly and build its fragments of memory and potential for networks of associations.

4.5 Visual Music in the Digital era.

The multi-sensory components of Visual Music, sound, image and movement, are to a computer, like information of any kind, always manipulable, reconfigurable data. Computers can work with sound and image interchangeably. For this reason computer technology may well have led to the increasing attention given to Visual Music. This is now leading to a transformation and expansion of the definitions of Visual Music. In the recent Visual Music film, *Graveshift (Stavchansky 2004)*, there is more of a two-way resonance between image and sound, and between abstract and concrete representation. The electro acoustic soundtrack in this film also contains an interesting meshing of representation and abstraction; recognisable sounds of places and things (“field recordings”) merge into new sonic spaces and musical compositions.

I see that the influence of the pure-abstraction intention of much Visual Music is the appreciation of the emotive power and freedom of not having any concrete image or narrative representational content. Yet for me limiting a film to the supposed purity of only representational or abstract relationships of image and sound, narrative or non-narrative, seems like selling the medium and viewer short.

5.0 The rich intersection of Abstract and Concrete forms in the narrative of Dreams translated into films.

5.1 From Dreams to Hallucination.

My own dreams are often rich intersections of concrete and abstract narratives. Beyond the scope of this study, the intersection of dreams and films is a recurring interest of filmmakers such as Luis Bunuel, Man Ray, Michel Gondry, David Lynch, and Peter Tscherkassky. I will however return briefly to this subject in relation to my own film *Dreamlake (Fletcher)*.

Related to dreams and altered states is the concept of trance. Sitney refers to Maya Deren 's films as "Trance" films. (Sitney) I find her film *Meshes of the Afternoon (Deren)* to have a hypnotic affect, producing a mesmerising poetic atmosphere rather than an actual physiologically induced state of trance consciousness or hallucination.

Deren became interested in the anthropological study of Haitian rituals and dances that invoked trance states in their participants. This is transferred in her film as something to be observed rather than experienced, we watch the main character in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, wander through various scenes seemingly dreaming or in a trance.

The experiments of flicker films however more often denied their audience any such romantic or otherwise based image and imaginings; they provided a much lesser degree of picturesque and imaginative stimulus. These films relied on actual physiological experiences with the potential of producing trance or hallucinogenic like experiences in their viewer.

5.2 The Perceptual Film; initiating altered states and hallucinatory experiences.

For his film, *The Flicker* (Conrad), Tony Conrad used his musical background in a very different manner to the usual methods of *Visual Music*, Conrad based the pattern of changing frequencies in his film to the rate of the projector as if this rate of twenty four frames per second was the tonic frequency of his flicker composition.

Tony Conrad found viewing a flickering light, of a variable frequency, at 8 to 16 frames per second to produce a unique type of sensory experience; he based his film *The Flicker* (Conrad) on this finding.

Tony Conrad's film *The Flicker* approaches the goal of "perceptual film", or "authorless" artwork where an audience creates the "meaning" and "story". "The Flicker", sets out to affect its audience purely through physiological response to particular rhythms or frequencies of flickering light produced by alternating black and clear frames of film. In Conrads' words, "The absence of contamination with imagery will be the fulcrum which will lever the attention of the audience directly toward full receptiveness to the characteristic flicker effects". Many other films and filmmakers experimented with this flicker affect combined with or without "contamination with imagery". Paul Sharits film *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G* (Sharits), combined the concrete physiological device, of flickering light, with other visual techniques that work at the limits of human perception and 'contaminated' the flickering light with flashes of representational imagery.

Anna Powell sees the production of altered states of mind as an inherent potential of all films. Powell extends and explains Delueze's writings on the aesthetic and theoretical altered state affects of film. The perceptual or "flicker" films of Conrad, Anderson, Small and others explore actual physiological affects that produce altered states.

“Anderson and Small found that their flicker film of alternating black and white circles produced brain wave activity and mental states similar to deep meditation and alpha wave activity.”(Wees) Alpha brain wave frequencies occur in states of deep meditation and are in the range of 8 to 16 cycles per second.

The perceptual flicker films are an interesting paradox of interesting experience yet forgettable content. They may be a very memorable or even annoying experience, but the actual sound and image content can be empty and forgettable. This leads me to a question answered by the disparate fields of ambient video, action blockbusters, generative audiovisual art and my own short films.

5.3 Is it possible to create a film that is as interesting as it is forgettable? What you see might not be what you remember.

