

Synthetic Investigations of the Russian Vanguard; Music in Colored Light and Harmonia Mundi; Dance Analogies and "Absolute Rhythm;" The Serial Principle and Transformed Material; The Intermedia Synthesis; Graphic Music; and Plastic Sound.

## FULL MOON

by Michael Light. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, U.S.A., 1999. 244 pp., illus. Trade, \$50.00. ISBN: 0-375-40634-4.

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This book and a number of others have recently come out in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the first landing by humans on the Moon. When President Kennedy announced to the United States Congress on 25 May 1961 the goal of landing a man on the Moon, few people would have expected the derivative benefits. The United States was locked in an apparent struggle with the Soviet Union for mastery of the world. The Soviets had launched the first artificial Earth satellite, the first biological payload and the first human to orbit the Earth. The Soviets had done everything in space first and the American public was reeling from the implications of an orbiting nuclear bomb that would be able to strike any spot on the Earth. The cry heard in the United States was "Our rockets always blow up." President Kennedy faced a public relations disaster, in spite of his secret knowledge that the U.S. atomic and missile arsenal was vastly superior to that of the Soviet Union. Politicians must cater to the public in spite of the facts, and Kennedy needed a space spectacular to put the U.S.A. back on top; what could be more spectacular than a trip to the Moon?

In *Full Moon*, Michael Light takes us on a trip to the Moon in loosely three parts. In Part One, we leave Earth in the mighty Saturn V launch vehicle and spend some time orbiting our home planet. He shares some of the spectacular vistas that are reserved for the select few that have left our Earth. He has chosen to include a few images of space-walking astronauts from the Gemini program. Gemini was a series of space missions designed as technology demonstrators to prove the feasibility of the Apollo program and to provide practice in activities that would be required for a successful journey.

In Part Two, we land on the Moon and explore the desolate landscape. Light has pulled together multiple frames into some spectacular panoramic views of the lunar surface and of the Apollo explorers. In Part Three, we leave the Moon and journey back to Earth for a fiery reentry and landing in the ocean. Light has obviously spent considerable effort in utilizing original negatives from the space program to create gorgeous prints for this book, although some of the images in my copy suffered from minor imperfections in the printing process. I assume this is a legacy of the deep, dark backgrounds in many of the images.

Cosmonauts and astronauts were the first humans to view an Earth where the scale of the planet showed the arbitrary and insignificant nature of political boundaries. This was readily apparent to spacefarers in low Earth orbit, only a few hundred miles above the surface, but the Apollo astronauts were in for a surprise when coming out from behind the Moon to watch an "Earthrise" over the lunar horizon. The photographs of Earthrise became an instant hit with the media and the worldwide public. Never before had so many realized that we live on such a tiny and fragile speck in the universe. And this sense of global unity has given rise to whole new ways of studying the interaction of Earth environments and biospheres.

The United States did "beat" the Russians to the Moon, although the political nature of the Apollo program led to an almost immediate cutback in funds and the eventual cancellation of the project. The human race has only recently begun to return to the Moon with robotic exploration craft to search for water and perform other scientific investigations. The Soviet Union has crumbled, and it is difficult to remember today the urgency felt over the competition in space. Questions remain: Was the space race a waste? Were there no lasting legacies from our trips to the Moon? It will be difficult for humanity to forget the legacy of Apollo—that we all must share this tiny closed ecosystem—at least, until the exploration can continue further out into the solar system.

I feel this book will provide enjoyment for both the space professional and the lay person. Readers previously unfamiliar with the space program will enjoy the spectacular images and the broad assortment of images, and the quality will satisfy the aficionado as well.

## DIGITAL AESTHETICS

by Sean Cubitt. Sage Publications, London, 1998. ISBN: 0-7619-5900-9.

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This book takes up the timely debate in an ongoing discussion of the shifts in the politics of communication and in social structures that result from the global expansion of computer technologies. While much of this debate has focused on digitization in comparison to older forms and practices of communication—stressing the aspects of "before" and "after" the "great divide" of the digital—Cubitt's contribution to this field is an investigation into the "History of Flow." Cubitt starts with the literal meaning of information flow, including histories of plumbing, water and telephone networks, and then frames the range of tasks that digital arts should perform, utilizing the metaphors and rhetorics of flow, the concern with in-between spaces and, in particular, the emphasis on *becoming*, in terms of the "not-yet." More precisely, he argues that the role of aesthetics should be to address through difference the problems of standardization and convergence in homogenizing cultural systems. Cubitt thus discusses the history and concept of flow against the background of the principle of universalization that he, in agreement with Habermas, describes as the overriding structure in networked society.

If, as the author points out, digital arts should play the leading role in developing alternatives to "information as one-way flow" (p. 131), only then will "digital aesthetics emerge from under the shadows of corporate culture" (p. 149). It is then the artist who will develop open-ended structures and engage in communication (meaning relationship and exchange) in a vivid dialogue instead of closure. From the examples Cubitt gives in the book—among them artists such as Miroslav Rogala, Bill Seaman, Masaki Fujihata and Char Davis—we may conclude that, for example, bricolage art would escape the one-way structure named "coherence" and rather express the specific fluidity that Cubitt convincingly describes as the necessary condition to counter the dominant drives in "globalising culture" (p. 59).

