

Virtual Bodies and Screen Actors

Presentation II: lead discussion on Steven Shaviro's essay in relation to *A Scanner Darkly*.

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In this presentation, I shall...

- Address and, in parts, criticise Shaviro's characterisation of Bazin's theory of ontology, indexicality and the myth of total cinema, then and now.
- Discuss the implications rotoscoping has for the subjectivity / objectivity binary, and the symbol / icon / index triad of signification.
- Explore specifically Richard Linklater's use of rotoscoping, and its interplay with narrative in *Waking Life* and *A Scanner Darkly*.
- Refer to other examples of film production, analysis and production-as-analysis that test the frameworks of classical film theory, and question the parameters under which Bazin's myth might be realised.

André Bazin – *What is Cinema?*

- “Myth of total cinema”
 - The ideal driving the evolution of film towards “integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.”
 - Thus, *indexicality* is Bazin’s primary concern, absconding with the “Cartesian or phenomenological subject.” What matters most is the relationship with between the profilmic and film; not the film and the spectator.

Paradox in the Age of Digital Reproduction...

- There are more cameras and screens than ever before, to such an extent that Shaviro argues our everyday life can be considered a form of integral realism, “nothing exists independently of TV, the movies, and the internet.” (contentious?) Thus, reality could be argued to be inextricable from its own re-presentation.
- And yet, the digital medium through which the lion’s share of this re-presentation occurs withers the indexicality of this re-presentation, as photographic manipulation becomes the accepted – expected, even – norm. “There is no longer any ontological distinction between a ‘true’ image and a ‘false’ one.” (p.65)
- However, we should be wary of making too many assumptions regarding Bazin’s feelings about technology of which he was unaware.

- Shaviro, referring to Bazin's description of cinema's preservation of time as being akin to describing the whole filmic experience as Deleuzian time-image, suggests that Bazin's philosophy contradicts Benjamin's assertion that film destroys the aura. (p.66-67)
- I categorically disagree with this statement: in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin refers to the aura as an ideological state of elusive distance, separating painting from spectator. Bazin, at his most poetic, recalls Jean Epstein's ecstatic reflections on *photogénie*. Such discourse is purely focused on the concept of revelation, surely the antithesis to the aura, which has always appeared as a form of intangible obfuscation.

"The click of a shutter produces a photogénie which was previously unknown."

- Jean Epstein, "The Senses I (b)."

A Holy Moment?

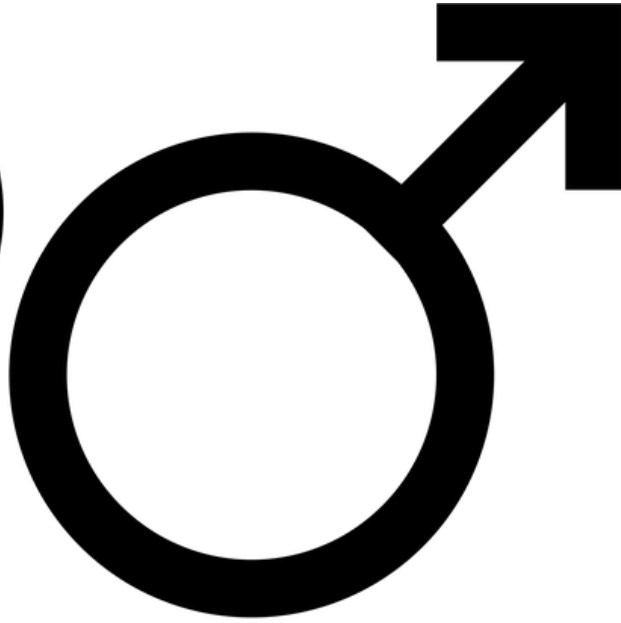
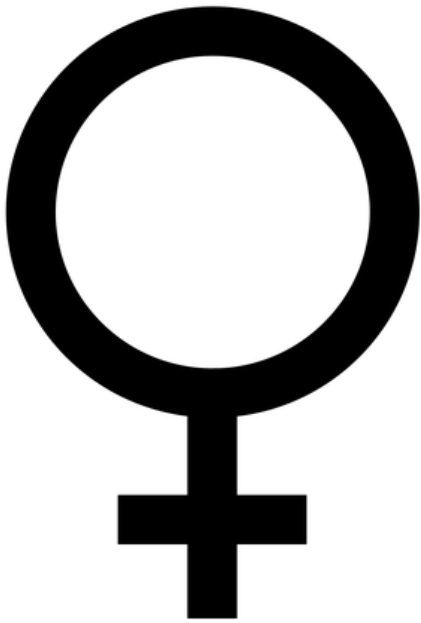
“Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It’s not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament.”

- Jean Epstein, describing a close-up shot of an actor’s face in “Magnification.”

The Duality of the Rotoscope

- One would assume that Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), being "animations," would largely fail to uphold Bazin's desire for integral reality. However, the animation medium complicates matters:

"Rotoscopy is deeply ambiguous, from a Bazinian point of view. It obviously violates 'the objective nature of photography'...but at the same time, rotoscopy is still something of a mimetic process. Through the act of tracing, the image maintains a certain link to reality, despite the subjective impositions of the artist's hand and the arbitrariness of digital code." (p. 69)



Symbol



Icon



Index



???