Generative art and ambient video as championed by Jim Bizocchi and Brian Eno provide two positive answers to this question.

Another type of film that is equally forgettable and interesting for me would be the American blockbuster, action-movie genre. I can remember the explosions and car chases from many action films but forget any other lasting impression or meaning.

Chin (Chin) sees this paradox of forgettable narrative content with memorable surface and style in recent films directed by Wong Kar-Wai.

“*Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* have no depth: they are movies totally on the surface. Yet the colors and the images and the rhythms and the soundtracks and the glamour are invigorating.”(Chin)

Chungking Express, in its evocation of style and surface, moves effortlessly between concrete narrative representation and a more abstract musical play of color, image and sound.

My concept of an interesting yet deliberately forgettable film is a sequence and combination of sound and image that can include a range of concrete, pictorial, and poetic or abstract use of image and sound, which like the flicker films aim to avoid the safety of known contexts and suturing narrative construction. Such a film can be hard to remember in its every detail but may well have a memorable affect on its viewer. Although I prefer the intrusion and inclusion of some imaginative authorial content I do share some of the intention of Flicker or perceptual films; the intention of creating a type of film that has the barest of supplied content and is interested in the viewers perceptual experience and imaginings rather than being an author dominated one way communication. In terms of actual authored content, this film could be quite forgettable, yet, in perceived content, immensely interesting.

6.0 Practical Work.

6.0 Introduction to Practical work.

In this chapter, I will talk about the practical work involved in this research. I will discuss how the films included with this thesis relate to a continuum of abstract and concrete forms. I will review the impact of the software tools used. I will detail the play of concrete and abstract forms within *Lake Qualm*, (Fletcher) and *Shed Film*, (Fletcher) and discuss the influences at work in *Chaos549*, (Fletcher). I will use *Dreamlake*(Fletcher 2006) as an example case study of the technical and conceptual processes involved across all these works. I will discuss the most complete assimilation of these techniques and interests in the final practical work of this present research, *Red Moon*, *Black Ocean*, (Fletcher). I will return to these films in more detail but next will look at the benefits and limits of the exploratory space of possibilities afforded by the digital production processes used in these films.

6.1 Parameters, influence and inherent limitations of software tools used.

Digital graphics tools have increased the range and ease of abstraction of visual images and the ability to flow between representational and abstracted versions of the same images.

Increasingly digital tools, such as *Artrmatic™*, *Studio Artist™*, *Processing*, and *After Effects™*, allow the relatively quick and easy generation or manipulation of smoothly changing imagery. Like the viewing of fireworks, or city lights reflected in puddles of water, extremely fluid metamorphosing of shapes, patterns and colors, has a seductive appeal. As animator, the easy production of extremely fluid metamorphosing of shapes, patterns and colors is also seductive because this has previously required an enormous amount of painstaking effort, for instance drawing thousands of images frame by frame.

For the last four years I have been using the program *Artrmatic™* and more recently *Studio Artist™*, to create animated patterns and mutations, or variations, of sound and image animation. This software-aided exploration of a mathematically infinite space of possibilities has heightened my awareness and appreciation of the abstract patterns underlying the concrete forms all around me. In future work I hope to develop this understanding further exploring the integration of natural or hand made patterns, in concert with, or as substitutes for, these digitally generated patterns. However, I also see that the fluid dynamically changing characteristic of digitally generated patterns can form a pattern itself and has the potential to become boring for an audience. "For human perception, strictly uniform patterns and strictly random patterns provide similarly boring, almost indistinguishable experiences; total order and total disorder are equivalent."(Scha 2001)Traditionally music, dance and animation performers put

conscious effort into varying tempo, accents, and interpretation of their script or score to provide interest and expression. The space between the beats in music and the movements between the frames of an animation, allow for much creative interpretation. I have found that with software tools that produce fluid animation, it becomes important to disrupt and introduce more human like flaws such as pauses, sudden changes in speed, or direction, subtle and dramatic snaps (or breaks) in movement for expressive or meaning based reasons.

The software tool *Armatic*[™] has shown me a practical example of the concept of complexity; incredibly rich construction potentials from compositions built on very simple forms, such as a circle, subjected to repeated duplications in symmetrical patterns. A potential downside of this fascination appeared in my short film work as a predominance of heavily centred composition. This can be effective as a relaxing concentration of focus. Outside of the scope of this present study is the very interesting study of any meditative and therapeutic benefits of this affect. For now, I am simply interested in the engagement potential of modulating and balancing demands for attention, distraction and reflection through the course of watching a film.

