

Is Live Cinema Dead?

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Abstract

Live VJ and interactive Public Projection/ Installations are currently propagating themselves like rabbits throughout many corners of the globe. This presentation looks at some examples of emerging trends, tropes and innovations. In greater detail, with actual live examples the author will outline some of his own experiments and experiences with various models and contexts of live cinema from installations to live performance in cinema contexts. The playful and somewhat ridiculous question "Is live cinema dead?" builds upon associations with Peter Greenaway's famous assertion that cinema died in the hands of the remote control. What is the impact on live cinema of the abundant dispersal of many forms of screens, networked and interactive audiovisual devices? The question also wrestles with what is added or lost, what is achieved, by constructing a film that contains some dynamic, transient, almost ephemeral characteristics that can change at each performance? Does this work best with abstract or narrative styles? Is this a perfect medium to highlight connections between, figuration and abstraction, poetic and factual, narrative and performative drama?

Keywords: Cinema , Live Performance, Visual-Music, Sonic Art , Expanded Cinema, Audiovisual, Media Art.

Introduction

The terms Live and Cinema and their combined usage in the term "Live-Cinema" vary so widely that it is all too easy to develop a somewhat confusing but appropriately non-linear and layered set of meanings and associations. Cinema is Live in as much as all Culture is a live and living phenomenon. Obviously all language itself is a living process of culture that grows and decays meanings and associations, within various contexts of use. Notwithstanding Greenaway's provocative complaints of a self-replicating re-hashing of tired genres, Cinema is still a part of, shaped by and involved in forming many areas of contemporary culture.(Greenaway, Peter 2003) will briefly explore some of the potential breadth of associations of "live cinema" then I will look at specific examples that live in my definition of live cinema.

The Mediasphere as a live cinema environment.

A reflection on the current state of media saturation lead me to seriously consider that "live cinema" in any form might be so thoroughly propagated and exhaustively employed everywhere that it might be at risk of already appearing in danger of becoming stale,

lifeless or effectively dead. Live cinema could be a description of the media and technology-saturated environment enclosing, and embedded within our cities and wealthier nations. In the present day technological cities there are a myriad of screen interactions occurring at all hours of the day and night from personal devices that in many cases are almost never switched off and usually in arms reach, to readouts on stoves, fridges, electronic billboards, ticket machines and LCD screens placed all over the place, displaying anything from artwork, live TV, entertainment-news, or event coverage to menus for hamburgers and chips with or without gravy. The screen, in so many pockets, can be a distribution and broadcasting device. Each one of these screens plays its' own form of live cinema, however humble, utilitarian or profound. Together the techno-ecosystem experience of all these screens could be viewed as one giant very well funded installation art piece; a highly immersive version of live cinema. In response to this my own crafting of a live cinema has become interested in supporting and reflecting this fragmentation, collage and hall of mirrors of endlessly self replicating simulacra; simulations and reformulations of simulations. Equally though the quite opposite or dynamic counterpart of this state of stimulation is the wish to quell the sensory overload and create a refreshing sanctuary from largely text based information replacing this with largely pre-language primal sensory washes of image, sound and motion. This trend can be seen in work from structural and materialist film makers of the 1960's to 1980's through to video artists as disparate as Bill Viola and Ryoji Ikeda.

The propagation and potential of live cinema.

In the early 1980's I was deeply attracted to the ideas and intent that I saw in Goddard's early films that stretched the narrative and ontological dimensions of cinema. Some of these ideas may now be commonplace for instance in the case of the jump-cut edit. However I still feel that narrative cinema has still many untapped possibilities that can be explored in linear and perhaps even more so in live performative film contexts. Live Cinema films can further exploit the value of treating the essential elements of cinema as independent channels of information and expression. Images, movement, sound, spoken and graphical language can all be put into dynamic play and infinitely mutable combinations in live cinema. Within a traditional linear film a viewer or participant's mental, emotional and physical gaze can be freely interacting with and to some degree recombine these channels of information. In a live performed film each of these 'channels' of information can in real time be literally reconfigured in dramatic or subtle ways by the performer and or interactively

