AHRC ICT Methods Network Workshop

FILM, VISUALIZATION, NARRATIVE

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Introduction

This seminar brought together practitioners and theoreticians from information design, filmmaking and computing. The presentations looked at current and possible application of visualization techniques to the writing, realizing and editing of films.

In his introduction to the day Adam Ganz, of Royal Holloway College, posed three questions:

- Why is visualization convincing?
- What do formal visual elements mean in visualization?
- What do film makers learn from this and what do data originators learn from this?

He showed a short animation from *The Inner Life of a Cell* to illustrate what it is possible to visualise given only abstract biological data – and what relation that has to more cinematic ideas of narrative and spectacle. Ganz argued that film is particularly interesting as a focus of study, because as well as being an industrial and aesthetic practice which can be differently approached and understood through visualization, it is itself a form of visualization, which transforms social relationships and events into image-based narrative developing over time.

Session 1: Visualization in Film Practice

In the first of two contributions to the session on Visualization in Film Practice, Stuart Mckie, a doctoral student at Royal Holloway College, attempted to show how screenplay visualization could better assist the screenwriter. His research aims to provide reviews of both the literature on the subject and a critical evaluation of the software available. He argued that the economics of film production skew most of the costs to the latter stages, putting a heavy premium on initial decisions, including those made as part of the screenwriting process. The more you can visualize and analyse the early versions of a script, the more efficient the overall process becomes.

Three programmes illustrate different approaches to the discipline of screenwriting. *Supernotecard* by Mindola (http://www.mindola.com/) employs the analogue index card method for building up plots and storyboards. *Storyview* (http://www.screenplay.com/products/sv/) allows visualization of a structural outline. It can be printed as a poster and give an impression of how the movie breaks down by colour coding of plotlines against a timeline. *Sophocles* (http://www.sophocles.net/) works as a tree browser, expanding and collapsing screen nodes. It offers analytic capability with pie charts (permitting breakdown of day and night scene percentages, bar charts, and potential costs based on analysis of studio filming versus comparatively expensive location shoots. Using its social network mapping function, the user has a diagnostic and analysis tool to show connections and relationships between characters. An example from *Casablanca* breaks down onscreen time as mapped between the characters Renault, Laszlo, Ilsa and Rick.

Discussion raised the question of how useful it would be if everything were digitized – Mckie and colleagues have discussed tag clouds to represent concordance style relationships and using XML to tag free text in scripts. As in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*, might there be a virtue in attending to less information, not more? Visualization can help analysis by counting things, differentiating things, and displaying things, but only if formats and categories are already determined.

In 'Design Documentaries – inspiring design research through documentary film', Bas Raijmakers, who is undertaking a PhD at the Royal College of Art as part of the Design Interactions project, showed how documentary approaches can improve our understanding of design problems. Preferring the description of himself as a 'design ethnographer', Raijmakers showed how film techniques can help where traditional design research – such as direct patient or consumer involvement, or explanatory posters, cannot. For heart patients he developed 'personae' based on experiences of real patients, but adding fictional elements and performance techniques, such as a letter to a relative

read by the 'patient'. In this way, he argued, the issues 'come alive'. Using material such as this design teams are given solid ground for speculation while the technique can help create empathic relationships with users who the team cannot all meet in person. Arguing that multidisciplinary collaboration is more powerful if research process creates a visual, shared reference as a source of inspiration for the whole team, Raijmakers concluded that documentary film's virtue is that it can serve as a conversation, a language, and as reality.

The purpose of film, argued workshop participants, is to 'represent the world of feelings and values', while one of the key analytical disciplines in film studies has long been that of visual anthropology, the analysis of meaning in the visible world. It can be argued that the history of science is essentially a history of visualization. Recently creative disciplines have begun to join multi-disciplinary teams to help enhance understanding of occurrences such as cereal crop genome sequences, and landforms on other planetary bodies or under oceans. As with *Biomapping*, an artist's project promoted by the JISC 3DVisA programme, planners and architects can make use of 3D representation to express the preferences of individuals or groups using buildings or city streets.

Session 2: Story, Space and Time – Linear Data in Nonlinear Environments

The second session of the day was 'Story, Space and Time – Linear Data in Nonlinear Environments'. In his presentation of the *ich-metamorphosen* project Martin Kreysigg, of Harz Mountain University, sought to show how he and his research team have developed a multi-media work using a non-linear form. This work of digital storytelling – or essay-film – puts the viewer at its centre by exploiting seven concepts of mapping in dataspace, resulting in a visual imagery similar to a planetary system. Kreyssig and his colleagues put textual data into the database. The resulting size of the planet reflects the amount of data. The user is always at the centre of the system and the knowledge orbit is around you. The user can also navigate from point to point.

Acknowledging that 'Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power' (Ernest Adam); Kreyssig described the content, based on the theme of artificial life in cinema, literature and life, a theory of associations, tools for navigation using a planetary metaphor, and the mechanics of delivering the results of searches through a unique content management system. Finally, he claimed that TV will in future be presented in non-linear environments, changing the behaviour of the audience, the content of the medium, narrative structures, the relationship of sender and receiver and the medium's entire structure.

In a further, practical, demonstration of the film in non-linear form, the film maker Florian Thalhofer showed how his *small world*, an online project from 1997 about life in a small town in Germany in fifty-four short film stories, can be invoked by the viewer. He developed the database of film clips and its accompanying keyword metadata – the *Korsakov-system* – as a tool to generate different, but equally meaningful, narratives. Thalhofer argued that you don't have to link stories by hand instead it is possible to setup the programming and then make the keywords. Having first turned the Korsakov project into a system he now has 200 projects that are based on it.

In contrast to Kreyssig's position, Michael Punt and Martha Blassnig argued that, far from moving from an analogue and linear sensibility towards one that is digital and non-linear, as artists and as academics we have always been post-digital and non-linear. By focusing on the historical and philosophical contextualization of the issue of 'non-linearity in the digital age' they argued instead that we should critically reflect on all three terms: the constructedness of the concept of 'age', the anticipation of the post-digital condition in the history of technology and ideas, and philosophical discourses underpinning the non-linearity of processes of perception, time and memory in the workings of our consciousness.

Invoking Bergson, they asserted that the fullest dimensions of human consciousness have yet to be restored to us, though indications of the potential have been visible for much of the modern period, from Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* project to the history of cinema itself. By creating an affective relationship between maker, content and audience at the point of contact, cinema demonstrates the potential for shared consciousness which, they noted, is even more central to the development of contemporary multimedia platforms.

Outcomes of General Discussion

In general discussion sessions participants debated issues including: the incentives for creating non-linear/database driven films, whether the audience for *YouTube* and similar websites is building the demand for this kind of filmmaking, and what might be the opportunities that science offers that film has yet to provide. The presentations led

some to question whether it is still true that good content will always have value, and whether, in the light of increased non-linearity, there is any 'replay value' in the kind of work now being made.

Though the discussion sessions came to no certain conclusions, participants from several non-cinema disciplines felt that there were insights that could be applied to their situation, whether that was town planning, public health or design. The impact that new technology is having on film theory and practice was always in view but perhaps because of the participants' backgrounds the impact of filmic thinking on information and communications technologies remained unexamined. The artificiality of visualization is in tension with its claims to truthfulness, yet its undoubted power as an aspect of human mental activity was arguably the most striking outcome of the workshop.