A new insight was the more conscious manipulation of the spatial composition over time; combining the establishment of a central focus and then moving this focus point around a little, or placing the centrally dominated image sequence in counterpoint with busier images that have many focus points placed at the edges or all around the frame. One useful reference for successful, varied, and open-ended composition containing competing points of interest exists in the animated film, *Revolver*.(Odell and Film-Tecknarna., 1993)

I will now look more closely at each of the five thesis films.

6.2. A continuum of Abstract and Concrete Forms in Film

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the five short films included as part of this thesis all set out to produce slightly different solutions to the effective integration of abstract and concrete forms. The five films illustrate different positions along the continuum of abstract and concrete representation.

These five short films engage different ratios of narrative and abstraction and differing relationships between sound, image and motion.

1. *Lake Qualm*, contains the most fluid or amorphous forms, moving between abstraction and representation, with a variety of sound uses.
2. *ShedFilm*, has a stronger link to known concrete images (sheds and rural landscape) placed in an abstract order, with abstract sound track in the tradition of musique concrete.
3. *Dreamlake*, works as an abstract narrative of fantasy, multiple viewpoints and times.
4. *Chaos549*, is a relatively more simple or concrete abstraction of image and moving patterns as musical forms, a kind of Visual Music with the intrusion of some representational images.
5. *Red Moon, Black Ocean*, is an attempted assimilation of all the previous techniques and interests.
6. *Insectaesthesia*, is not discussed in the text but included as the final and most recently completed example.

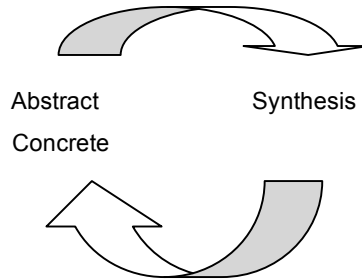
Fig 2. Continuum of Abstract to Concrete Films

←----->

ABSTRACT		Area of Most Intersection			Concrete
Abstract Image.		5.Red Moon, Black Ocean(2008)		2. ShedFilm(2005)	Figurative Representational
Abstract - Image /Sound Relationships	4. Chaos549 (2007)	1. Lake Qualm(2004) 6.Insectaesthesia (2008)	3.Dreamlake(2006)		Image Concrete - Image/ Sound Relationships
Non – Narrative					Narrative

In fact this continuum might be best represented as a loop; for instance, the most entirely abstract film, such as Richters' *Rhythmus21*, can be seen as being abstract for its lack of mimetic representation yet seen as concrete in being constructed entirely of rectangles and black and white tones.

Fig 3. Abstract and concrete coalesce in a cyclical relationship.



Red Moon, Black Ocean, and *Insectaesthesia*, in this schema, are at the closest point to the centre of the continuum, and demonstrate sharp as well as flowing changes between abstract and concrete treatments of narrative, time image, space, sound and image relationships.

ShedFilm, follows the gentler path of making any abstract image appear to come from a known image. *ShedFilm*, with its soundtrack designed in collaboration with electro-acoustic composer Jacques Soddell, follows the more usual Visual Music

approach where the soundtrack is one complete musical composition that interacts with the image but is not tied to representing for instance each visual event and space with its expected representational sound. I see this film as also containing a successful intersection of several traditional hand made animation techniques with digital and traditional video techniques.

Chaos 549 is closest to the idea of Visual Music. The form of the film is closer to a musical structure than a narrative structure. Patterns of repeating motifs and contrasting sections create an abstract journey or progression. Rhythm and implied movement exist in a similar way to musical melody and rhythm. In this context, the intersection of concrete representational images is not essential, but something draws me to it. Films from the Boston 2006 Visual Music Marathon, such as *Runas Spell* (Maxwell 2007) and *Graveshift* (Stavchansky 2004) also exhibited this approach, including representational human and animal character based imagery in otherwise abstract visuals and musically dominated narratives.

6.3 The Relation of Visual Music and Narrative in Chaos549 to the contemporary work *Formula* (Ikeda)

The controlled work of Ryoji Ikeda as seen on his DVD *Formula* and installation work at ACMI's *White Noise* exhibition highlighted for me the affect and effectiveness of image and sound reduced to pulsing, patterned flows of tightly synchronised sound and image, "a minimal palette of line geometries and flashes of video montage"(Poole). Close synchronisation of repetitive rhythmic and visual accents allows any non-synchronous sound and image to have an even greater contrast; the converse of the accented beat. For this thesis, besides the mastery of design and control evident in this work, the crucial significance is the complete integration of completely non-figurative patterns of colors and shape with rapid-fire bursts of photographic representational images.

