

Video Jockeys
New Media in Performance Art

Research Thesis

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by

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I. Introduction

Since the introduction of digitized media into culture, the artistic venture to integrate technology into performance has taken many names. Multimedia performance, interactive media, and digital media design are all novel forms in the lexicon of new media art. The medium of projection arts encapsulates those arts which utilize media projection as a foundational tool. In this thesis, I will investigate a novel projection art: VJing. First, I will analyze VJing by tracing the genealogy of its predecessors, Secondly, I will interrogate the underlying critical implications of VJing within the larger context of visual culture.

VJing is a live visual art form that has risen in popularity across music genres. It utilizes a multitude of new media to alter the traditional music performance into an audio-visual synaesthetic experience. The discourses surrounding VJing are incomplete, and one aim of this thesis is to enhance the current history of VJing. I claim that the VJ hails from the slow molding of new media into performance and has developed among distinct periods of the twentieth century, which I have separated into the 1910s-1940s, 1960s-1980s, and 1990s-2000s. Each of these periods reflect shifts in the human relationship to technoculture, and more specifically, the artist's relationship to media.

Within the emerging school of media studies, as well as contemporary performance studies and art history, VJing has been woefully unacknowledged, let alone subject to critique within the context of cultural studies. For an artform that is practiced almost every night in music venues across the world, I find this to be a strange oversight in interdisciplinary studies. In

conducting my research, I could count on one hand the scholarly sources which have actively addressed VJing. Most of these sources either take the form of ethnographic research asking about the process or intentions of VJing or are guides explaining how to VJ. My position in respect to this project is novel, as I have been a practicing VJ for the last three years: over half of the duration of my undergraduate studies. This project does not seek to romanticize the VJ but instead to insert it into scholarly discourse so that we may begin to critically interrogate its existence in contemporary media and performance. By placing the VJ in conversation with different schools of study, such as film, literature, and media studies, I hope to invite and legitimize additional critiques of the artform. Further, this thesis aims to inspire similar studies about projection arts.

A deeper understanding of the history of VJing unveils more pertinent questions about the evolution of artistic practices within contemporary culture. Although these questions are potentially infinite, this thesis seeks answer two specific lines of inquiry: 1) How does a new media artist communicate narrative and feeling? 2) In what ways do sound and moving image seem to call for one another?

Beginning with cinematographic theories developed by some of the first film theorists, Sergei Eisenstein and Andre Bazin, the theories which drove early montage practices have rendered themselves inadequate for the new media artist. As the following pages will argue, the shift from temporal montage to spatial montage becomes necessary as cyberspace becomes as navigable as physical space. As such, intertextuality and dialogism become increasingly relevant in the expression of nonhierarchical narratives. Additionally, the evolution of the role of sound in cinema, as well as visual supplements to live music performance, question the relationship

between sound and moving image. The nature of the live audio-visual relationship has implications for the affective and aesthetic qualities of modern live performance. As I will argue, exploring the contemporary possibilities of montage and spatial relations in live performances grounded in an intimate connection with technologies reflects new affective and aesthetic preferences of the twenty-first century.

I assert that these preferences must be a result of the subject's contemplative interest in understanding the world around them. The two facets of our society that VJing can seek to explore include the new media revolution and mass media consumption. The close examination of key aesthetic features of VJing indicates how our society has responded to a world visually saturated with mass media. At the same time, however, the presence of the VJ has the potential to increase visual literacy within subcultures and allow the subject to seek forms of pleasure from within the saturated world of mass media.

II. Visual Encounters

November 2013

At fifteen, I am the last of my theatre troupe to leave the parking lot after the opening night of our Autumn play. As the youngest member of my troupe, I'm grateful to have an excuse for not being able to make it to the cast party, the invitation for which was hastily extended out of pity, and likely with the hope that I would decline.

"I can send you the address, if you want." The senior's car keys jingled in her hand as she turned away.

