SEQUENCES AND INTERVALS

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Abstract

This article discusses some ideas around video and color through nature, landscape and technology. This is related to experimental film and video practices in Europe and North America and various aesthetic traditions.

Practices emergent in Europe and North America from the 1960s and 1970s engaged the perceptual possibilities of cinematic, televusional and computer technologies—through their convergences and differences—with prominent work around the London Filmmakers’ Co-operative in England [1] and the Media Study department in Buffalo, New York [2]. The rich diversity of approaches and ideas emergent in these and other areas are continued to evolve and develop to the present day. Some of the practices here share common ground through experiments with technology and form, exploring and developing the image through its breakdown and analysis.

Many of the works that have been of greatest import in these traditions have engaged the relations of nature, history and aesthetics. This connects a spectrum of practices across Europe, with practitioners such as Kurt Kren, a pioneer of system-based films (3/60 Trees in Autumn, 1960), Rose Lowder (Recurrent, 1979) and Chris Welsby, whose films like Seven Days (1974) and the installation Tree Studies (2006) have examined a performative dance of agencies between technologies, history and nature [3]. In North America, films such as Michael Snow’s Central Region (1971) or the videos of Steina Vasulka such as Selected Treecuts (1980) are also notable connections.

In an incisive description of such works, Deke Dusinberre wrote in 1976 of contemporaneous British experimental films that

> The significance of the landscape films arises from the fact that they assert the illusionism of cinema through the sensuality of landscape imagery, and simultaneously assert the material nature of the representational process which sustains the illusionism. It is the interdependence of these assertions which makes the films remarkable—the "shape" and "content" interact as a systematic whole [4].

Process

The video frame is multi-dimensional, as duration, light and color. As many have worked through the possibilities of cinematic technologies, others have considered videographics and electronic processes. The fundamental incompleteness and abstractness of the video image brings about new aesthetic possibilities.

Across varied screens and formats—projections, televisions or portable devices—pixels, scan lines and raster grids create specific situations to consider light and color, examining technological configurations in open explorations—through the diversity and discontinuities of video imaging—rather than in reduction or essentialism.

In such instances, nature appears as momentary images in the flux of electric light. Something more emerges in process and abstraction through the systems of videographics. Within the intervals of pixel and scan line, sequences of color become ideas of landscape. The sensuous is framed within the fragmentary properties of the image technology, terrestrial spaces with the virtual spaces of the computer-processed image.

Through some select considerations of editing processes, the works that I discuss below have explored landscape through the time-based fluctuations of video. They use simple structural and compositional shifts to develop underlying patterns, and this is mostly achieved through a form of collage, with the use of selection and layers.

Landscape

My video work Sea (2011) (Fig. 1) uses high-definition (HD) recordings that pan from left to right across the horizon of a seascape. These sequences are repeated to shift between the perception of depth, three-dimensionality and the flatness of the image as a projection. To create the work, the raster area was divided into 1080 separate image layers matching the horizontal lines of resolution. Each line, or section of 1920 x 1 pixel, was offset by different iterations of 1/25 of a second from the next, reflecting the frame rate of the video format (1080 lines of horizontal resolution, progressive scan, at 25 frames per second).

The image is reconstituted such that movements appear at times to be continuous, in that waves move over or between spatially and temporally distinct parts of the picture. Progressions of wave movements from the top (background) of the image space move towards the bottom (foreground) as oscillations of tidal flows shift and rebound from horizon to shoreline. By eliminating elements of perspective the abstraction constructs apparent depths from color gradients.

Superimposed monochrome blocks of color ‘eye-dropped’ from the footage move downwards over the top of the waves. The resulting sense of motion in the video is the perception of changes between spatially frozen parts: an element of all ‘moving images’ brought to light.

Time and Intervals

The single video frame (1/25 of a second) has duration, is in itself temporally divisible; it is also spatially divisible by the raster grid. Spatial stasis is still duration, as the HD video is comprised of a grid of over two million pixels, shifting from left to right, top to bottom, over microseconds. The image is an underlying flux of the instant. The wave movements in Sea relate to this sense of liquidity in the moving image [5]. Flow emerges to relations with properties of changing voltage or the scanning sawtooth wave of the electron beam on a television display.

Fig. 1. Sea (2011). Varying length, size and duration. Color, looping HD video. (© Gareth Polmeer)
Considerations of instant and interval embed time within technology and the imagination, such as the questions of perception and motion in Henri Bergson’s cinematographic analogies. He writes, ‘What is real is the continual change of form: form is only a snapshot view of a transition…our perception manages to solidify into discontinuous images the fluid continuity of the real.’ [6]. These historical conceptions of time and duration have been central, in numerous ways, throughout much of the aforementioned experimental film and video traditions [7].

Questions around process, temporality and experimentation with time-based images variously reflect a materialist aesthetic, considering sensuous elements of experience through perceptions of color and light, and bringing other ideas to thought and reflection. In their aesthetic variations, time-based images bring new perspectives to the concepts that articulate ideas of landscape.

Chris Welsby suggests that the means by which form and content interrelate in works like Sea are a way to mess with the digital image so that it is no longer separate from, and therefore looking in upon the landscape from outside…a sort of hybrid…where neither element can be separated…where representation and represented meet…Where does the working of the perceptual eye/brain mechanism stop and the photonic signal on the monitor start? [8].

Lines and Layers

In my video Field (2014) (Fig. 2), footage recorded from the coast is the basis for similar temporal offset procedures to Sea. The image becomes abstracted into landscape forms that trace color into horizontal structures. The lines of resolution in the image flicker against themselves when the image is rendered as a file of interlacing video fields.

These video channels are duplicated and reversed, then looped in projection where the images develop through one another. This works like a palindrome, rather than a loop per se, such that the textures and colors of the landscape become a series of flittering fields.

In relation to video (videre, ‘to see’) the composition of Field resembles an aperture or oculus (the ‘eye’). This is also architectonic, being the circular opening to the sky of classical buildings; a mediating, transitional space for light. The round form further relates to the ‘tondo’ (a circular painting), the shape, as Rudolf Arnheim wrote, that ‘encourages mobility’ and ‘belongs everywhere and nowhere’ [9].

In Horizon (2014)—a work in progress—triangular projection forms have other relations to painting, geometric forms and composition. Painters such as Bridget Riley have examined the dynamics of color as it sweeps the gaze across the canvas with two-dimensional space and depth, drawing relations between form and process [10]. Such ideas are echoed in considerations of perspective, line and color in this video in which the framing of the horizon line is changed at one-frame increments, differentially bisecting the image space between sky and sea. Through a series of temporal delays and offsets these patterns of flicker become drifting videographics. Color forms emerge and streaks of light hover, then move across the frame.

Color

In the ongoing development of these works (presented in different forms and variations) I have developed new images from the further intermix of digitally generated color with recorded material. Samples are put into new configurations that echo the structures of the raster display and the blocks and macro-blocks of video codecs and compression algorithms. The recombination of source material with generated color in the processes described above creates different perceptual phenomena in the visualization of landscape.

In these works, as with those discussed above, surface is reordered to reveal an image that is relative to the continual motion and becoming of light and forms in video. The inherent abstractness of the image, as something always developing, is made present by the conditions of its transience in a momentary optical event.

References and Notes

1. For a selected history of some of these works see, for example, Peter Gidal, ed., Structural Film Anthology (London: BFI, 1976) and Malcolm Le Grice, Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age (London: BFI, 2001).
8. Correspondence with Chris Welsby.