The major concern of this book is to

point out cultural counter-strategies that would in particular enable the artist—more precisely, the artist who deliberately works like an “amateur” and strategically operates in the Net like a partisan (that is, anonymously and in small groups)—to uphold a diasporan standpoint towards communication structures that, in principle, govern global community and expert cultures.

These two phenomena, globalization and expert systems, are two sides of the same coin, as the book, in agreement with recent social and cultural theory, tells us. While netculture provides a striking example of global communication, Cubitt explains that it not only requires a universal language system, but fundamentally relies upon the subordination of knowledge to power so that we have to face a “fully administrable knowledge world: the expert system” (p. 12). Where the author clearly names the cultural and technological preconditions that allow individuals to access global communication, his argumentation points out that, even in the early days of public reading and libraries, access to knowledge has always been the object of colonializing and universalizing forces. The sociologist Richard Sennett, in his recent study of the “corrosion of character,” talks about the resulting effects of this trend. Both Cubitt and Sennett, in their analyses of shifting power structures, conclude that the interrelation between the global scale and the emergence of a new type of expert result in the same effects that most efficiently maintain the expansion of global capitalism. What Sennett calls the “paradox of flexibility,” which means that specialization has itself become a flexible category and goes hand in hand with the “concentration without centralization of power,” finds a parallel in Cubitt’s diagnosis of universalization where “coherence is a mark of the corporate” (p. 151).

Consequently, Cubitt’s critical reading of the effects of “globalization” is closely connected to the question of how alternative practices of “digital aesthetics” would offer us ways of disturbing, disrupting and opposing the coherence on a global scale. *Digital Aesthetics* approaches this task in five different stages. The first chapter points out the subversive powers of the private, more precisely the “intimate reading” against the ordering of knowledge—first in library systems and later in computer icons. Cubitt explains with great lucidity how the connected history of the

two “modes of reading” would later result in interwoven spheres that are inherited in universal Net languages. What becomes clear is that in fact the political questions of subversion, opposition and utopianism have only slightly changed today, but what has changed is the dimensionality.

In the second chapter, Cubitt discusses the issue of realism as inscribed into the use of maps, and then defines the map as “the art form of realism” in contrast to the perspective projection, which he sees “as pure special effect” (p. 78). Consequently, on the one hand the map becomes the bearer of the realistic principle and forms the paradigm of universal knowledge through the accuracy of cartography (in particular, when the map represents the territory 1:1). But on the other hand, as Cubitt argues in the following chapter on “Spatial Effects,” the special effects that occur in perspective and cinema are basically “spatial effects” and as such they become part of the “history of flow” and point towards the transgression of fixity in the “endless dataspace.”

It is in this context that the centrality of the film medium is explained, along with the shifting function of space. Starting from the assumption that, according to Christian Metz, “all cinema is special effect,” Cubitt refers to Vivan Sobchack’s argument that science-fiction film constitutes the paradigm of cinematic space that encompasses the setting of an outside and the “other” as well as the transgression of frontier. As Sobchack says, where space is the final frontier, it is in particular the computer-modeled dataspace that pushes the (mobile) frontier even further. And finally, when space becomes open-ended, the challenge of the artist is to “meander” through space, a space that is always “foreign” and cannot be fully colonized. Surely this is the point, where Cubitt identifies the utopian quality of “digital aesthetics.” It is in the meanderings of dialogue where he sees the chance for “diasporan cultures” to escape universalized languages and the mark of coherence.

Of the last two chapters, one applies the concept of “fluid becomes” to the spheres of sound and hearing, while the other expands on convergence in the history of mailing and highlights mail as the model of a global network. Here, Cubitt underlines the two major theses of the book: first, that the new spatial-oriented arts will be global; and second, that only in diasporan cultures

lies a chance to counter the coherence of globalizing culture on the grounds of “the becoming of what is not-yet.”

The critical reader of *Digital Aesthetics* may, on the one hand, find the tone of the book too utopian—not always avoiding the trap of mere optimism—and on the other hand, may be disappointed with the vagueness of Cubitt’s outline of aesthetic practices. I will argue that this is exactly what defines the strength of the book. We should not be surprised that a study of the modes of alternative cultures to some extent engages in the matter itself and performs ways to meander through discourse.

Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the author draws a cunning line between critique and theory. Just as the argument of the book stands for loose connections and destabilizing practices, the critical approach avoids fixity and methodology. It works with a set of methods that not only interrelate diverse discourses, but furthermore communicate the ways of these interrelationships. To conclude: the engagement with incoherence is reflected in the necessary open-endedness of the book. Cubitt, also the author of two other books, *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (Routledge: London and New York, 1991) and *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1993), has written a clever book of flow.

## THE VERSATILE WORLD OF KANDINSKY

compiled by N.B. Avtonomova, D.V. Sarabyanov and V.S. Turchin. Nauka, Moscow, Russia, 1998. 208 pp. ISBN: 5-02-011684-X (in Russian).

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This book is a collection of materials presented at an international conference in Russia that was devoted to the creativity of Wassily Kandinsky. The conference, held in Tretyakovskaya Gallery in Moscow in December 1994, was the first Kandinsky exhibition of such a scale in Russia. The creative heritage of the avant-garde artist was discussed from many points of view, as one might expect, given the versatility of Kandinsky’s creativity. Kandinsky, as a painter, graphic artist, theoretician, poet and playwright, attracted the attention of art historians, philosophers, literary critics, psychologists, theater critics and musicologists. The result of