

Database Cinema: Greenaway and Vertov

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Although the *database* form may be inherent to new media, countless attempts to create "interactive narratives" testify to our dissatisfaction with the computer in the sole role of an encyclopedia or a catalog of effects. We want new media narratives, and we want these narratives to be different from the narratives we saw or read before. In fact, regardless of how often we repeat in public that the modernist notion of medium specificity ("every medium should develop its own unique language") is obsolete, we do expect computer narratives to showcase new aesthetic possibilities which did not exist before digital computers. In short, we want them to be new media specific. Given the dominance of database in computer software and the key role it plays in the computer-based design process, perhaps we can arrive at new kinds of narrative by focusing our attention on how narrative and database can work together. How can a narrative take into account the fact that its elements are organised in a database? How can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link, search and instantly retrieve it lead to new kinds of narratives?

Peter Greenaway, one of the very few prominent film directors concerned with expanding cinema's language, complained that "the linear pursuit – one story at a time told chronologically – is the standard format of cinema." Pointing out that cinema lags behind modern literature in experimenting with narrative, he asked: "Could it not travel on the road where Joyce, Eliot, Borges and Perec have already arrived?" While Greenaway is right to direct filmmakers to more innovative literary narratives, new media artists working on the database – narrative problem can learn from cinema "as it is." For cinema already exists right in the intersection between database and narrative. We can think of all the material accumulated during shooting forming a database, especially since the shooting schedule usually does not follow the narrative of the film but is determined by production logistics. During editing the editor constructs a film narrative out of this database, creating a unique trajectory through the conceptual space of all possible films which could have been constructed. From this perspective, every filmmaker engages with the database-narrative problem in every film, although only a few have done this self-consciously.

One exception is Greenaway himself. Throughout his career, he has been working on a problem of how to reconcile database and narrative forms. Many of his films progress forward by recounting a list of items, a catalog which does not have any inherent order (for example, different books in Prospero's Books). Working to undermine a linear narrative, Greenaway uses different systems to order his films. He wrote about this approach: "If a numerical, alphabetic color-coding system is employed, it is done deliberately as a device, a construct, to counteract, dilute, augment or compliment the all-pervading obsessive cinema interest in plot, in narrative, in the 'I am now going to tell you a story school of film-making.'" His favorite system is numbers. The sequence of numbers acts as a narrative shell which "convinces" the viewer that she is watching a narrative. In reality the scenes which follow one another are not connected in any logical way. By using numbers, Greenaway "wraps" a minimal narrative around a database. Although Greenaway's database logic was present already in his "avant-garde" films such as *The Falls* (1980), it has also structured his "commercial" films from the beginning. *Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) is centered around twelve drawings being made by the draftsman. They do not form any order; Greenaway emphasizes this by having draftsman to work on a few drawings at once. Eventually, Greenaway's desire to take "cinema out of cinema" led to his work on a series of installations and museum exhibitions in the 1990s. No longer having to conform to the linear medium of film, the elements of a database are spatialized within a museum or even the whole city. This move can be read as the desire to create a database at its most pure form: the set of elements not ordered in any way. If the elements exist in one dimension (time of a film, list on a page), they will be inevitably ordered. So the only way to create a pure database is to spatialise it, distributing the elements in space. This is exactly the path which Greenaway took. Situated in three-dimensional space which does not have an inherent narrative logic, a 1992 installation "100 Objects to Represent the World" in its very title proposes that the world should be understood through a catalog rather than a narrative. At the same time, Greenaway does not abandon

narrative; he continues to investigate how database and narrative can work together. Having presented "100 Objects" as an installation, Greenaway next turned it into an opera set. In the opera, the narrator Thrope uses the objects to conduct Adam and Eve through the whole of human civilization, thus turning a 100 objects into a sequential narrative. In another installation "The Stairs-Munich-Projection" (1995) Greenaway put up a hundred screens – each for one year in the history of cinema – throughout Munich. Again, Greenaway presents us with a spatialised database – but also with a narrative. By walking from one screen to another, one follows cinema's history. The project uses Greenaway's favorite principle of organization by numbers, pushing it to the extreme: the projections on the screens contain no figuration, just numbers. The screens are numbered from 1895 to 1995, one screen for each year of cinema's history. Along with numbers, Greenaway introduces another line of development. Each projection is slightly different in color. The hundred colored squares form an abstract narrative of their own which runs in parallel to the linear narrative of cinema's history. Finally, Greenaway superimposes yet a third narrative by dividing the history of cinema into five sections, each section staged in a different part of the city. The apparent triviality of the basic narrative of the project – one hundred numbers, standing for one hundred years of cinema's history – "neutralizes" the narrative, forcing the viewer to focus on the phenomenon of the projected light itself, which is the actual subject of this project.