My work *Chaos549* is in part a response to what I saw as this effective collision of abstract and concrete representations and relations in Ikeda's work. In

Chaos549 darkly colored amorphous blobs change shape in a tightly synchronised concrete relationship to a computer synthesized voice saying three very concrete words; “computer, gorilla, mother”. These ‘speaking blobs’ appear layered over the top of an image of snow falling inside an abandoned shearing shed. In the context of very little other narrative, these words jump out with all their possible narrative and ontological associations. However there is clearly little supporting information or context to support any particular connotations or associations other than perhaps providing some concrete information to keep the logical functioning part of the viewers mind happily occupied enough to let it relax and enable other more experiential ways of viewing. Perhaps this is an attempt to understand or at least foreground a concept of existing within a swirling chaos as a dynamic flow between concrete and abstract forms.

The process I have been working on for the last four years with software tools (such as Artmatic™) is one of continuing experimentation which would have been impractical if not impossible to carry out entirely by handmade means. This ability has included being able to instantly refine, reassess recombine image, motion and sound several hundred times without using any bench space, film or video stock, and often while sitting on a long train journey with a laptop.

This process has lead to a greater interest in pattern and flow and to the amassing of a large personal library, of tropes, motifs, fragments; building blocks of certain styles and functions. I see this building of reusable elements less like a specific database process as espoused by Peter Greenaway and Lev Manovich, and more akin to a musician practising a musical instrument.

6.4 Dreamlake case Study.

Dreamlake-synopsis.

An attempt at a specific blow by blow synopsis for *Dreamlake* would be in danger of appearing like some sort of nonsense pop song lyrics and would reveal nothing more than a lot of individually and constantly overlapping images or filmic scenes. The content of *Dreamlake* includes lakes, pumpkins and potatoes, fairytale towers and castles, boats, moths, people and hybrids of moths and people, as well as past and present images of people and places. As a synopsis I have preferred the cryptic prose,

Sounds sink slowly in to the ground,

Thoughts float away as clouds,

Dreams flow like water,

Dreamlake : a reservoir of dreams and memories.

(Fletcher) This prose appeared as the beginning titles in the longer edited version of the film.

Dreamlake is an extension of preoccupations started in *Lake Qualm*; the ideas of lakes being associated with both calm and a brooding unease; and lakes as a reservoir of memories of many emotions, situations and events.

The other central preoccupation of *Dreamlake*, a kind of metaphysical, abstract, link to the past being contained in the (concrete) present, began in my earlier film *Eleven*, (Fletcher) that attempted to deal with the phenomenon and records of victims of tornados, and in the gallery installation *Time Decomposing* and its associated film *10,000 days*, (Fletcher, 2006a). *10,000 Days*, worked with the idea of a dreamlike collage of simultaneous past and present histories of a particular location.

Dreamlake contains an allusion to both the Ballet form of abstract narrative spectacle, and the narrative style of *Dreams*. This dream-logic manifests as many short scenes that somehow blend into each other. This is a phenomenon I remember from my own dreams, of being in one place then all of a sudden in a quite different location and situation. The flying moth formations, for example, appear at the start of the film over the lake, and continue their patterned flying as

the scene behind them changes from a theatre stage to a large landscape with white horses pulling a pumpkin coach.

6.5 Writing Process for Dreamlake.

In 'writing' Dreamlake no fully written storyboard or script was produced prior to its production. My only working written documents consisted of regularly updated, scribbles and lists of ideas for scenes, overall structure and pacing. In the production of *Dreamlake* I often had the paradoxically conscious intention, of allowing improvisation, chance and serendipity, to influence the writing and production process. I found this approach to produce results that may not otherwise have come about through solely self-conscious planning and intentions.