participating audience. Open, flexible, indeterminate and dynamically responsive possibilities contrast sharply with how Greenaway sees generic cinema productions as “bedtime stories for adults”. Peter Greenaway yearns for, discusses and experiments with the “possibilities of film”; not only breaking the adherence to single linear narratives but physically breaking the constraints of a single plane fixed frame and screen. Greenaway has experimented in several productions with ways to overcome what he calls the ‘tyrannies’ of cinema. Greenaway identifies these tyrannies as being imposed from text, actor, and frame.

An appropriately broad view of Cinema defines itself as a type of media, rather, than cinema as a specific physical architectural space and context (eg the Cinema theatre that many people still pay a lot to enter). With digital and networked technology Cinema is more than ever at the whim and whimsy of its fans and their cultural and actual digital manipulation and replication of the narratives, tropes and actual media. Peter Greenaway ascribed the death of cinema to the adoption of the remote control for television sets and dvd players 31st September 1983. (Greenaway, Peter 2003). Since that time though, as Greenaway is also keen to mention, the average viewer can be participant in not only figuratively and literally changing the channel, interrupting and rescheduling films but can now also completely re-edit, re-mix, and reinvent the look, style and context of digital film content. It is possible for the average viewer to even determine the “sharing” and distribution of cinematic works often using the same social media tools that the film studios use. Thus Cinema in this form is live and “live cinema” could be a useful term to describe this cultural field. Manovich in his essay “Flash Generation” asserted this cycle of user led subversion /interjections into any production cycle in not just how they read a film and **shape** it in their own minds but in how they can, in so many cases, access, copy, manipulate and redistribute their own versions of films. “Quoting, appropriation, and pastiche no longer needs any special name. Now this is simply the basic logic of cultural production: download images, code, shapes, scripts, etc.; modify them, and then paste the new works online - send them into circulation.” (Manovich, Lev 2002). But more subtly and blatantly than that film genres pick up on anything that has previously been successful including user appropriation, adoration and even influences of social media sharing including fan fiction and remakes. A film like *Deadpool* and its enormous marketing campaign mimicked to some degree this phenomenon of fan fiction remakes with its various pre-release and post release youtube promotional video clips made by its central actor/anti-hero character/comedian Ryan Reynolds.

More specific uses of the term “Live Cinema” and indeed what I have aspired to call much of my own film and audiovisual performances is the specific production of film for and in the form of a live performance. This involves not only making a film but making a flexible modular library like structure and

a way to assemble this flexibly and responsively in real time. In the end the performative nature of this sort of live cinema can vary from subtle and almost imperceptible in their element of performance to the ridiculously obvious.

Mia Makela, sees no useful distinction other than different contexts between “vj”, live cinema, audiovisual art, visual music and expanded cinema. 

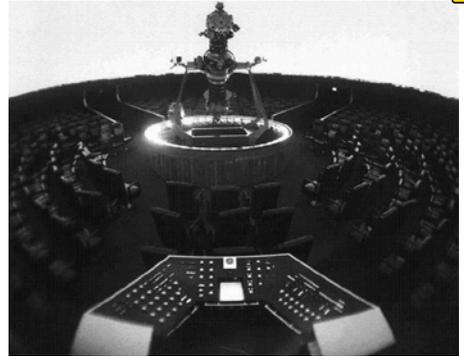


Image 1. Star Theatre. Manifesto “Cine Dreams” Stan VanDerBeek 1972

“CINE DREAMS is a myth/process/magic/theatre event lasting 8 hours. (11p.m. till 7a.m.) It is an “endless” image/sound/event designed for planetarium presentation. It appears to be like an endless dream/cinema an experiment in theatre. The 8 hours are portioned into hour themes, with an emphasis on the 90 minute interval similar to “REM” pattern of deep sleep. (Nightmares, day dreaming, abstract images, literal, figurative images, story telling etc.) The audience is invited to bring blankets and pillows to relax (to sleep if they wish), to interrelate to the images to a cinema”