Waking Life's Icon-Index

- Rotoscoping seems to throw us into a grey zone between iconography and indexicality that problematises any simple understanding of the ontology and realism of the re-presented image.
- When used in a film that blurs realities between sleeping/waking or alive/dead to such a point as to render these distinctions inert, perhaps even the strictest Bazinian can make allowances for such self-conscious artistry:

“Linklater uses these interventions of the artist’s hand in order to suggest a ‘realism’ of dreams – if such a thing is conceivable – supplementing Bazin’s objective realism. That is to say...rather than substituting an expressionistic, subjective point of view for an objective, Bazinian one, the film strives to reach a point where the very alternative between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ becomes meaningless or irrelevant.” (p. 70)

“This, then, is animage: an animated image that is already no longer an image (it is no longer an impression of the world precisely), something conveyed by the privative prefix a. But animage is also, and now more than ever, an image that moves to the beat of animation.

Animation is thus returning to cinema, or rather the contrary: cinema is returning to animation. And it is animation, as a form of cinema in the broad sense, that is rising up as cinema’s primary structuring principle in the digital age. In our view, animation thus represents the path of the future for understanding and apprehending this medium in crisis in the digital age.

- André Gaudreault, “Animage and the New Visual Culture”

A Scanner Darkly

- *A Scanner Darkly* provides us with a dystopian vision of withering subjectivity in a world in which integral realism now includes hallucinations and paranoid fantasy.
- The content and “grim hyper-realis[t]” manner of rotoscoped content, in stark contrast to *Waking Life*, grounds us paradoxically enough in what we are more or less willing to accept as the “real world” in such a way as to show flights of fancy not as not dreams, but nightmares; not liberation, but insanity.

- It appears not to be pure chance (or economics) that *A Scanner Darkly* is relatively star studded (Keanu Reeves, Robert Downey Jr., Winona Ryder, Woody Harrelson) in contrast to *Waking Life*. Rather, it helps the narrative both connect and disconnect to our reality, by both using and distorting the star system, Shaviro argues, to great effect and affect combined.

“Rotoscopy transforms them into manically pulsating and yet strangely hollow doubles of themselves, they are iconic masks behind which there is nothing.

...

Other Substance D addicts suffer full-scale freak-outs; all we get from Arctor is continual, low-grade anxiety and befuddlement. Reeves is a notoriously inexpressive actor; rotoscopic abstraction amplifies this inexpressiveness, as if to turn it into a positive quality.” (p. 71)

- By shifting the medium of Reeves’ performance from image to *animage*, what might have been a frustrating point of alienation is reconfigured into a positive, allegedly otherwise impossible (if purely indexical), “performance.”

Realisation of the Myth?

- Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky's [CinemaScope Trilogy](#), an example of both “found-footage film” and structural materialism, achieves the production of indexical film made, in line with Bazin’s seemingly impossible dream, *without a camera*.
- However, not only is the artist’s hand very much present, the nature of its indexical production limits the “filmed” subject to film itself.
- Recontextualisation of Hollywood scenes and stars by artists like Tscherkassky, Malcolm Le Grice, or Martin Arnold relate directly to the semiological concept of *aberrant decoding* that might be said to occur to a subtler degree in Linklater’s work.
- Much like Shaviro’s commentary on today, in which he characterises the digital age as a fulfillment of integral realism in a manner Bazin would have disliked, or *Waking Life / A Scanner Darkly*’s rotoscoping acting as a newly conceived *animage*, it seems that post-modern play with Bazinian concepts regularly leads us to the conclusion that a binary view of subjectivity / objectivity is no longer enough, if it ever was.

“If Linklater’s rotoscoping is a way of tracing the world in order to recreate it in its own image, then the scramble suit marks the point at which this technology becomes ubiquitous. It has scanned everyone, and captured their images. It voraciously devours all those bodies and faces, mashes them together, and reduces them to simulacra. That’s what it means to maintain some sort of referentiality, or indexical ability, in the digital realm. Whoever copies your image, steals your soul.” (p. 72-3)

- Note the plane of discourse – the “*ne plus ultra*” of rotoscoping – relating to subjectivity / objectivity falling away is connected to the human body, the human skin.

- Discussing *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), Shaviro makes regular reference to the touchability, or lack thereof, of memories and images.
- It, perhaps, should be unsurprising that the alternative to the aforementioned subjectivity/objectivity binary – an “erotic” intersubjective relationship – has routinely been proposed within the discourse of “haptic visuality” – a screen presence that recalls and is concerned more the sense of *touch* than with a clear re-presentation of image.

“Haptic images are erotic in that they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image. The viewer is...called upon to engage with the traces the image leaves

...

[Haptic visuality] tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.”

- Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film*

- Such discourse regarding “illusionistic depth” strikes one as relating directly back to Bazin’s “Ontology,” in which he decried painters’ attempts at realist perspective, and celebrated their liberation from this need, come the advent of indexical photography. Marks, and perhaps both Linklater and Gondry too, suggests that we should be paying more attention to the 2-dimensional quality of film and, in so doing, ideological debates regarding subjectivity and objectivity will give way to something much more Real.
- Paradoxically, in drawing our attention to the reality of the filmic medium, perhaps the animated quality of *A Scanner Darkly* makes it all the more realist.

Discussion questions:

- To what extent can we interpret *A Scanner Darkly*, in form and content both, as a film-as-analysis of digital culture's distortion of the Real?
- Do we receive the actors in *Scanner* and their performances very differently from how we would if this were a live-action film? How about if they were merely voice-acting an animation? Does our reception lean more towards one than the other? Why?
- Does the “look and feel” of the film, as stressed by Shaviro, lend *Scanner* a haptic quality that other films do not always possess?