

# Re-Writing the History of Media Art: From Personal Cinema to Artistic Collaboration

*Ryszard W. Kluszczynski*

**T**he transformation of modern communication technologies and linear text structures characteristic of film work (along with all time-based arts) into interactive multimedia structures has not only transformed the present state of the art film but has also made us look anew into the history of film—made us understand, categorize and value it differently. Once again it has turned out that no historical narrative is by any means a final version of the past, defined once and forever. History is rather a manifestation of our perception and understanding of the past through the present; it is a product of changing philosophical and methodological approaches, cultural strategies and deconstructive and reconstructive strategies. History is continuously written from scratch. We can easily find examples of such processes of reinterpretation of historical phenomena. In his theoretical writing, Sergey Eisenstein analyzed Pushkin and Dickens's literary works to present his own reading thereof from the perspective of his film-editing and film-construction ideas. In this procedure he followed the Russian Formal School, another exemplar of such a strategy, whose representatives eagerly displayed new methods of analysis of literary work, which they worked out in studying avant-garde poetry, applying Futurism and Constructivism to the literary canon and suggesting new readings, incompatible with the previous ones.

These practices ought not to be confused with the kind of interest in the past defined as archaeology. The archaeology of media and multimedia art looks for the roots of contemporary practices through an analysis of pioneer phenomena: the apparatus, techniques and concepts or poetics that helped to shape the recent appearances. Archaeology aims at better understanding of the present through analysis of its bases and genesis. It is also a manifestation of a desire to discover in the past those structures and processes that remain significant factors today, despite the fact that they often defy our observation and identification. Studies of archaeology serve the present. Nonetheless, one unavoidable, although not necessarily desired, side effect of an archaeological perspective is the transformation of the past itself through new interpretations and emphases of aspects different from those previously privileged. Furthermore, although general frames of perception of past events and structures do not always change, the same events and structures often acquire new shapes and senses. In this sense the archaeological perspective enforces the effect provided with the sort of historical intertextual

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interpretation that I apply in this essay with the aim of interpreting historical events armored with the knowledge, conventions and beliefs of today, immersed in modern attitudes and approaches, full of desires stirred by recent events and processes.

To make the character of the above study strategies visible, let us have a closer look at the history of avant-garde film in a manner marked by the conceptual and practical development of multimedia art and interactive cinema. Structural film provides an extremely interesting case for our purposes. The concept and practice of avant-garde collective work is another issue to discuss.

## THE REINVENTION OF STRUCTURAL FILM

Describing structural film from the perspective of the 1970s, one could say that the artistic and art-theoretical context of structural film, where it is completely in accord with the tendencies of the art of the time, is co-determined by three movements: abstract expressionism, minimal art and conceptualism. The first emphasized the material dimension of the work of art and revealed its processes of creation (thus promoting anti-subjectivism); the second demoted complex construction in favor of ascetic simplicity; the third brought a maximally analytic approach to creative possibilities implicit in the artistic medium and attempted to transform art into its own consciousness. From the perspective of the 2000s, however, and seen through the prism of hypermedia, structural film takes on a slightly different form, gathering and intensifying far-flung influences.

Film experiments undertaken in the historical avant-garde period did not undermine two dogmas of traditional art: the rule of permanence and formal stability and the rule of the subjective character of the work. Avant-garde films created at that time had a permanent formal structure endowed by their author. The structural permanence and durability of the film work allowed for its multiple presentation in the same, unchanged form, as well as making collecting films possible. The works remained expressions of their authors' philosophy of art (and sometimes of life) and showed qualities of their individual poetics.