(Van Der Beek, Stan 1972), (Van Der Beek, Stan 1966)

Makela has a reverence for cinema and live audiovisual creation, “cinema still creates magical connotations in our minds and Live Cinema sounds sexier than realtime audiovisual creation.” Makela points to the confusion and confusions of the term live cinema being associated with film since its earliest history. (Makela, Mia 2006) Winsor Mc Cay included his animated film as part of his live cinema performances then known as ‘vaudeville’. Mc Cay commanded his captive Dinosaur to perform for the audience and appeared to be able to feed an apple to his projected dinosaur. In 1914,

“McCay, brandishing a whip, would appear onstage to the right of a movie screen. He would first speak to the audience, explaining how animated films were made, photographed, and projected. He would then introduce Bertie as “the only Dinosaur in captivity”. At the crack of the whip, the film would start.”

(Van Eaton Galleries)

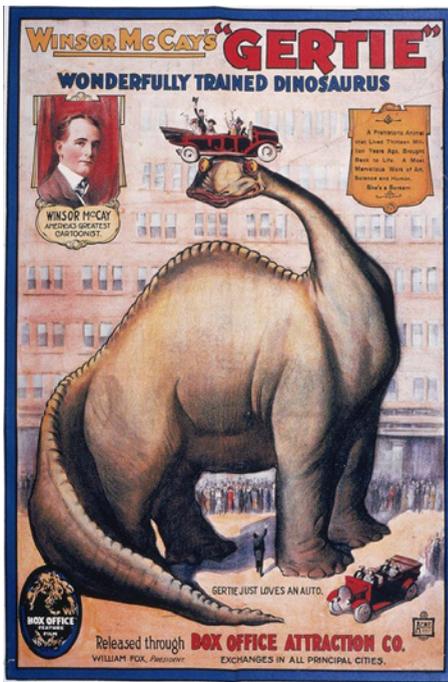


Image 2 – Gertie the Dinosaur /director: Ref.: film poster McCay, Winsor November 1914- Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed April 12, 2016).

Generally the silent movie era built on the traditions of live vaudeville, magic shows and theatre. Orchestras, keyboard players and trap drummers that played in the theatres, not to mention performances from Dadaists and Futurists can easily be seen as Live Cinema.

Oscar Fischinger's Lumigraph is an early live audiovisual performance instrument around which a very different kind of live cinema could be performed.

Placing body and or objects in between a latex screen and system of lights and colored filters or gels created a playful and played instrument responding to music with whole body and objects. According to Fischinger's family members the Lumigraph performances were not only a lot of fun and a live each time unique performance but also quite close to the style and content of Fischinger's linear composed visual music films.(Keefer, Clndy Guldemond, Jaap; Keefer,Clndy Guldemond,Jaap 2012)

Makela's keywords chosen for her thesis are a good list of the associations of live cinema "live cinema, realtime visuals, performance, participation, projection, VJ, cinema, language, digital, space, time, loop, laptop, software, montage, composition, effect, synthesizer, software, magic lantern, shadow theatre, synaesthetics, color music, visual music, lumia, expanded cinema. Gesamtkunstwerk".

Some level of circumspection has crept in to my appreciation of architectural projection art as live

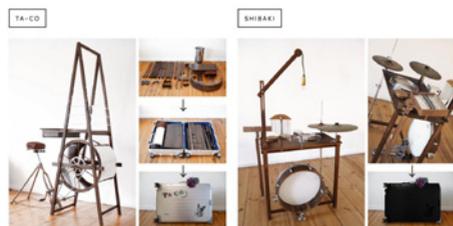
cinema when I start to see recurring, copied, repeated 'tricks', themes, gimmicks or tropes- such as the collapsing building. They are all great tricks, don't think I don't enjoy them and maybe the novelty of it is still relatively fresh considering the 120 or so years of Cinema compared to the more recent handful of decades of projection art. However it is conceivable that this form of live cinema could if left in lazy or franchised ownership become as dead as Greenaway claims traditional cinema based on recycled texts and genres has become.