“That's okay, but I'm actually going to a show with a friend tonight. See ya tomorrow,” I mumble into the wind.

I inhale and relish in what I know will be my last moments of the cool, still silence of this late autumn evening. Now I am alone. And I like that it matches the persisting loneliness that accompanies high school. Just as the cold concrete steps start to become a nuisance to sit on, my mom's van rolls up to the curb. When she asks me how the play went, I tell her it was fine and that I didn't stumble over my lines. She finds a way to fill the silence the entire ride home, gently reminding me that my dad will be working at the show tonight, and that I should make 'good' decisions. We pull into the driveway where my friend's beater is running--waiting for me. I hurry inside, replace my jeans with fishnets, and throw on some extra eyeliner.

As my friend drives we listen to electropop. She has no idea where we're going, who we're seeing, or why I care so much. I excitedly explain that these are two of my favorite local DJs, that they haven't played an all-ages show in two years, and that they might not do so again for a while. She nods her head and goes back to singing with the radio again. She's just along for the ride. After a sorry excuse for a parallel parking job, and a crude jailbait joke from the door guy, we walk through the doors of the Newport.

A wall of pounding bass, humidity, and flashing lights greets us, and for the first time in hours, I feel myself genuinely smile. I immediately dive into the sea of bodies to search for the best view of the show.

“Hey Ella! Let's just stay over here.” Tired of trying to follow me, she points out a prized, open piece of dance floor on the furthest side of the venue with a series of pillars obstructing the

stage. I yell over the subwoofers, telling her to trust me as I grab her hand and lead her into a tame corner of the pit.

“See what I mean?” I said, turning in the direction of the stage. I smile as her eyes widen.

A projection screen hangs behind the decks (see Fig. 1), a series of animations bounce to the beat of the bass. Short video clips fade into one another, rising and falling with different melodies. Onstage, two shadowy figures command the room. They are adorned with tattered black hoods and masks that emit red lasers from their eyes. Through a vocal distorter, they introduce themselves, “Greetings, Friends. We are roeVy.”¹



¹ See Jack Attack, *RoeVy Performing at Skully's in Early 2019*. *Officialroevy*. Jack Attack, February 1, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/officialroevy/photos/p.10156959306393399/10156959306393399/?type=1&theater>.

Fig.1 roeVy in early 2019.

The music transitions away from the last DJ's set and steady dark techno begins to creep through the air. The whole venue stands and stares, fascinated as the screen starts to strobe between black, red, and white, and as the BPM rises and musical tension builds. The shadowy figures look at each other, nod, and suddenly "LET'S FUCKING DO THIS" flashes on the screen as the BPM drops to a danceable tempo.

Sweat brushes my skin as bodies bump into mine. The dark techno duo control the madness with the build and release of their set. Scenes from horror movies play on loop as tension builds. The next relief brings a steady beat, and fantastical beings perform something of a black mass ritual, and a static image interrupts the movement onscreen professing: "THE FUTURE SUCKS."

roeVy's prophecy strikes me as suitably validating, so I allow myself to be mesmerized by the visuals onscreen. Cyberpunk icons from sci-fi movies have been edited to have the same shining red eyes that match the performers onstage. Post-apocalyptic animations and fake newspaper headlines get triggered in a series of cryptic montages welcoming the audience to Hell. Meanwhile, the packed crowd continues dancing to our city's latest techno remixes (see Fig 2).²

² Gify Roevy. August 31, 2016. https://giphy.com/gifs/roevy-l0MYFklRKGMSsxdKg?utm_source=iframe&utm_medium=embed&utm_campaign=Embeds&utm_term=https://roevy.com/

