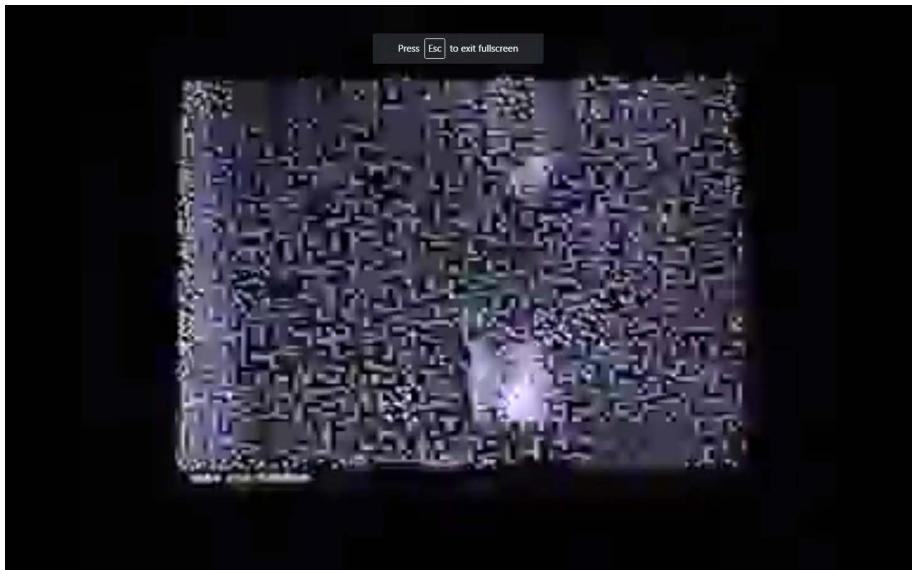




BINARY STRUCTURES: ANNOTATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY AVANT GARDE FILM AND THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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By José Sarmiento Hinojosa

Cinema for me is one big tree with different branches that change. The novel, for example, is a main branch and then different writers come in, so there are changes within that one branch. Similarly, in film there are different branches that come in – video art and video filming – but they are still the art of the moving image. Technologically, filming with video cameras or producing work through computers is like painting using oil or watercolours. These are different varieties but still they're part of what is called painting, part of what are called moving images.

- Jonas Mekas⁰

This text doesn't aspire to cover the history and the whole environment of current and historical practices on digital media and the avant-garde. It is mere a guide with annotations on some contemporary artists working in the medium and a reflection on their practices in the contemporary universe of experimental cinema.

INTRODUCTION

It was Malcolm Le Grieco who talked about the binary universe as a realm of possibilities for experimental cinema. In his 1999 book **Digital Cinema and experimental film – Continuities and Discontinuities**, Le Grieco pinpointed the difficulty of defining digital media as a medium; in fact, the possibilities that the binary system offered for the experimental practices was endless and offered its own characteristics.

In fact, while avant garde cinema used film (celluloid) as a medium for different interventions (Brakhage painted and scratched it, Jacobs performed with it, Gatten used optical printing processes on it), the digital medium offered a different group of "binary artisans" to play with the format in different forms: with image manipulation (glitch), computer intervention, live cinema, software manipulation, etc. The old and new techniques were combined and recreated to form new binary structures, buildings of zeroes and ones that depicted a new branch for exploring cinema: the data¹.

STRUCTURAL FILM AND BINARY DATA

Post-conceptual artist **Cory Archangel** explored different digital artifacts, specially focusing some of his work on the reworking of 8-bit Nintendo videogames. In his **==Super Mario Movie==** (2005), Archaengel re-encoded the Super Mario game for a 15 minute-film, complete with intertitles and audio bits. The result is a dazzling piece of digital malaise, with glitched sections reminiscent of Piet Mondrian's paintings (adapted to the binary era), but also a look into the medium as an alienating agent of the self, much different from the game original intentions.

This execution of an anti-entertainment device, in hand with a complete deconstruction of the original game, gives as a result a somewhat meditative piece on the 8-bit format, almost an oxymoron for what the videogame industry became at that time. **Super Mario Movie** tries to resolve its own