Both structural integrity and durability, held over from pre-

## ABSTRACT

The author reinterprets the artistic phenomena that composed historical avant-garde art. His method of interpretation is an intertextual strategy that approaches the historical artifacts through recent phenomena. The first case study is of structural film; its most important attributes appear to be artistic strategies questioning the structural/material integrity, durability and permanence of the film work. The second case study is of the avant-garde strategy of collective work, reinterpreted through the open-source work and interactive art of today. The author identifies three steps in the development of the 20th-century concept of joint creative work: avant-garde general strategies of artistic collaboration; avant-garde film works oriented toward creative collectivism; and collaborative artistic practices that manifest themselves in non-hierarchical strategies of contemporary interactive art.

vious artistic dogmas, along with the attributes and rules of film creativity connected to them, were questioned and subsequently left behind by the artists forming the structural tendency. From the late 1950s and early 1960s, and developing rapidly during the two following decades [1–3], the structural film movement shattered the continuity that until then had unified the history of avant-garde film. Thanks to them a new attitude in artists' film was shaped in anticipation of and contributing conceptually to interactive, multi-media cyberculture art and interactive cinema.

Like expanded cinema [4], structural film questioned the formerly accepted conditions of art, undermined its axioms, transcended existing limitations and questioned the nature of film as art and as a medium, in order finally to turn all those questions toward the recipient-participant of the art events so as to make him or her a vital, even indispensable artist's collaborator. It is because of these shared attributes of the phenomena of structural film and expanded cinema and their tendency to transgress all borders that I combine them under the umbrella term of transgressive cinema.

The practices gathered together under the heading of transgressive cinema that led toward the configuration of contemporary interactive multimedia art were manifested through deconstruction, problematizing, transformation, transgression and negation of the rules of permanence and durability of the work and its subjective character. Advancing these principles of transgressive cinema opened the way for recipients to take on the status of coauthors of the work and gave to the work itself the capacity to become the context of creative receptive interactions. The ensuing dispersal of the rules of permanence and durability in the field of complex, multidirectional communication processes informs present-day artistic creativity as it transforms into such processes, essential to interactive multimedia art, and to the whole of cyberculture.

Deconstruction of the prevailing expressiveness, permanence and durability of the artwork took various forms in the 1960s and 1970s. Among these practices, the abandonment of filming as a basic method of producing a film may be recalled. It was replaced by direct work on celluloid or by using other people's ready-made material for one's work (found-footage film).

Other deconstructive methods were shaping new projection strategies: projecting the film (or more than one film)

on more than one screen simultaneously, looping, introducing performance actions into screenings and combining film projection with slide projections, music concerts, dance spectacles, etc. [5]. Such actions led to effective erosion of the hitherto obligatory frames and boundaries of film work, and in the latter cases they might also deprive it of the authorship previously characteristic of avant-garde cinema. I should add that some of these works were still highly authored (however, in many cases their authorial character was found not in the film structure but the structure of film presentation; the way the film was presented to the viewer became the work of art) or demanded the presence of the author in the structure of the event (e.g. Malcolm Le Grice's *Horror Film*).

The introduction into the scope of the film work of elements previously omitted from artistic practice turned out to be no less effective in deconstructing the work. Activating unexploited aspects hidden in the space between the frame of the film-strip and the frame of the screen, for example by introducing frame borders, perforations or other material features of celluloid film into the scope of vision as artistically valuable elements of film as screen phenomenon (in accord with Paul Sharit's conception of the ontological dualism of the film work [6]) shifted the focus from the permanent film form to the process of reflection on the film medium.

The artistic character of a film work and its durability and status as a work of art were undergoing a kind of demontage through the introduction of amateur cinema equipment—the unsophisticated 8mm and Super 8mm cameras—and methods of work characteristic of amateur film: in-camera editing, lack of sound, lack of special effects and choice of subject matter (family life, personally meaningful landscapes).

Two methods proved especially effective in depriving the film work of its durability and stability.

Random choices in all the existential aspects of the production, in the final film structure and in the projection process, made clearly visible the relative character of every element of the work, emphasizing and underlining the open nature of its form. At each screening, the author of the film could make different decisions regarding the duration of the work, the number of projectors used, the speed of projection, the character of filters, the positioning of projectors and so on. In such cases, authorship of the film, taking into account its lack of permanent projected film structure, should be dis-

cussed differently (on the basis of the film score or film presentation).