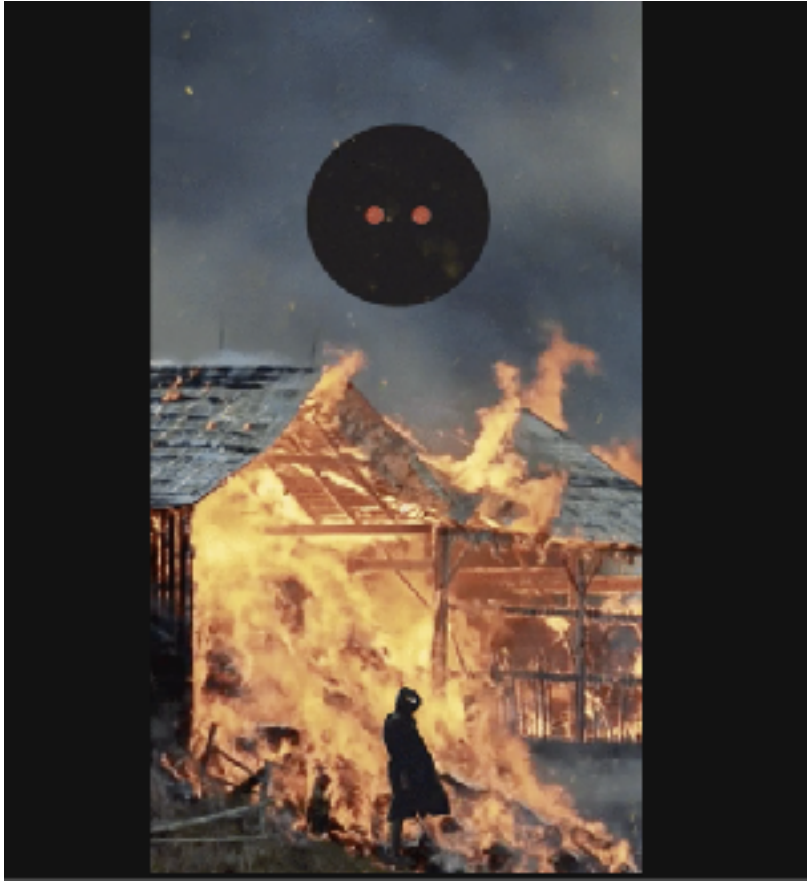


Fig.2 Standard visual content for a roeVy performance

Somewhere, among the dismally prophetic and anarchic video compositions, a new static message supersedes the screen: “YOU” - “ARE” - “NOT” - “ALONE.” This single comforting declaration doesn’t need to dominate the screen for long before the message is received. Club kids around me move with more feeling now, and we lean into each other a little more

purposefully. Together, we have all found a way to make fun out of the uncertainty of the future. Eventually, roeVy shows us a burning world one last time; with their closing tagline: “roeVy loves you.”

As our cheers replace the fading music, they disappear offstage.

The entire venue starts clearing out, with everyone already laughing and reminiscing over the night's events. As the night air cools the sweat on my skin, I realize that for the last hour and a half I somehow allowed myself to stop being so debilitatingly insecure. I stand on the sidewalk for a moment and try to understand why I feel so okay and assured that maybe one day things will get better. An incoming call from my dad interrupts this thought. After making sure I'm safe, he says, “Oh okay, good. Well I have a friend here who wants to talk to you.”

He passes the phone off, and before I can say anything, a familiar pair of voices say, “Happy 16th birthday, Ella. roeVy loves you.”

III. The Mechanics of VJ Production

Etymologically, ‘VJ’ was derived from its functional similarity with “DJ”; where DJ is an abbreviation for disc jockey, a VJ is a video jockey.³ The DJ and VJ are operationally similar in that the crux of their artistic mission lies in their ability to mix pieces of media. At its most basic level, a DJ beat matches two songs together using a mixer. Similarly, VJing is characterized by the blending or creating visual digital media in real time. Despite there being numerous approaches to VJing, some of the most common approaches can be described in order to lay the

³Adrian Shaughnessy, “Last night a VJ Zapped my Retinas” in *VJ audio-visual art + VJ culture*, 10.

foundation for how VJing is exemplary of new media theories, especially since the possibilities of such image manipulation become increasingly complex as editing software develops.