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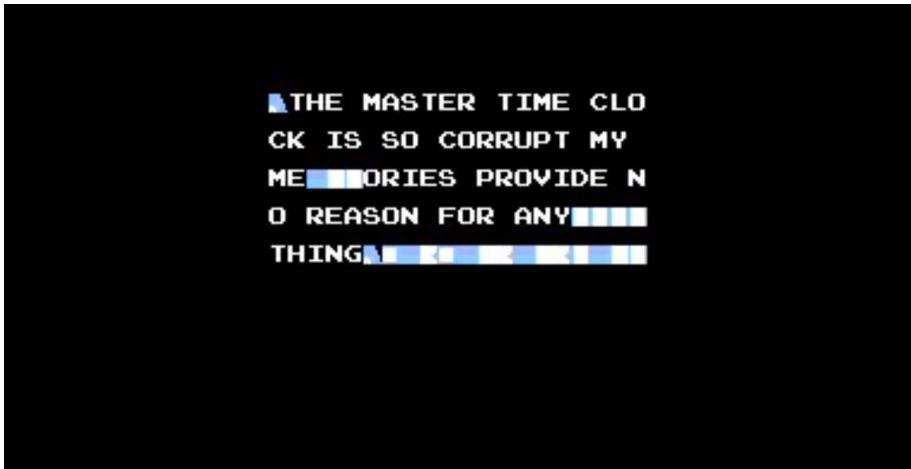
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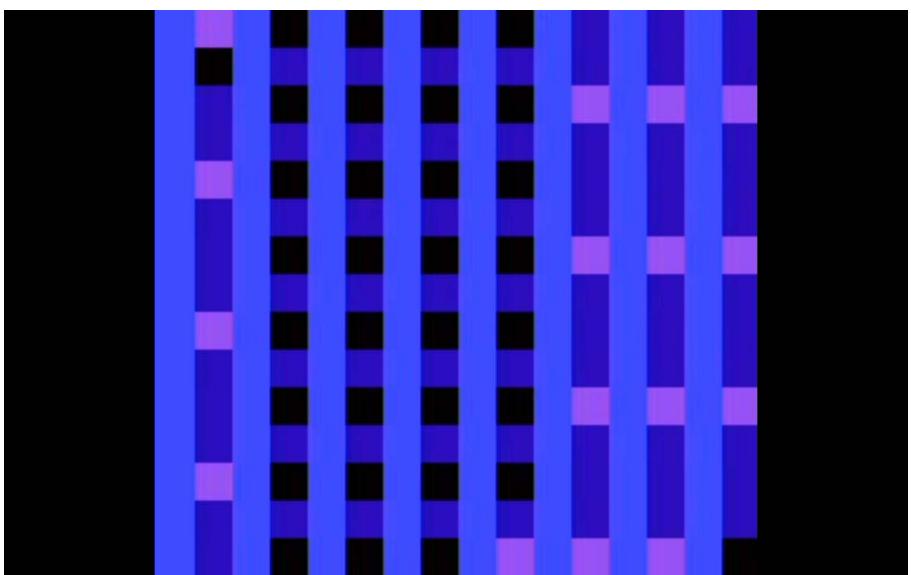
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conflict in its fifteen minute runtime, in a sort of post existential Lynchian labyrinth in which the digital being is confronted to its own digital reality. *The master time clock is so corrupt/my memories provide no/reason for anything.*



Cory Archangel: ===Super Mario Movie== (2005)

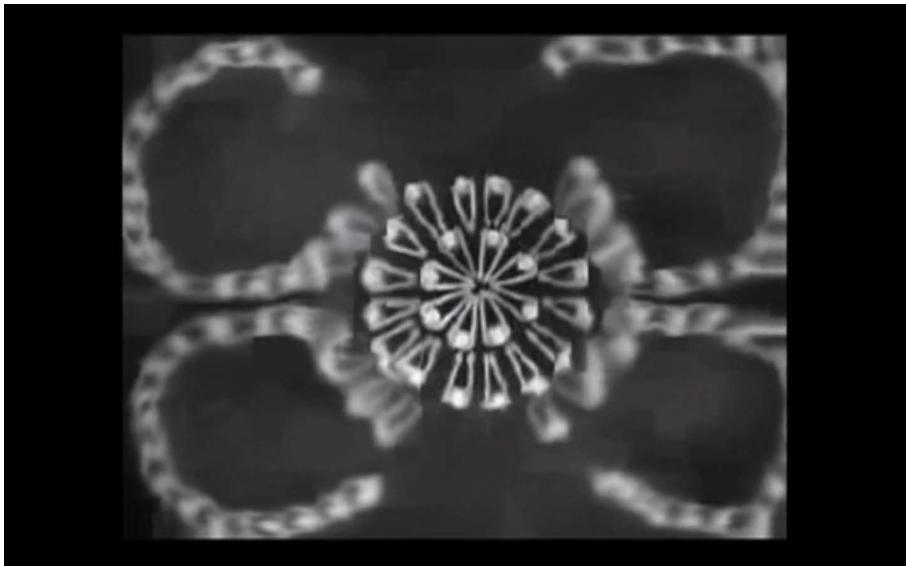


Cory Archangel: ===Super Mario Movie== (2005)

The influence of structural film (predetermined art) was crucial to the development of the format. The Structural Digital Video solely represents the continuation of such practice (Kubelka, Snow, Frampton) towards digital media.² In **Lossless #5** (2008), Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin's worked on the idea of digital video compression to transform the original image into a different living organism. While doing so, **Lossless #5** explores the materiality of digital cinema, which manages to recode the binary in different ways to recreate a new animal. The idea of reconfiguring binary as media, which is at its most simple significance, a set of positive and negative electrical impulses which translate into an ethereal materiality, implies working in a new scenario where the "material" no longer exists; it is replaced by "information". We decode information into materiality and vice-versa, declaring this universe of electrical immanence.