The questioning of the subjective permanence of the film as celluloid material print was combined with a number of contemporary art strategies to transform the film into the object of frequent or even permanent transformations, so that subsequent presentations of the film were in fact presentations of a new and different film each time. This could be achieved in the simplest of ways—through editing and taking from or adding to the material. Submitting the film to atmospheric conditions, or modifying it with various bacterial and chemical processes initiated by the artists, could achieve the same goal. The most interesting experiments took the form of specific filmic installations or performances in which films were looped and doused in chemical substances to extract the silver from the film emulsion, so that hitherto subjectively organized film (celluloid) became objectively fluid, in a process in which images shown at the beginning of the projections gradually disintegrated (e.g. works by Juergen Reble).

Many of these methods, which deprived the film work of its durability and structural permanence and equally deprived it of its subjective form, in many cases simultaneously weakened or even destroyed its objective character, subduing it to deconstruction concretized in various ways. Random choices, chemical or bacterial processes and other techniques transformed the film into a relatively autonomous, self-presenting object and process. The personality of the artist became merely one of multiple factors (or even an initiating factor only) affecting the form (or structure) of the film. Thus the avant-garde film entered a period in which the author's link to his or her product was challenged. Paradoxically, this depersonalizing of artistic strategies could also produce highly subjective features in the resulting films, uniquely identified with the author's name, as is the case with Stan Brakhage's films.

## FOCUS ON BRAKHAGE

Brakhage's art is an especially interesting object for analysis of the processes of depersonalization in film work, because Brakhage is widely perceived as the most important representative of personal, poetic or lyrical cinema. In his case it is especially challenging to show how the processes of making the work less definite and less personalized produce the ap-

parently contradictory result of a precise personal expression.

Hailed as the quintessence of lyric and formal film for obvious reasons, Brakhage's art anticipated structural cinema by pointing to the material aspect of film through direct work on the print and through subordination of representation to technique (use of filters and anamorphic lenses, deforming the image; overlaying the images by multiple exposure; slow motion; etc.). As a result, many of Brakhage's films became acts of "pure" (subjectless) vision. Experiments with direct shaping of the print (non-camera work) and the practice of releasing the camera from any human control (quite often even from the control of the eye) appeared the most important features of his oeuvre. The camera (if used), in constant motion characterized by dynamic movement along unexpected paths, expressed both the artist's temper and the vitality of the medium.

Although Sitney [7] believes these characteristics are sufficient to proclaim Brakhage one of the pioneers (or even protagonists) of structural film, I maintain that the main reason for such an evaluation of his art lies not at all in the repertoire of strategies used, however interesting they are. The principal justification for relating Brakhage to the structural tendency is his adaptation to film of the concept of *objectism*, first proposed by the American poet Charles Ol-

son. Olson [8], and later Brakhage, while rejecting imagination in favor of direct perception, aimed at reintegration of human and external reality [9–10]. In Brakhage's opinion, film was the perfect medium for the meeting of psychological and physical elements. The idea of the untutored eye [11], free of the learned constraints of familiar techniques and cultural conventions, also contributed to this objective. In his mature work, Brakhage consistently tried to reject any participation of his consciousness in the processes of creation of visuality and left out the conventional methods of portrayal of space by the illusion of perspective, as well as abandoning the rules of image ordering through cause-effect

1. the phenomenological external world;
2. the optical—biological and mechanical—apparatus;
3. the psychical universe, including both the physical brain and its processes of memory, imagination, dreams and capacity to generate visions in a closed eye.

Brakhage attempted to unite these spheres in one [12]. From Brakhage's perspective, this unification is not a conclusive process terminating in the artist's work: It occurs every time the film is subjected to the recipient's perception. This unification, the particular syntheses of the individual, the external world and the hybrid, optic interface connecting them, might then be said to become the perceptive and creative experience of each viewer.