In the twenty-first century, it is commonplace for live music performances to utilize visuals in tandem with a musical act. The widespread popularity of live audio-visual synthesis is puzzling considering the enigmatic nature of the VJ. This is likely because of the many responsibilities a VJ can assume: filmmaker, animator, technician, etc. Additionally, a VJ can be found performing at an underground rave, an upscale interactive art gallery, or a commercial music festival.⁴ So, rather than there being an extensive set of criteria an individual must meet in order to be considered a 'VJ', dialogues surrounding the art agree on one criterion: the live mixing of moving images in synchronicity with music. Sometimes, the musical performer and the VJ work together in creating a show. In other cases, the two share no interaction prior to the performance. If there is no previous discussion about the cohesiveness of the show, the VJ's set is reactive to the music. The VJ in this area serves to visually improvise the media to match their own reactions to the music. If the musician and the VJ develop the production alongside one another, the visual set is built intentionally, as the combined message of the artists is considered. In each of these instances, the audience is presented with a synthesis of audio and visual media. This synthesis has been embraced across genres, and so reiterates the human fascination with how sound and image can influence one another. The evidence for how image and music can be connected is even further articulated when considering that much of the hardware used by VJs is also used by DJs. For example, the MIDI controller was first used by DJs to trigger different sound samples, but VJ software quickly developed in order to use the MIDI controller as well. In

⁴Adrian Shaughnessy, "Last Night a VJ Zapped my Retinas" in *VJ: Audio-visual art + VJ Culture*, 10.

this way, sound and image are intimately connected, even in the instruments the artists use to perform.⁵

The practice of VJing has utilized many schematics involving different hardware in order to project the moving image. For the purpose of this discussion, there are two modes through which the moving image is relayed to the audience: a projector or an LED screen. Though these are similar in effect, the difference in schematics is relevant. If the image is being relayed to the audience via a projector screen, the image itself is first being sent through a projector. Projectors vary in scope of light emanation, increasing in emanation as the cost of the equipment increases. Typically, projectors are used in lower budget VJ schematics or in smaller venues and were the more common production hardware in the late 1990s and early 2000s. When using a projector screen in a venue, the VJ must account for the angle of the projection throw, so as to ensure that the image projected is the correct shape.⁶ Otherwise they will be battling image distortion, since the light is distributed unevenly across the intended area of projection.

This image distortion can be used to the VJ's advantage in certain situations. In a space where there is no central point from which to suspend the projector without image distortion, the VJ can manipulate the geometry of the projected image to their liking using a variety of projection mapping programs (see Fig 3).⁷

⁵ Bram Crevits, "The Roots of VJing" in *VJ: Audio-visual art + VJ Culture*, 19

⁶ Typically, the intended shape of the projection is a rectangle, similar to the cinemascope ratio of film, which further relates VJing to film. However, the practice of projection mapping is used to project onto more complex 3D spaces, such as bodies, buildings, and sculptures.

⁷ See "Top 6 VJ Software Options 2017," *TripleWide Media*, April 25, 2019. <https://articles.triplewidemedia.com/top-6-vj-software-for-multiscreen-video/>.