Initially as a reaction to hunched over figures sitting apparently motionless in front of a glowing lap-top perversely placed on a stage almost in the way of a projection I tried to create large gestural theatrical interface devices such as the midi-vacuum cleaner. The Midi-Vacuum Cleaner had a large lever to control pitch and speed of sound and image simultaneously. This was an obviously recognisable easy to see relationship between human gesture and audio visual effect but quite a strange incongruous effect for a cinematic experience. Yet after experimenting with correspondences like these that are so clear that they risk becoming ends in themselves and appearing frivolous or distracting I also have come to the conclusion(about 6 years later!!) that the ultimate goal should be the content and the experience of live cinema. Even without obvious performer and theatrical based correspondences between human actions and the projected sound Live Cinema can still be very much performative, live and unrepeatable unique experiences. In a piano concert, when a pianist presses the keys, the sound immediately corresponds to the actions of her fingers. If the pianist plays faster, the speed of the music accelerates. If this correspondence were to suddenly disappear the audience would immediately think it were a playback. The key concept in gestural interfaces is realtime correspondence between the actions and the results. I believe that in spite of the new possibilities offered by digital technologies, the content of the performance should still count the most, and an interesting audiovisual experience as a whole is worth striving towards, with or without the involvement of the body. "Classical" video-mixing and processing can offer fascinating insights to the nature of images. Even though performance is a vital element in the live context, creating new narratives for visual culture is equally important."(Makela, Mla 2006)



Image 3 Usaginginen Bespoke AudioVisual Instruments and road cases <http://usaginginen.com>

Usagingen is a two person audiovisual performance group of two performers who perform a beautiful mix of animated film, theatrical, music and an almost magic show concept of live cinema. In their performances it is clear to see direct real time correspondences between performers actions on stage with the projection and music seen and heard. Yet this does not become distracting or an awkward competition between the elements and still has enough mystery to provoke a sense of wonder. The assortment of electronic triggers and custom foley/percussion instruments played by Shin and the amazing yet simple custom bicycle powered animation rostrum stand produce results that are magnified on screen and stage. The results belie their simple means of production and highlight their ingenuity, elements of surprise and wonder. Usinagen strike a beautiful balance of performance/function and affect. Their filmic background at times literally seeps onto or is projected onto the stage ,at times the projection appears like a set that the performers are in, a backdrop for them to appear in front of whereas they can just as easily, and quite fluidly, disappear into the metaphorical background loosing significance while the projected visuals and lighting with the sound take over.



The Visual machine "TA-CO" has a camera, a kind of an animation table with layers, rotating drum, water-basins, colored ink, beads, mirrors, gears, hand cranks and lots more.
The Music instrument "SHIBAKI" is some kind of a percussion kit, connected to a MIDI controller and to a string instrument.

Image 4 Usagingen -Live Cinema Performance Reykjavik Visual Music - Punto y Raya Festival 2014 <http://usagingen.com>

Some of my own experiments and applications of Live Cinema.

For my production Dreamlake in 2006 I created a gestural instrument to make sounds and 'perform' a film in a semi-improvised mode. This set up used an intense bank of image and sound loops, triggered by mechanical devices and by acoustically made sounds.