Stan Brakhage and his art maintain an exceptional status in contemporary art and avant-garde film history. This is because, remaining in conflict with the character and boundaries of the medium, it builds a bridge between the modernist art of the Author and the post-

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modernist art of the Recipient, the art of co-created reception. It is one of the most interesting examples of artistic inventiveness in the visual arts of the 20th century, demonstrating the process's liberation of the artwork from both conventional artistic and perceptive conditioning and from the influence of the artist's ego, philosophy of life, etc. From today's point of view, Brakhage's film art appears as a still imperfect but nonetheless extremely important experiment in the possibility of experiencing other people's artwork in an extremely subjective way, as an attempt to provide the viewer with the material for the individual and creative experience of visual perception.

Another interesting example is Zbig Rybczynski's works, particularly his film *New Book* (1975), in which the image and screen are divided into nine sections. The action takes place simultaneously in all those sections; due to their spatiotemporal correlation, events transfer from one section of the screen to another as the action develops. It might seem that the viewer should follow all sections of the screen simultaneously and observe the relations between all the actions as they develop. This is how the classical reception of linear textual structures—film among them—is expected to work. The practical impossibility of such a perception makes us aware that *New Book* (and in a way another film by this artist, *Tango* [1980] [13]) conceptually belongs to the impending era of hypermedia [14]. An interactive CD-ROM by Christopher Hales entitled *Bliss* (1998), repeating Rybczynski's concept from *New Book* as interactive artwork, is a convincing proof.

## RYBCZYNSKI: FROM FILM TO HYPERMEDIA

Another interesting example is Zbig Rybczynski's works, particularly his film *New Book* (1975), in which the image and screen are divided into nine sections. The action takes place simultaneously in all those sections; due to their spatiotemporal correlation, events transfer from one section of the screen to another as the action develops. It might seem that the viewer should follow all sections of the screen simultaneously and observe the relations between all the actions as they develop. This is how the classical reception of linear textual structures—film among them—is expected to work. The practical impossibility of such a perception makes us aware that *New Book* (and in a way another film by this artist, *Tango* [1980] [13]) conceptually belongs to the impending era of hypermedia [14]. An interactive CD-ROM by Christopher Hales entitled *Bliss* (1998), repeating Rybczynski's concept from *New Book* as interactive artwork, is a convincing proof.

## INTERACTIVE COLLABORATION, COMMON EXPERIENCE

Collaboration, participation and community are currently becoming the central categories of reflection on art, culture and social organization. With the rapid development of interactive art, virtual social spaces, cyberculture and the network society, the notions of individualism, subjectivity and individual identity no longer seem sufficient to describe the tendencies that define the nature of contemporary art; they no longer seem to harmonize with the rhythms of the present.

These transformations of cognitive paradigms are visible in media, multimedia and hypermedia art, which foreground issues of communication, locating them in the context of network order. The notion of collective intelligence described by Pierre Lévy [15], or the concept of a networked cyborg (a network of distributed technocorporeality) presented by Stelarc [16], may exemplify the founding theories of the immense diversity of contemporary media and multimedia artistic practices. In this field, above all, the notions of artistic communities and collaborative artistic practices assume particularly intriguing and valuable forms.

To come closer to the character of recent collaborative artistic practices, let us consider, for example, two prize-winning

works from the 2005 Ars Electronica festival in Linz (the list of other possible examples is theoretically endless if we assume that each digital product is open to modification) [17].

In the category of Net Vision, the Golden Nica was given to a work entitled *Processing*, whose authors, Ben Fry and Casey Reas, pointed to the work's numerous network users as co-authors, considering themselves merely initiators.

*Processing* is

a programming language and environment built for the electronic arts community. It was created to teach fundamentals of computer programming within a visual context and to serve as a software sketchbook. . . . Processing.org is the online hub for the international community of people using the software [18].

The striking qualities of this work are the wide scope of its collaborative character and—more importantly—the obliteration of the difference between traditionally construed artist-authors and recipient-users. On the open-source project platform where *Processing* can be located, such distinctions are no longer feasible: The hierarchy of authors responsible for particular projects is not primary, but reflects each author's contribution to date, which is thus temporary; future development of the work may change or invert the hierarchy.