A close parallel to the process of writing as an improvisational process is how David Lynch; describes his working method of building up a collection of individual scenes without at first necessarily knowing how they link together. Kaleta, quoting Lynch "You want to make a feature film, you get ideas for 70 scenes. Put them on three-by-five cards. As soon as you have 70, you have a feature film" (Kaleta 1993) Kaleta also points to the distinction between writing with words compared to writing with pictures and sound and creating more open ended or incomplete narratives open and indeed requiring more interpretation. "Lynch does not write his story in words and tell it with pictures; he is a filmmaker who creates objective duality, so suitable to the world of the motion picture."(Kaleta 1993)

SwanLake(Tchaikovsky Peter) was one of the deliberate references/allusions for this film. I studiously watched two different DVD films of productions of the ballet, *SwanLake (Bourne et al., Bart P and Barenboim)*. The aspect which most struck me most about these ballet productions, was how they created a symbolic and abstracted telling of the same story in very different ways and that they both

seemed to rely on an assumed prior knowledge of the basic story (presumably backed up with program note/synopsis). In other words, it seemed to me that their main interest was in a kinetic, visual and emotive spectacle, effect and affect. This was my intention for *Dreamlake*. Like my understanding of the Ballet adaptations of *Swan Lake*, I hoped to rely on previous experience and knowledge possessed by my viewers; associations and allusions, of fairytale icons, pumpkins, and castles, dream like landscapes, lakes and regional towns. These reflections and memory triggers could provoke imaginative if not emotive or reflective responses from an audience. "Evaluation and narration therefore become a joint task of filmmaker and audience". (Kaleta 1993)

In the context of film editing and mixing as a live performance, the performer and audience both have significant and immediate roles in evaluating and narrating the materials of a film. The performer is directly involved in selecting and manipulating the content in a prepared library of materials, the audience forms their own evaluation and narration of both the performance and projected image and sound.

In the live performance version of *Dreamlake*, quite literal evaluation and narration involves improvisation and the immediacy of on the spot decisions. These instant decisions can be subtly or dramatically influenced by the atmospherics and conditions in a live public setting and can affect the editing and look, or visual effects, of the film in real time. I tested my short film work, *Red Moon*, *Black Ocean* as a modular, semi-improvised concert performance. The final editing of *Red Moon*, *Black Ocean* has been influenced by this live improvisation process.

6.6 Red Moon, Black Ocean

Red Moon, *Black Ocean*, starts with a view of a boat on a lake or ocean, the point of view is voyeuristically located as if spying through tree branches. Rather

than having an onscreen character to identify with, the viewer is placed clearly in the role of looking, I suggest this has the benefit of setting up an attitude of receptiveness to observing the screen without any particular expectations; a mixture of curiousness and detachment.

In the opening and closing scenes there are resonances of relaxing natural environments, perhaps time spent on holiday, fishing and so on. Looking more closely at this evocation of a relaxing natural environment would actually reveal faults or breaks in the illusion, the picture is made of three originally separate still images; tree branches, a boat on water and a separate ocean image. The illusion of the water movement and natural environment of this scene is achieved through the synthetic marsh or swamp-like sound ambience and a digitally produced visual ripple placed on top of the picture. On viewing this synthesis of sound and constructed composite image the viewer could easily be seduced into imagining, observing, or even exploring, some lush natural environment devoid of any particular pressing need or demands. The constructed nature of this image creates a productive tension between representation and abstraction that results in an unfixed, or open-ness, of viewpoint.

After this comparatively naturalistic scene, the representation and slight abstraction of, the familiar, drifts into a slightly surreal other worldly view of flowing melting shapes and patterns. This moving image resolves into the concrete image of drifting clouds. This image becomes overlaid with simple geometric, flower like patterns.

Red Moon, Black Ocean, uses similar preoccupations or motifs as several of the other pieces. Natural sites of water, such as an ocean or lake, represent here a literal site of relaxation, and a metaphoric site filled with an accumulation of memories and dreams. Images of large bodies of water and drifting clouds become symbols for a state of mind or metaphysical awareness. Contemporary American short film-maker Chel White, shares a similar intention, “elemental

images- water, fire, earth, and air, as represented by sky, clouds, smoke, ... these images represent the mystery and the very essence of life. I find using them is a kind of visual shorthand to the metaphysical.”(White)

The floating cloud image abstracts further as it blends into a distorted view of a blue tinted city street, on a wet day, with a pink fairy like creature flying over the top of it. This is a reusing of some of the models and footage made for the earlier *Dreamlake* film and a continuance of the moth image as a metaphor for ephemera, metamorphosis and possible transcendence between states of perception and being. This is coincidentally a motif also noticed in several other animations, for instance *Madame Tuttle Puttli*, (*Lavis and Szczerbowski*).

The blue tinted city footage in *Red Moon, Black Ocean*, is footage shot with a broken Super-8 camera some twenty years ago. The faulty camera mechanism produced an interesting color caste and a particular organic/mechanical repeating and blurring of the image. This footage was always an interesting intersection of concrete and abstract representation. Several media formats and twenty years later, I have finally found a good home for it.