This and several subsequent performances engaged in a small level of theatre- by the way of a ridiculous interface and symbol of mundane good little domestic consumer icon – a re-purposed vacuum cleaner. The vacuum cleaner motor and suction was left intact so this could be switched on for extra effect somewhere in the middle of a performance. Simple electronics were built around the hacking of an old toy keyboard with midi capabilities inserted to the dustbag area of the vacuum cleaner. This was in a time when there were way fewer midi control 'surfaces' . I have been pretty much seduced by the low cost, convenience and apparently amazing features of mass produced control surfaces more recently and even

resorted to the comparatively boring figure hunched over a lap-top theatrical set up. But some of the most successful gestural elements of my first attempt at a hacked interface , the midi-vacuum cleaner, I cannot find in any of the newest controllers I have read about seen or tried. The midi-vacuum cleaner in both of its incarnations or 'models' had the very simple device of an aerial inserted as a lever into a standard potentiometer(eg.analog volume dial). This was used to produce a very sledgehammer-like, unsubtle level of correspondence between performers action and audiovisual result. The lever could be made to vary the pitch and speed of sounds and vision simultaneously or separately, according to software patches and physical switches. As an aside the retractable nature of the aerial was chosen for its ability to pack away quickly and compactly which is a practical necessity of live cinema enabling travelling to and setting up in various venues. At a much greater level of sophistication, Usinagen quite rightly proudly show on their website how their entire set up is beautifully designed and crafted to collapse and pack away into just two suitcases.

Another feature of my midi-vacuum cleaners was the more traditional v-shaped, old tv antennae often referred to as "rabbit ears". These iconic tv era devices were wired up to produce a touch sensitive controller where by grabbing both aerials completed the circuit and intensity of a signal or voltage according to how you held them.. this was most often used to trigger random continually mutating phrases of notes using the Max Msp/Jitter patch

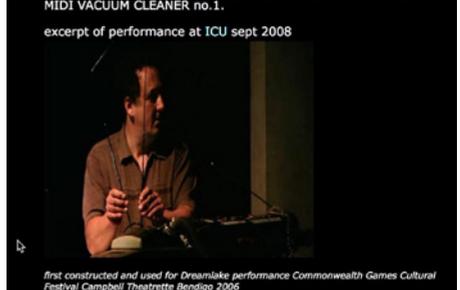


Image 5 - Midi Vacuum Cleaner_Control Surface1 Available from: <http://www.digitalcompost.net> (accessed April 12, 2016).



Image 6 - Hoover Constellation Midi-Vac Photo of the authors work.

The Hoover Constellation or 2nd variant of Midi Vacuum Cleaner did not seem as successful visually and theatrically- being a model of vacuum cleaner from two or three decades earlier, I liked it for its compact

round sphere shape and its model name “the Hoover Constellation” with its associations of novelty of space travel in the late 1960’s early 1970’s but it did not seem so instantly recognizable for **today’s audiences** as it is not **now** something that could be found in any contemporary suburban lounge room.



Image 7 - Hidden Creatures -live cinema as outdoor exhibition multichannel soundscape, kinetic constructions and animation screens hidden in objects and sculptures in a park.

Hidden Creatures has been an ongoing project that panders to my own grandiose ideas of a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk. This project is a participatory live cinema environment, or as I have called it an “audiovisual ecosystem”. This installation is an application of cinematic media to a live setting; the visitors literally have to find their way around and are as much a part of the live cinema as the artworks and audiovisual cinematic elements. Interconnected narratives are formed dynamically through the interactions of natural environment, including a colony of actual fruit bats, 100s of human visitors of all ages, cinematic like multichannel soundscape, **video**, static and mechanically activated kinetic sculptures and animations on screens in sculptural housings.

Obviously this form of live cinema is not easy or quick to set up or transport but I see it as valid and alive as any other form of live cinema, full of further potential and feel that it is great to put screens back into nature rather than the more common opposite approach where nature is appropriated for entertainment on indoor screens.

Most recently for an ongoing Live Cinema project called *Unknown Signal*, I used a fairly quickly assembled collection of junk percussion instruments, from the remains of a digital image scanner, light fittings, and springs. The audio signals from the various contact and electromagnetic microphones placed on these contraptions was used to trigger changes in video clip sequences and effects. This was used for visual and theatrical effect as well, allowing some recognizable human gestures with changes in image and sound live and pre-recorded. Alongside this for reasons of flexibility, compactness and ease of use this was paired with the already easily accessible lap-top computer for many other live video controls in regular off the shelf vj software. The performance version of “Unknown Signal” --- Old Fire Station Bendigo December 6 2015, Attempt to meld documentary and abstract film in a live cinema context. The performance integrated many interests, in **live percussion** which provided a **contrast** with live percussion that affected the visuals.