Among the works recognized at Linz in the category of Interactive Art was the installation *Intimate Transactions* (2003–2004), authored by Transmute Collective (Keith Armstrong, Lisa O'Neill and Guy Webster). The authorial commentary was as follows (emphasis added):

*Intimate Transactions* . . . allows two people in separate spaces to interact simultaneously using their bodies. . . . This shared experience allows each participant to gradually develop a form of sensory intimacy with the other. As this highly immersive experience evolves, each participant begins to sense their part in a complex web of relations that connect them, and everything else within the work. In this way a subtle, indirect form of *collaboration* develops via an increasing sense of intimacy between sites [19].

On the one hand, the collaborative dimension indicates the influence that the multimedia character of contemporary art has had on this particular work—the collectivity of the creative process reflects the diversity of artistic practices and their attendant competences (technology, programming, hardware, choreography, music, etc.). On the other hand, it demonstrates how art's interactivity

opens a new dimension of creative collaboration. No separation of the authorial from the recipient sphere occurs, nor is the difference between the role of the artist and recipient obliterated. Instead, we witness the emergence of a new plane of creation, complementing and expanding the domain of endeavors undertaken by artists—until now the sole creators of art—to include the domain

teractive art, one cannot but notice how incredibly restricted their scope was in comparison to the contemporary forms. To illustrate this remark, I wish to offer a necessarily brief look at the collaborative character of artistic endeavors undertaken by the 20th-century avant-garde.

I have chosen this example for a reason. After all, one of the defining qualities of the avant-garde, indicated by

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of creative recipients. Interactivity transforms those heretofore restricted to receiving art into coauthors of artworks: They may become co-creators of software or hardware, or providers of material to be organized into a hypertextual database determining the audiovisual content of particular realizations, and they are always designers of their own experiences of the work.

Their dissimilarity notwithstanding, both *Processing* and *Intimate Transactions* illustrate how the idea of artistic collaboration is currently being transformed, chiefly as a result of interactive digital technologies. Contemporary multimedia collaborative artistic practices, in contrast to traditional forms of creative cooperation, go beyond mere integration of various spheres of art and combination of activities traditionally identified as artistic with the area of scientific and technological endeavor (the current rapid increase in the latter process can be considered *signum temporis*). What differentiates the collaborative artistic practices of today from those undertaken in the past is primarily an increase in the range of their occurrence, connected with questioning traditional models of artistic communication, rejecting the previous system of roles involved in that process, as well as establishing a new community that integrates artists and audience into a single collective that participates actively in the processes of creation.

### COOPERATION AS AVANT-GARDE STRATEGY

Viewing the history of collaborative artistic practices through a lens of recent in-

numerous researchers of this artistic-social formation, is the proclivity for establishing groups and collective creation. This characteristic can be found in the programs and practices of such disparate avant-garde groups as the German Expressionists, the Futurists, the Dadaists and the Surrealists, as well as in the ranks of the Russian, Czech and Hungarian avant-gardes having decidedly political attitudes, such as the Productivists and the Constructivists. One could conclude that the artistic avant-garde is a phenomenon founded on the idea of artistic collaboration. Nevertheless, once we take a closer look at the forms that this idea assumes in particular avant-garde activities (I refer mainly to the historical avant-garde of the first part of the 20th century), we observe that—the most extreme cases excepted—this cooperation was of a strategic-programmatic nature and did not manifest its presence in the field of actual artistic work. It appears that at the heart of the cooperation lay a desire to form a kind of shield to protect avant-garde artists against the power of traditional art institutions. In most cases, avant-garde artists established communities within which they usually worked as individuals. There existed avant-garde artistic communities that met very rarely, communicating mostly by post. Another reason for creating avant-garde groups was a wish to emphasize a shared program and common artistic practices while simultaneously opposing and negating traditional concepts of art. This created an opportunity to pinpoint the ethical dimension of artistic collectivism. However, what we would consider the pivotal aspect of creative collaboration,

joint work, appears to be a rare and less significant attribute of avant-garde cooperation.