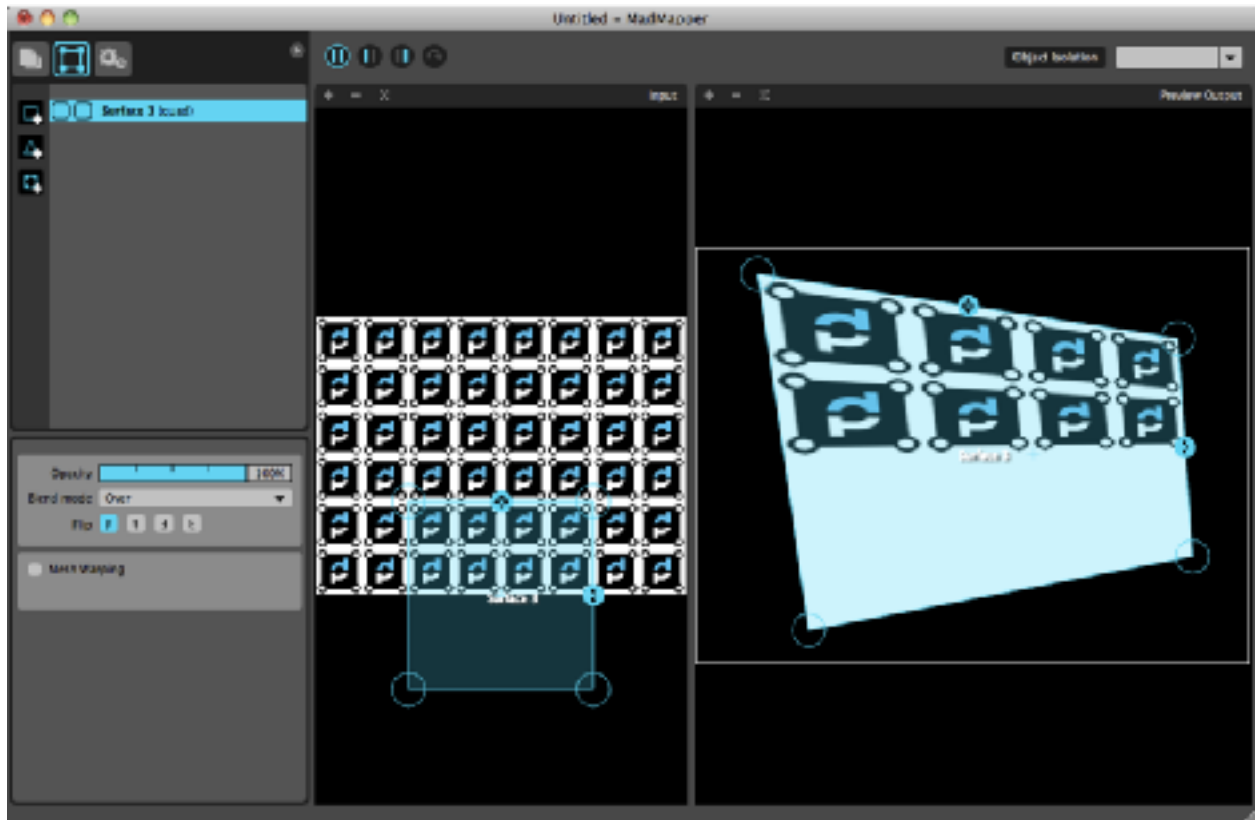


Fig 3 Madmapper Software image.

As the image shows, Madmapper is a software that allows a projected image to be manipulated. To the left is the image as it is intended to appear, and to the right how the image has been distorted onto a surface in order to account for the angle of projected light, so that the image appears to the audience as the image to the left.

Projection mapping software turns the projector into an adaptive tool, particularly in lower budget productions. Since the advent of the LED screen, however, projectors are being used less frequently in larger venues, or in venues where there is an excess of moving LED lights. This shift has occurred because LED systems are more cost effective and easier to maintain as opposed to incandescent lighting systems. LED light bulbs are brighter, last longer,

and produce adaptive color to a greater extent than incandescent bulbs.⁸ These hardware distinctions are relevant because they change the way the image acts within the space, but their effect with the audience is similar.