Most often visual music is associated with purely abstract themes in this project I combined computer based sequencing and triggering of documentary like subtitles on a very specific and complex theme. These subtitles related to the mistreatment, often overlooked value, and the absolute richness of one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world, the first peoples of Australia, Indigenous Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. I was interested in juxtaposing these two usually disparate styles of information and content with the hope that deep and transformative changes in awareness and attitudes might be possible. I am not sure that the work was a success in either visual music context, documentary film or cultural and political awareness but at least one audience member commented to me on the “intensity” of the event and it certainly felt like something that was alive in its not yet fully grown or resolved nature.

Writer Klare Larson summed up my earlier live cinema project *City Symphony Noise Poem* (Fletcher, Paul 2014) with a similar content on the relationship between modern living and an audiovisual intensity of expression.

“It was a striking expanded experience of living in the modern world, the fluctuation and speed of time represented via image and sound. ...An old belt sander grinds out sound particles, a cable tie attached to a fishing line spinner rotates like an old music box, dragged across metal strips that protrude and reverberate on contact,...

Fletcher’s imagery is strangely reminiscent of 50s science fiction, creating a visually spatial language that zones in on ideas around the decomposition of televisual transmission and test patterning, the motion of technology. ...The abstract shapes, hand drawn work and split second movement expose the nature within our psychology, often hidden and always ephemeral. Fletcher composts the digital and in doing so he represents the continuums of everything. With an abstract use of recorded vocal utterance it was uplifting in it’s intensity.”(Lanson, Klare 2014)

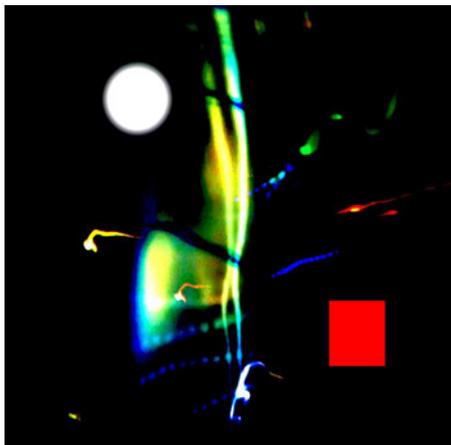


Image 8 - Unknown Signal- still frame from video work Paul Fletcher 2015.

Some of the factors that led me to this playful provocation and questioning of whether live cinema paradoxically is dead were in fact some serious reservations about my own practice in this area. The first doubt is the value and perception of live mixing. I have noticed on many occasions that the live cinema performances that I was most satisfied with were actually watched by many in the audience under the misconception that it was all pre-recorded, carefully edited and always meant to all be exactly the way this particular audience saw it on this particular occasion. The sad reality is that it is often hard enough to get a venue and audience for one of these performances let alone several eg it is not likely to get the same audience to come along to the same work at a different time and place to actually see and prove to them how it might be different each time it is performed. Other doubts are around whether it is a distracting gimmick or an engaging hook to see the vj, or audiovisual artist to be playing the visuals and or audio as if some sort of puppeteer performing a sort of puppet show or simply an audio visual musical instrument performance.