The situation can be seen in a slightly different light if we shift our focus to the historical avant-garde films produced in the period roughly between 1910 and 1935. Here, examples of motion pictures resulting from real cooperation between multiple artists abound. Undoubtedly, the collective character of cinematic endeavors played an important role here, but we ought to bear in mind that it was precisely avant-garde film artists who subsequently championed the type of motion picture work in which creative individualism was considered a central characteristic.

Nonetheless, even the instances of actual collective avant-garde work in the field of cinema indicate its limitations. Lev Kuleshov, one of the foremost creators of the 1920s Russian cinematic avant-garde, set forth the following principles that were to guide the creative work on the 1924 film entitled *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of Bolsheviks* (it is worthwhile to note that among the artist's works this film is the most oriented toward creative collectivism):

In working on *West*, we developed a very interesting semi-rehearsal method . . . I went to the shooting set and rehearsals of *West* as the "chief observer" or "chief-in-command" while Pudovkin, Khokhlova, Obolensky, Komarov and Podobed created sets with various decorations. Each of them separately rehearsed in the course of a day or two their assigned part of a scene or an entire scene. I went from one set to another in the studio and observed how these rehearsals progressed, and directed the work. To their most minute detail, all the scenes were staged in this manner by various people, various co-directors, various assistants, but solely under my direction. In this fashion, already with *Mr. West*, the rehearsal method was applied, but the entire work was not rehearsed in advance—rather, individual scenes were [20].

The circumstances surrounding filming of *The Death Ray* (1925) were similar. Kuleshov described its production strategy in the following way: "During the period of the *Death Ray* we had continued to work this way in a directorial collective. I was the head director, while Pudovkin, Komarov, Obolensky, Khokhlova were the director-assistants or co-directors. They prepared scenes according to my instructions [21].

Kuleshov's concept of joint creative work based on a hierarchy of head director and director-assistants or co-

directors makes it necessary to introduce a distinction between the apparently synonymous concepts of "cooperation" and "collaboration." In cooperation the task is split hierarchically into independent subtasks, whereas in collaboration the cognitive process may be heterarchically divided into intertwined layers. In cooperation, coordination is only required when assembling partial results, while collaboration is "a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" [22].

## FROM COOPERATION TO COLLABORATION

The type of artistic teamwork that Kuleshov imposed on his group may be termed hierarchically organized cooperation, within the confines of which we can additionally notice certain restrictions on the independence of subtasks.

It appears that the opposition between cooperation and collaboration can also be employed more generally to describe types of artistic teamwork in the 20th-century avant-garde. Three types of joint artistic activity can be discerned there; their emergence, development and shifting hierarchy reflect the evolution of artistic attitudes and the new types of artworks resulting from them.

The first type limits the scope of joint artistic endeavor to general programmatic issues, using it to construct strategies for action in the hostile environment of traditional art institutions. It can be perceived in the group practices of the historical avant-garde from the second and third decade of the 20th century.

The second type assumes the form of artistic cooperation. In this case we are dealing with actual teamwork, which manifests itself in coordinated individual actions, which are organized hierarchically and subjected to an individual's supervision and conceptual control. Possible examples include many avant-garde motion pictures from the 1910s and 1920s, such as the examples from Kuleshov, but also René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) or Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1923), as well as numerous happenings of the 1960s and some multimedia projects, including Internet works, such as Antonio Muntadas's *File Room* (1994).

Finally the third type, artistic collaboration, gains prominence with the evolution of digital media, especially in its interactive forms. One variant consists primarily of collaboration between artists, still traditionally defined, which—as in the case of *Intimate Transactions*—of-

fers the recipients limited participation on the plane of interaction. In a second variant, exemplified by *Processing*, collaboration becomes an elaborated model of joint creativity, in which a group of participants of unlimited number and undefined quality works on non-hierarchically linked elements or aspects of the work, sometimes even on its entirety. Thus, the work becomes an open, processual, joint product and allows the production of a particular, individualized version. This model represents the most advanced form of contemporary collaborative artistic practice in digital media.

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