Next, the film returns the viewer to a voyeuristic position – a disoriented, wavering first person point of view, following a figure walking across the screen. To further confuse literal/concrete perspective of time and space the figure is subtly superimposed and time stretched; walking away from us and towards us simultaneously in slow motion.

After this drifting smooth flowing section of the film, that has no particular synchronisation or accents between the wash of musical sound and image, the picture changes to a much more minimal set of information in sound and picture. The emphasis is now on the close synchronisation between on screen movement and sound. One dot moves across a colored frame accompanied by a single tone that also pans across the stereo sound space. This creates a different kind of

relaxation, energy and expectation. The expectation becomes the maintaining of a rhythm or pattern and the synchronisation between picture and sound.

Michel Chion calls the synthesis between synchronised sound and visuals, without any necessarily logical connection, “synchresis”.(Chion) Being aware of the strong accent and attention grabbing force of synchresis is an important strategy in my image and sound toolbox. In *Red Moon, Black Ocean* I have attempted to heighten the affect of synchresis by placing it in contrast to sections of drifting and totally asynchronous sound and image relationships (acousmatic sound in Chion’s terminology). These contrasting approaches have been especially useful in the live improvisation versions of the film.

The draw of a human voice arrives via the introduction of an indistinct voice, at 2 min and 50 seconds. At this point, we hear a distorted, ghostly, low-pitched, sounding voice, and then another indistinct voice becomes just audible. The image of an old radiogram appears briefly and is a potential referent to other disembodied voices, an associative image of radio broadcast voices lost in the ether of passing time.

The most abstract layered visual sequence begins at about 3 minutes 23 seconds. At this point the music that flows along with the images conveys a relaxed mood but this is jarringly juxtaposed with the concrete sound of smashing glass clearly heard, followed by a less easily recognised rhythmic mechanical sound derived from a recording of windscreen wiper blades.

At 4 minutes into the film the image comes to rest, for twenty seconds, in a strange foreign planet, a desert with a city of skyscrapers, and a just visible oversized koala, possibly representing threatened fauna and environment or a tourist attraction/mascot at the city entrance. I see this scene as representing any of the following options; a city imposed on a desert, a city that has metaphorically drained the surrounding environment of flora and fauna and turned the

surrounding environment into a desert. Other viewers could interpret this image as representing another ideal planet of their dreams. This unfixed quality of the meaning of the image is an unresolved, incomplete illusion, not completely abstract or concrete in its representation, offering a scene that creates a puzzling tension between familiar and unfamiliar. Thus narrative clues are released in a reduced form, complete answers or directions are not supplied, only an invitation for each individual's associative, interpretation connections and reflection.

At 4 minutes 23 seconds there is a brief, but comparatively clear, sequence showing two young children wandering down a country lane. Due to the content and look of this footage combined with its context in the film, this short scene has the feeling of a detached or mediated viewing of some past time; a memory of a memory.

The film's audio ends with a graceful move between major and minor color and mood as musical instruments fade away to reveal the electronic swamp sounds heard at the beginning of the film. This is a circuitous return of the viewer back to the scene of the boat on the water. Here the viewer is returned to position of a voyeur watching the boat through the tree branches, however now this image fades away indicating a leaving of the film and a return to awareness of the environment actually surrounding the viewer. By the end of *Red Moon, Black Ocean*, the viewer has, hopefully, had an experience of a vicarious, immersive, emotional journey not dissimilar to the experience of watching a linear narrative film yet with more space and encouragement for their own narrative associations, connections and reflections. Rather than realistic characters in unreal situations, in this film I attempt to create a connection to what I understand of Stephanie Maxwell's concept of that which is "Hidden beneath our routine generalized encounter with life [the experience of] a continuous, more sensuous encounter with our surroundings and within ourselves that we routinely ignore, pass by, and through time lose our ability to tap into."(Detheux, 2008)

7.0 One possible future direction for Abstract Narrative: the Immediacy, Indeterminacy and Mutability of Performance and Improvisation found in “Live Cinema”.