Along with Greenaway, Dziga Vertov can be thought of as a major "database filmmaker" of the twentieth century. His *Man with a Movie Camera* is perhaps the most important example of database imagination in modern media art. In one of the key shots repeated few times in the film we see an editing room with a number of shelves used to keep and organize the shot material. The shelves are marked "machines," "club," "the movement of a city," "physical exercise," "an illusionist," and so on. This is the database of the recorded material. The editor – Vertov's wife, Elizaveta Svilova – is shown working with this database: retrieving some reels, returning used reels, adding new ones.

Although I pointed out that film editing in general can be compared to creating a trajectory through a database, in the case of *Man with a Movie Camera* this comparison constitutes the very method of the film. Its subject is the filmmaker's struggle to reveal (social) structure among the multitude of observed phenomena. Its project is a brave attempt at an empirical epistemology which only has one tool – perception. The goal is to decode the world purely through the surfaces visible to the eye (of course, its natural sight enhanced by a movie camera). This is how the film's co-author Mikhail Kaufman describes it:

An ordinary person finds himself in some sort of environment, gets lost amidst the zillions of phenomena, and observes these phenomena from a bad vantage point. He registers one phenomenon very well, registers a second and a third, but has no idea of where they may lead... But the man with a movie camera is infused with the particular thought that he is actually seeing the world for other people. Do you understand? He joins these phenomena with others, from elsewhere, which may not even have been filmed by him. Like a kind of scholar he is able to gather empirical observations in one place and then in another. And that is actually the way in which the world has come to be understood.

Therefore, in contrast to standard film editing which consists in selection and ordering of previously shot material according to a pre-existent script, here the process of relating shots to each other, ordering and reordering them in order to discover the hidden order of the world constitutes the film's method. *Man with a Movie Camera* traverses its database in a particular order to construct an argument. Records drawn from a database and arranged in a particular order become a picture of modern life – but simultaneously an argument about this life, an interpretation of what these images, which we encounter every day, every second, actually mean.

Was this brave attempt successful? The overall structure of the film is quite complex, and on the first glance has little to do with a database. Just as new media objects contain a hierarchy of levels (interface – content; operating system – application; web page – HTML code; high-level programming language – assembly language – machine language), Vertov's film consists of at

least three levels. One level is the story of a cameraman filming material for the film. The second level is the shots of an audience watching the finished film in a movie theater. The third level is this film, which consists from footage recorded in Moscow, Kiev and Riga and is arranged according to a progression of one day: waking up – work – leisure activities. If this third level is a text, the other two can be thought of as its meta-texts. Vertov goes back and forth between the three levels, shifting between the text and its meta-texts: between the production of the film, its reception, and the film itself. But if we focus on the film within the film (i.e., the level of the text) and disregard the special effects used to create many of the shots, we discover almost a linear printout, so to speak, of a database: a number of shots showing machines, followed by a number of shots showing work activities, followed by different shots of leisure, and so on. The paradigm is projected onto syntagm. The result is a banal, mechanical catalog of subjects which one can expect to find in the city of the 1920s: running trams, city beach, movie theaters, factories...

Of course watching *Man with a Movie Camera* is anything but a banal experience. Even after the 1990s during which computer-based image and video-makers systematically exploited every avant-garde device, the original still looks striking. What makes its striking is not its subjects and the associations Vertov tries to establish between them to impose "the communist decoding of the world" but the most amazing catalog of the film techniques contained within it. Fades and superimpositions, freeze-frames, acceleration, split screens, various types of rhythm and intercutting – what film scholar Annette Michelson called "a summation of the resources and techniques of the silent cinema" – and of course, a multitude of unusual, "constructivist" points of view are strung together with such density that the film can't be simply labeled avant-garde. If a "normal" avant-garde film still proposes a coherent language different from the language of mainstream cinema, i.e. a small set of techniques which are repeated, *Man with a Movie Camera* never arrives at anything like a well-defined language. Rather, it proposes an untamed, and apparently endless unwinding of cinematic techniques, or, to use contemporary language, "effects," as cinema's new way of speaking.

Why in the case of Whitney's computer films and music videos are the effects just effects, while in the hands of Vertov they acquire meaning? Because in Vertov's film they are motivated by a particular argument, this being that the new techniques to obtain images and manipulate them, summed up by Vertov in his term "kino-eye," can be used to decode the world. As the film progresses, "straight" footage gives way to manipulated footage; newer techniques appear one after one, reaching a roller coaster intensity by the film's end, a true orgy of cinematography. It is as though Vertov re-stages his discovery of the kino-eye for us. Along with Vertov, we gradually realize the full range of possibilities offered by the camera. Vertov's goal is to seduce us into his way of seeing and thinking, to make us share his excitement, his gradual process of discovery of film's new language. This process of discovery is film's main narrative and it is told through a catalog of discoveries being made. Thus, in the hands of Vertov, a database, this normally static and "objective" form, becomes dynamic and subjective. More importantly, Vertov is able to achieve something which new media designers still have to learn – how to merge database and narrative merge into a new form.