VJing as a practice serves to extend the venue from its strictly physical attributes (e.g. stage, audience, performer, etc.) into a navigable digital space. During the performance, the VJ controls and navigates the digital space in front of the audience through moving image. Whether they are conscious of it or not, any person that regularly interfaces with computers is also confronted with the existence of navigable digital and physical space.⁹ In this sense, the introduction of the VJ in live performance is significant because it reflects our everyday reality. The VJ brings the navigation of the physical and digital into the forefront of the audiences' awareness, and makes it a centerpiece of performance, rather than a reality which escapes our notice. In the case of the projector, the possibilities of projection mapping can be extended to mapping an image on top of a three-dimensional object. This practice is also frequently used in theatrical performance, bringing the awareness of physical and digital reality into the framework of a narrative. In the case of the LED screen as used for VJing, any technical complications wherein the projector screen must compete with the more powerful emanation of the LED system is rendered null. LED screens are typically placed center stage, and their image projection is rarely overshadowed by any aspect of the technical production. So, beyond the extension of the physical space into a digital space, these two schematic differences can result in two performance implications: the intentional manipulation of the digital image to extend the

⁸ See Jerald Raymond Pierce, "Charge of the LED Brigade."

⁹ See Lev Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 77; 244-252.

physical space, or the domination of the digital image in the physical space. Image domination and manipulation permeates the mental landscape within the larger context of culture, and so the representation of such functions within an artistic space speaks to the relevance of the new media revolution.

The aspect of VJing that sets it apart from other digital and performance artforms is the breadth of media which it can both generate and manipulate. Here I will introduce the idea of different compositional possibilities of the artform. These categories have not been clearly defined within the current discourse of VJing, but their distinctions are relevant in order to create further critical analysis. I have developed the following definitions through studying many interviews within VJ communities, as well as my own experience being immersed in VJ culture. A generative VJ approach¹⁰ will set parameters and create codes within their software that continuously create various moving animations throughout the visual set. In some cases, VJs will even write entirely new algorithms and programs for this purpose. These animations can be set to interact with the environment based on these parameters. This follows the same logic as an audiovisual sine wave one may see when listening to music on an interface where animations respond to beat or volume. Found visuals¹¹ may refer to VJs who use moving images that already exist (and that they did not create themselves) in their performances. This can include video clips from film, news reports, or other graphics animations. These visuals will blend and transform

¹⁰ I draw this term from the practice of generative animation. Some VJs also refer to themselves as computational VJs, which is similar. The term generative VJing is more specific of these practices as the content is generated in real time through a computer. To refer to a set as computational VJing is too broad for this discussion since it can be argued that all VJing is always computational because the computer is used in every VJ composition.

¹¹ This term is derived from the practice of found theatre, where a space that is not intended to be a performance space is refashioned for a performance. This is also sometimes called sampling, but the term sampling is borrowed from music sampling. Using the term found visuals gives more specificity to what is occurring when a VJ reframes the meaning of a moving image in a new performance space not originally intended to be used for the purpose of the VJ set.

video clips in a number of ways. Found visuals may also contain elements of cinematic narrative; however, with found visuals the VJ did not create the original narrative themselves. Instead, the visuals are selected to create a new narrative, thus shifting the original rhetoric of the image. Finally, a VJ who shoots their own footage and uses it in a live visual set is practicing reproductive VJing.¹² Reproduced visuals have the potential to seem purposefully grounded in narrative, although this is not required. In fact, there are VJs who will feed live footage of the venue into their visuals as they perform. This can be done using a variety of cameras, but in essence the audience or performer can then become part of the VJ's set. This tactic has been used in many Aphex Twin shows, where audience members are projected onto the face of Aphex Twin himself.¹³ This live recording has long proved useful in large arenas, but in the last ten years, the manipulation of live feed has become popularized. Unsurprisingly, these approaches to VJing are not mutually exclusive, nor are they mutually inclusive. For example, it is entirely possible for a VJ to use both reproductive and found visuals. Likewise, there are VJs that rely entirely on the generative operations of their software or self-made code.