In the 1920s, Filmmakers, Fischinger and Ruttmann with composer A.Laszlo pioneered multi-screen projections of tinted animation to live music accompaniment (Moritz). Fischinger “hoped to produce some day an audio-visual abstract concert feature.” (Fischinger E et al., 2004)

The development of the potential intersections of concrete and abstract art forms, in a live performance context did not compete with the growing industry of Hollywood studio film production, which was based firmly in creating the illusion of figurative human drama, nor was it able to supplant the established Classical Concert Hall performance. The potential for live Visual Music can be seen to have been explored, in the sound and light shows of Jordan Belson’s Vortex Concerts of the late 1950s and similar shows into the 1960s. Current gallery installations, sound and light shows and video dee-jays can now exploit more affordable, even compact and portable digital technologies of video and audio manipulation synthesis and projection.

The ability to perform a film with some level of improvisation in a live concert setting emerged from this study as a valuable arena for the synthesis of abstract and narrative film. This chapter will discuss a contemporary understanding of the concept of “Live Cinema” and the relationship of my experiments in this field to a particular synthesis of abstract and narrative film.

“The term “Live Cinema“ has hitherto been used primarily to describe the live musical accompaniment of silent movies. But that was yesterday. “Live Cinema“ today stands for the simultaneous creation of sound and image in real time by sonic and visual artists who

collaborate to elaborate concepts on equal terms. The traditional parameters of narrative cinema are expanded by a much broader conception of cinematographic space, the focus of which is no longer the photographic construction of reality as seen by the camera's eye, or linear forms of narration.”(Nomig, 2005 -)

Live Cinema enables the combination of “intuition and improvisation in a live environment” and as such has a major influence on the creative process. (Makela)

I find these assertions re the concept of live cinema, to be true for my own work. After having performed film and music material in a live setting, I have come across new ideas for later approaching film edits of the same material. I often now think of film ideas in terms of the structure of a live performance; several concurrent possibilities of progressive variations, repetitions and recombinations of all filmic elements.

The precedents of live cinema existed well before the cosmic psychedelic sound and light shows of the 60' and early 70's. Fischinger among others experimented with performance as part of their concept of Visual Music. The so called “city symphonies” of the 1920s as created by Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov's much revered *Man with a Movie Camera*, were all intended as screenings with live music performances. Before synchronised film soundtracks were possible, live music performers often accompanied them.

Kinoautomat was a film project designed for a specially built cinema in Czechoslovakia in 1967 that combined interactive buttons on each audience members seat arm rests and incorporated a live actor performance with multiple film projectors.(Hales, 2007)

Mike Figgis, already mentioned in Chapter 3, has since 2000, been screening a version of his film *Timecode* (Figgis) with a live re-mixing of the soundtrack for festivals around the world “creating a unique A/V experience and one-off version of his film every night.” (Faulkner and D-Fuse)

Makela points to video and film work of the 1980's and 1990s particularly Godfrey Reggio's Quatsi trilogy, Koyaanisquatsi (Reggio) as not only extending the idea of an integration of film and music but also as extensions of cinematic language "through visually powerful rhythmic compositions, in which the music, composed by Philip Glass, stands on equal footing with the image."(Makela, 2006) Reggio purportedly re-edited the films footage to match Glass's music. (IMDb)

Live performance that utilises film projection could be in any style of abstraction or narrative, rigorously planned and scripted. The maximum and unique potential of an audiovisual performative medium is precisely in its performative aspects.

In a live performance context there is a need to embrace the immediacy of the event, this involves an engaging with a dynamic process of creating and interpreting meaning, on behalf of performer and audience.

My own experiments with live cinema performance have now included ten or more public performances and many variations on one basic audiovisual system of which I will describe shortly.

7.1 Recent work in creating a performative cinema that excels in integrating abstract and concrete forms.

Throughout 2006-2007, I created several live performances using my custom audio-visual performance instrument, a modified vacuum cleaner now capable of producing a digital (MIDI) signal output to trigger and control audio and video stored on a lap top, processed via MaxMsp™ computer software program.

This work, influenced by the prevalence of media technology, is concerned with concepts and metaphors of tuning, reception, transmission, perception, noise

and signals. These phenomenon all involve a dynamic flow between concrete and abstract forms, for instance from a concrete clear transmission of a congruent spoken word and image to a densely layered, fragmented, unclear or noisy signal. The vacuum cleaner itself is also a clear metaphor for picking up and collecting fragments.

My audiovisual instrument constructed from a Vacuum cleaner and other domestic objects, alludes to the metaphor of picking up signals and detritus or dust. The rabbit ear TV antennas attached to the Vacuum cleaner reinforce this allusion and function as a practical gestural interface, touching these antennas with varying pressure or intervals, triggers random phrases of midi piano sounds and or images.