The execution of **Lossless#5** is impeccable: a water-ballet created by choreographer and filmmaker Busby Berkley is compressed into an "organic mitosis", a multicellular organism with a life of its own, transforming itself over and over again within a self-evolutionary process. While compressing the image (which signifies a loss of information from the original data), Baron and Goodwin give birth to a new material, a new media in which the information has been re-encoded to produce a new aesthetic, in something that Buskirk would call "The contingent object of contemporary art"³.

The "Lossless" series, also reassembled images from Maya Deren films, **The Searchers**, and Ernie Gehr's **Serene Velocity**, always recontextualizes its sources into new creatures, new forms of representation, such as Jaqcues Perconte would do with digital images in his "post-impressionist digital art" (although much more reminiscent of practices on the plastic arts).



Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin: "Lossless #5" (2008)

Barbara Lattanzi, in the other hand, worked as a performer and a media artist, meddling in what she called "idiomorphic software", a species of interactive art that took the structural film as a base camp for her video improvisations, installations and other work. Replacing the source material used by artists like Peter Kubelka, Lattanzi deployed her innovative software to configure the "data" and "information" of the programming ventures into "performative" digital art, a realm where the materiality is central and the content peripheral. In her "Optical De-dramatization Engine (O.D.E.) applied in 15-hour cycles to Ma-Xu Weibang's *Yeban gesheng (Song at Midnight)*, 1937" (2009), her software generates a data composition from rendered images of a Shanghai version of **Phantom of the Opera** (1937) to music by Ma-Xu Weibang (Song at Midnight).

In a raging 15-hour cycle of projections, Lattanzi builds an experiment on perception in where the resignification of the image and the construction of new materiality from the software programming configure a brand new "kubelkian" reality, without dispensing from the original dramatic element of the opera. It is drama reconfigured with a structural pathos; the original images and the deconstructed "pixels" come and go in the image, giving a disorienting effect where the material is the recipient of emotion.



Barbara Lattanzi: "Optical De-dramatization Engine (O.D.E.) applied in 15-hour cycles to Ma-Xu Weibang's 'Yeban gesheng' (Song at Midnight), 1937" (2009)

VIDEOART PRACTICES

Sam Taylor-Johnson famous installation **Still Life** (2001) gives a new context in which the dimension of time adds to the old plastic art practice of the still life. Whereas in painting the still life never decays, the postmodern Vanitas practice of digital image provides the element of recurring time and mortality of the image. We see the still life decaying by mold and funguses, a Bic pen and a supermarket peach in the image. It's a reflection and a meditation on death (mortality) and beauty in this new context of post modernism where some things still decay and some do not.



Sam Taylor-Johnson: "Still Life" (2001)

In that same vein, also working in video installation, **Judith Goddard's Time Spent** (her first work on video) dwells on daydream images, what she calls “reveries”, exploiting the quality of duration that film wouldn't provide but video did. What we perceive is precisely the exploration of dwelling in time; a series of meditative images which are relented to extend their duration, something that Jean-Luc Godard had explored extensively in his video essay phase (*Histoires du Cinema*, *Scenario du Film* “Passion”, etc). *I wasn't using film. Video had a particular quality, and there was a particular quality of colour that you could get out of it- it was emanating light- it wasn't projected light.*³



Judith Goddard: Time Spent (1981)

In the short video projection **2 into 1** (1997) **Gillian Wearing** films a mother and two sons, each one lip-synching the words on the other in the image. It is an intense experience to watch two generations exchanging the words of each other; is a perverse little game of mixed identity as well as a game between the spectator, the artist and its subjects⁴.

Since each subject had to learn the other part's dialogue, what we perceive is a roleplay in which empathy, understanding and awareness of the other compete with each individual need of personal expression. It is sinister but also mind boggling, this unnerving set of recitations that comes one after the other: “2 into 1” goes beyond the simple exploration of family and parent control, exchanging identities with the filmmaker subjects, and radically re-signifying the objective practices of documentary cinema in a sort of “anti-documentary” where the complexities of the family apparatus are stripped bare and presented in the same unsettling way in which they are originally created.



Gillian Wearing: "2 into 1" (1997)

POSTDATA

While explorations in digital cinema were made, videoart was in parallel, giving birth to its own language, a language that served from video as a support for cultural commentary of modern times, replacing the structural film initiatives with explorations of time, identity and society, also marrying with some concepts of contemporary cinema.

Here the binary as structure gives place as time as a functioning material.

Notes:

1. Jonas Mekas, "Reflections on avant-garde cinema", BFI, Georgia Korossi, 2013
2. Malcolm Le Grice, "Digital Cinema and experimental film – Continuities and Discontinuities", 1999
3. Avant-garde and experimental cinema: From film to digital – Pedro Daniel da Costa Ferreira, 2013
4. Interview with Judith Goddard – Chris Meigh Andrews, <http://www.meigh-andrews.com/writings/interviews/judith-goddard>
5. Gillian Wearing, interview – Journal of Contemporary Art