Conclusion

Walter Murch in his 1999 “time travel” article, “A digital cinema of the mind” quotes Francis Ford Coppola’s statement in regard to the direction traditional linear cinema production, “The director is the ringmaster of a circus that is inventing itself”. I guess I would like this process to be actually happening in live cinema experiences. Murch also talks of cinemas ability to integrate the personal and general as he puts it “a kind of mass intimacy”. (Murch, Walter 1999) Again I think live cinema for instance particularly using networked data inputs and distribution as well as simple but direct audience/performer responsive interactions can take this fusing of the personal and the general even further. I am not so completely sold on limiting Cinema to the role of verbal or text based storytelling. The often espoused story of our primeval links and history of verbal storytelling around a campfire, for me downplay the most important parts of these communications- the nonverbal and preverbal. For me the story is at best equal to other performative elements and in some cases, for instance where the story would be already well known, the story is almost secondary to the sensations for instance of the hypnotic effect of flickering campfire flames and the acting of the storyteller and in many older cultures even the storytelling may be associated dancing and singing, in other words music and movement, haptic, kinetic, audiovisual communications. In some cases even collective rituals, naturally induced trance states and even naturally occurring psychotropic augmented or altered states of reality surely supported if not overshadowed the actual content of the story.

Does Live Cinema need to be interactive to be fully alive? What sort of interactivity is a minimum requirement for live-ness? Even the act of watching a linear pre-recorded film is in itself interactive. The design of a Tarkovsky film for instance particularly invites the

viewer to open ended reflection and encourages us to direct our gaze around the frame. However a live performed film can move elements between many different screens or literally move the viewers around a space. Viewers may be encouraged to be participants for instance by physically moving around a large space such as in Greenaway’s installation *the Theatre of History and Magnificence*(Greenaway , Peter 2007) embedded in a two kilometer walk through the restored baroque castle Reggia di Venaria Reale. This is live cinema because it simulates live actors appearing to react to the roving viewer travelling through the spaces. It is live in that the viewer becomes an active agent, if not almost a performer themselves moving through and affecting the installation space of the film in real time. Elaborate live cinema contexts such as this surely increase the potential of cinema to include live interaction and feedback from kinetic, haptic, and audiovisual and mental processes.

Of course not all live cinema is going to have the luxurious budget or palatial architecture of a Baroque castle. Something that never fails to strike me as somewhat frustrating or perhaps is a misguided expectation on my part, is that even when placed in the middle of a music concert an audiovisual performance that includes images even if they are totally abstract, is immediately and often somewhat impatiently interrogated by the audience for specific intended meanings and links. “Unfortunately, we are not used to listening to visuals but rather to watching them attentively, looking for a story.”(Makela, Mia 2006)

It is clear to me that one of the potentials of film especially when placed in a live performative context is that it can reveal and create experiences of process, dynamic meaning and changes of states. Text by its very nature is less suited to creating unfixed and dynamic meanings. Perhaps if I was a better writer and also knew not only my own language but every other language in the world, my use of text might come closer to being flexible enough to create multiple and new meanings on each reading? My very limited experience of Japanese language for instance, has led me to a fascination with words that work poetically rather than mathematically and can have several or indeed usefully vague flexible meanings. The concept of being lost in translation points to the expression of ideas sometimes quite unique to individual languages. This present written communication is in convenient, effective and academically acceptable* English text based form(*perhaps less so in my particular execution!). I wonder if the tyranny of text is a tyranny of text itself? Despite so many advances and discoveries in science and physics of the last 100 years, from quantum physics to understandings of consciousness and the important interaction of subconscious and pre-verbal messages, the tyranny of text appears to me to too easily trap the writer into explanations that ascribe fixed, linear, binary meanings and definitions based on isolating elements from their context in space and time(19th Century Science). Better writers than me have tackled this problem with some success for instance from in “The audiovisual breakthrough”,

the writers inspire with me their written aim to develop "relational and fluid definitions", "describing" rather than defining "the permeable borders of the different categories,"(Carvalho,Ana Lund, Cornelia 2015) For me Live Cinema is a way to attempt to also create relational and fluid descriptions formed from its component elements and in so doing maximise the ascribing of meaning and the understanding of human expression as an ongoing live event. Live Cinema examples even mentioned in this short article have proven to exist in both abstract and narrative styles. For me Live Cinema is the perfect medium to highlight connections between, figuration and abstraction, poetic and factual, narrative and is the most relevant mirror to reflect contemporary understandings of our inner and external worlds.

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