Separating and re-combining multiple threads of narrative and or channels of information is the intention. An audiovisual live performance system can literally create this process of mixing elements of sound and moving image with the added element of indeterminacy, and improvisation.

7.4 The benefits of live performance for Abstract Narrative form of film.

So far my live vacuum cleaner performance system, not only allows me to approach linear editing with fresh insights, but to actually improve on a linear editing process with literally rhythmic or even musical editing; I can perform the edits percussively by hitting sensors/switches in time with music performance or improvisation. It is therefore possible to create new compositions musically and cinematically. This live performance /composition process includes the processes of changing the progression and layering of sound and image, as well as changing the pitch and speed of visual and audio material in legato or staccato manner. This enables diverse interactions between visual and audio content and between this material and live performers/creators and audience. Finally, I think this approach could lead to new composition and editing techniques for linear film image and sound. Potentially a new performative medium of film capable of

various mutations, permutations or simple variations, could develop into a viable commercial medium with a longer shelf life than current fixed form, linear films.

8.0 Conclusion

Abstract and concrete forms are most often in a state of flux and appear as a continuum rather than distinct, discrete opposites. They are often not poles apart but wrapped around each other!

Film has a potential for the synthesis and intersection of abstract and concrete forms. This is especially prominent in the medium of Animation combined with the technological capabilities of digital audio-visual media.

The richness of film can come from its tussle between the concrete and abstract forms. Films can have a greater or lesser degree of musicality, poetry, and abstraction in their structure and content.

It has become apparent to me that what is most intriguing, is the gaps in between definitions, the fleeting, liminal and transient states where things become neither exclusively one nor the other, concrete or abstract, material or immaterial.

The digitally influenced convergence and blurring of boundaries between processes and even entire disciplines has a significant impact conceptually as well as technically. Just one mentioned example of this is the ability to instantly and endlessly re-arrange and seamlessly recombine digital information, which now includes sound, image and motion information. This capability changes our perception and writing abilities.

Once the province of isolated experimenting eccentrics, random assemblage, is for instance, increasingly accessible for any home computer user. From the sub-atomic to the universal, Digital Media can effectively sustain a broad continuum of abstraction and concrete forms with its ability to listen in on, recombine or replay macro to micro analysis and simulation of time, space, invisible or theoretical dimensions and interactions.

My film work explores a range of abstract and concrete representation intersecting with narrative elements. I have experimented with disrupting an otherwise abstract flow of pattern, color and sound with reduced or minimal narrative cues or hooks, for example the sound of automotive traffic, a human voice or representational imagery chosen for its iconic, or even archetypal associations. Performative, mutable narratives are key to my concept of abstract narrative film. This approach involves an appreciation of kinetic, light, and sound stimuli contributing to a multi-sensory literacy.

In, 1995 Adrian Martin described my then film work as containing “a certain “chaos factor” – an overload of information, images, sound, stories that always branch off into further stories, representations that incessantly slip from animation to live action and back again...they are a form of “fast fiction” that works very close to our unconscious processes of thought and feeling. They are like dreams, or like “brainstorms”, rapid, cascading montages of material, but always very carefully structured.” (Martin) These comments point to a long held interest in fragmenting concrete narratives into a new synthesis of abstraction and concrete forms.

Narrative and non-narrative, figurative and abstract films all have their own interesting individual qualities and values I find their intersection and possible co-existence an even more interesting worthwhile challenge. Shon Kim’s film *Latent Sorrow*, (Kim) has a more painterly sensibility than my own work but expresses a similar pursuit of an equal co-existence of figurative and abstraction. The goal of

equal co-existence of abstract and concrete forms in film parallels a concept of living amidst a swirling chaos. This is an observation of a dynamic flow between concrete and abstract forms propelled by our own language and perceptual systems.

8.1 Future Work

In future practical research I intend to investigate further the prospects of mutable forms of film arising from the performance potential of live digital video and audio in solo and collaboration with other artists.

The invention and testing of audiovisual instruments and performance systems that allow integration of spontaneous improvisation and performance with pre-prepared moving image and sound is a rapidly developing area of which I would be interested in contributing further to.

Longer film work and longer development time would be of interest to explore for developing poetic and narrative strengths further.

Future work logically will also ideally follow up the small beginnings hinted at here in looking at Perception, Emotional states and Film in linear and live interactive contexts. The impacts of these findings would also be of interest to look at in terms of personal, social, cultural and political concerns as well as in learning and mental health/therapy contexts.

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