These approaches to creating visual media can each be manipulated further within VJ software in ways similar to Adobe Suite, as exemplified in Resolume Arena. In live time, the VJ can adjust exposure, opacity, and key tones in the same way a photographer would edit an image. The VJ can also adjust video clip loops to fast forward, slow motion, and zoom in the same way that Adobe Premiere edits individual video clips. In short, the artistic liberties a VJ can exact upon an image are vast, and all are dependent on the operation of selection and combination of

¹² This term is inspired from Bazin's film theory regarding the myth of cinema as working to reproduce reality.

¹³ See Neil O'Hara, "Aphex Twin Live at Forbidden Fruit Dublin 2017 (Part 2) (Cilonen, Pythex)."

existing data. These possibilities of image manipulation are significant because they mirror the sampling manipulation that DJ's and electronic producers use in performance. As Lev Manovich argues, the DJ is the quintessential cultural figure emblematic of selection processes in new media:

The rise of [the DJ] can be directly correlated to the rise of computer culture. The DJ best demonstrates its new logic: selection and combination of preexistent elements. The DJ also demonstrates the true potential of this logic to create new artistic forms. Finally, the example of the DJ also makes it clear that the selection is not an end in and of itself. The essence of the DJ's art is the ability to mix selected elements in rich and sophisticated ways. In contrast to the 'cut and paste' metaphor of the modern GUI that suggests selected elements can be simply, and almost mechanically, combined, the practice of live electronic music demonstrates that true art lies in the "mix." (Manovich 135)

I began this section by relating the VJ to the DJ etymologically, and now I close by introducing the VJ's contribution to the discussion of new media. First, the development of VJing has been tied to technological developments that link sound and image. This occurred in the same way that old media and computers were connected to one another. Secondly, one of the VJ's effects is in extending the physical arena into the digital realm. This extension of reality contributes to dialogues surrounding digital interfacing and navigation of mass media culture and the new media revolution. Finally, the VJ's methods of creating art lie in selecting and compositing digital images in new ways. These methods further enforce the theory proposed by

Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* that new media art is variable and as such constitutes a computer layer, which can be manipulated, and a cultural layer, which can communicate messages.

IV. **VJing: An Atemporal Genealogy**

The task is a difficult one. The matter lies well within the realm of a conspicuous beauty as a new form of expressed feeling; and aesthetics, at its highest, deepest, and best, has a way of bundling the myriad faceted *all* into a *one-ness* equalling, if not beggaring, formal philosophy, and even metaphysics in the difficulty of its right presentation by word for record. (Mary Hallock-Greenewalt, *Nourathar*, 1946)

It's when you listen to music and close your eyes, and you imagine scenes or visions. That's what a VJ is doing with music. (Cal-TV of the Mercury Boy, *What the fuck is VJing?* 2008)

To effectively extrapolate cultural analysis from the artistic expressions of VJing, a genealogical extension beyond the current discourse of the form is necessary. The VJ is the quintessence of a new media artist, and as such, its development alongside technological and cultural shifts has defined its role in art today. The artistic exploration of the relationship between sound and moving image precedes the term “VJ”. I suggest a different way of understanding how these performances came into existence, rather than claiming a single historical point of departure leading towards VJing. What follows is a non-chronological presentation of artistic

moments from the last century that serve to outline the shifts that occurred in popular performance and technology. This conceptual presentation reveals the interconnectedness of synesthetic artistic pursuits, and shows their development as heavily influenced by one another.

1960s-1980s

Fusing visual art and music as a performance practice began to develop in rock and roll and psychedelic rock. In the early 1960's, Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd, Jefferson Airplane, and others all employed the creative fervor of The Liquid Light Lab or The Joshua Light Show in their performances. Creating a liquid light show involves dropping and mixing small amounts of dyed liquids onto a piece of glass. The colorful mixture is then magnified and projected across a stage. Throughout these rock performances, liquid light artists would continually mix and change the colors to create a visually psychedelic dimension to the rock performance. Steve Palovsky has indicated in interviews that their artistic inspiration is rooted in their love of the music genre, and their chromesthesia (sound to color synesthesia).¹⁴ It is indeed the case that liquid light shows differ from VJing in that a liquid light show requires the use of immediate physical material to create content, rather than digital media. However, the form between these performances is nearly identical. More importantly, the cultural significance of popular bands employing live visual artists is crucial to situating the VJ in the history of musical performance. The liquid light show was a necessary precursor to VJing because it established the relationship between live music and live visuals to the large audience of the 1960's. This affiliation also

