

Artificial Life in Real Time by Bernardo Rondeau

The Video Game reflects nothing. It is a computed, bogus mirror, or rather, to borrow from Maya Deren's *Meshes in the Afternoon*, a mirror-faced, amorphous death angel, though made of digital particles instead of glass and cloth. However, the Video Game continues to be held up next to Cinema like some baby-faced, Hercules-bodied, e-brained astro-boy wonder most likely to grow up and take that old codger's place. A century ago, it was the Cinema, foppish and fresh, who stepped over the Theatre, that boorish, bearded-lady dandy, to conspire with the ancients: Painting (Cyclops. retina weakened by age), Sculpture (giant caterpillar), Literature (listening, sleepless Sphinx) and, new to the court, Photography (monacled proto-android with glued-on waxed-moustache). In middle age, an unwelcome guest (motormouthed, brute adolescent Television) became Cinema's roommate and adopted brother (later dating ladytron librarian Internet, with whom marriage talks continue). But born from a wholly other lineage – vast, incestuous Industry – the Video Game somehow managed an audience with the Arts and its overshadowing entourage – where Cinema, due to its association with Television and the other terminal, pathetic bachelors of the Mass Media, has been ensconced with gray head dyed black and wrinkles surgically smoothed out. A scam artist par excellence, mooching resources and forging cheap counterfeits, the Video Game has stolen his way up the ranks and joined Television, Internet and his brothers in Industry, name changed to Technology, in converting life into a continual marketplace where space and time, among other products, are exchanged through abstract currencies. Cinema should really take this opportunity to survey all the ground lost – slashed and burned, as well – and atone for its multitude sins not the least of which is its capability to be Orpheus looking back at Eurydice without her dying It won't.

The Video Game is the cold waste of our digital world, a traceless erasure. Its perfunctory similarities to Cinema eclipse this fact, of course, passing Video Games off as interactive films. On both counts that is a lie. A Video Game involves interaction only in the sense that whatever combination of buttons a player presses on a controller or keyboard or beats pounded on a faux-bongo or steps taken over an motion-sensitive carpet, is translated into a limited set of phenomena onscreen. It works off of a circumscribed language of movement, an architecture of necessitated codes. A Video Game is hardly read, it is scanned. It is an appliance, or rather an application, not a text. At best it is cinematic but never cinema.

The Video Game is an engine of control. The player, most often referred to as “gamer” as he is dissolved into the virtual topography and reprocessed as some para-persona whether quarterback or intergalactic mercenary, may use his hands seemingly under the guidance of his eyes and ear – routing commands to expedite engagement with the monitor's data – in forging ahead, controlling, his fate in the computerized environment of his choosing. He is ascending levels, finding clues, hoarding points, prolonging “life.” Digitally, he is eternal, free. But in fact, *he* is following orders. Instructed by a manual or onscreen directions, he is using the Video Game as it is has

been designed. Film opens up, a Video Game is closed. The one is a shimmering loop of audio/visual refraction, the other a network of raw data disguised as a moving painting.

The Video Game is work. Or rather, it is a false labor yielding sham leisure. The player passes hours trying to complete the game's designated project – a tennis match, a shootout, a chase – and, as such, escape his true, quotidian tasks. Susan Sontag posited that the most labor-fixated nations – namely, Japan and the United States – yielded avid photographers in part due to the need of these citizens to interject work even in their “off” time, mostly vacations, both by operating their cameras and resulting image-document. As such, both countries may also be now producing the most fervent bloc of gamers. A caste who was wholly internalized the rhythms of work, for whom it is now natural. Their energy directed towards the same mechanisms of productivity, imagination – the ability to write and recode, not merely translate and comprehend -- is corralled and quietly withers away.

The true fraternity between the Video Game and Cinema is solely founded on fiscal matters. Video Game consoles – their names echoing cubicle-like containment: box, station, cube – facilitated the DVD boom of the 1990s in that they became an integrated element of the home entertainment unit or, in most cases, served as an instant version of it. Necessarily plugged into a television monitor, it could output movies, music and, of course, Video Games. In return, Hollywood began producing film versions of Video Games, most often to dismal critical and commercial returns, and, most significantly, began adjusting its narrative rhythms to the action/movement fixation of video game players.

If anything, the latent potential of Video Games to provide an interactive audio/visual event lays in the realm of contemporary arts practices. The Beige collective mines old Nintendo cartridges to produce strange, vivid videoscapes and other forms of hacked-chip art. Markus Popp (aka Oval) constructed Skotodesk, a flayed computer permanently running the artist's custom audio software that, when interfaced by a user, streams an assortment of syncopated sounds based on drag'n'drop shapes. Both Beige and Popp are exemplary of the ongoing, broader electronic arts where video games – in their most literal sense – are being truly played in line with the Avant Garde tradition of exquisite corpses and Conceptualist schemes. These projects allow for genuine attempts at authorless, impermanent texts capable of morphing through a diversity of interactions. Art, the oldest, most genetically-spliced creature in the cultural menagerie, continues to evolve with ease. In its wake, Cinema can in no way benefit – other than by profiting from its own self-destruction – from any assimilation of Video Games. It's best to let the kith and kin of museums, galleries, biennales, journals and contemporary art elsewhere pick apart these ugly, ersatz realities. Cinema has enough to perturb it's second (last?) century as is.

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