¹⁴ Bonnie Stiernberg, "Talking Synesthesia with The Joshua Light Show's Joshua White" in *Paste Magazine* November 11, 2014. <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/11/talking-synesthesia-with-the-joshua-light-shows-jo.html>.

represents the idea of an expression of an individual artist's sense of chromesthesia, resulting in the arena becoming a multidimensional synaesthetic space.

In 1966, the purposeful collaboration between The Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol resulted in *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, a multimedia performance at the Cinematique in New York City. The band performed a 70 minute set as Warhol's black and white film was projected on stage, accompanying typical strobes and dancers of the time.¹⁵ Further collaborations between these artists lasted only two years, but the lasting effects of *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable* are evidenced by the popularity of avant-garde multimedia installations even into the twenty-first century. These performances also began to inspire other rock groups and filmmakers to collaborate on their productions, continuing to explore how cinematic images and music could influence one another.

Moving forward into the 1980's, music performances began to call upon visuals that held more filmic attributes. English post-punk band The Monochrome Set collaborated with avant-garde filmmaker Tony Potts to project cinematic art across the stage. Upon the band's reformation in 2013, frontman Bid commented in an interview on the early years of the performance production design:

[Interviewer:] At an artistic level there was something more intelligent going on with The Monochrome Set than with your average band of that era. Early performances were characterized by atmospheric lighting, stage sets, and projections courtesy of filmmaker

¹⁵ See Wren Graves, "The Velvet Underground: How Andy Warhol Was Fired by His Own Art Project" in *Consequence of Sound*. Consequence of Sound Net, March 13, 2017. <https://consequenceofsound.net/2017/03/the-velvet-underground-how-andy-warhol-was-fired-by-his-own-art-project/>.

Tony Potts. Was all of this a conscious move to ‘hide’ the band...to present something ‘greater than’ just music?

[Bid:] Tony Potts was a good friend and felt like the fifth member of the band. It started out ad hoc, and then became tailored. At some point in early 1979, it came about that he started to project some of his films onto us. We liked it, so he carried on. We made screens for the stage, and took these and the projectors with us, along with the other gear. Tony did an increasing amount of work making the films and eventually made specific films for each screen, tailored for the live show. Overall, films seemed better than a standard light show. (*The Mouth Magazine*, 2013)

Within a year of Tony Potts deciding to project his films onstage, the band created a song on the Love Zombies album called *The Weird, Wild, and Wonderful World of Tony Potts*, where a dialogue between the avant-garde film and the sound is explicitly narrated through lyrics:

Stir into the essence pot

Close-up, cross-fade and mid-shot

Sprinkle short ends on the gruel

Tape splice and camera spool

Focus and fade

A-B rolling, f-stop and grade

(*The Weird, Wild, and Wonderful World of Tony Potts*, The Monochrome Set)

This specific instance of cinema and music being presented to the audience further cemented the relationship between cinema and sound. In *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, The Velvet Underground performed in front of a film, but neither the music nor the film explicitly acknowledged one another. In the case of *The Monochrome Set*, the artists all demonstrated an awareness of the production directly, and as a result, both the visuals and sounds engage in dialogue with each other. This trajectory can be seen in the music video industry boom where moving images were used to create narratives with music. Effects of Potts' visuals can also be seen in VJs of the 1990's taking clips from movies or producing their own footage to use in their live mixes. Tony Potts was regarded as an unofficial member of the band and maintained his separate identity as a filmmaker. This may be in large part because the term 'VJ' had not yet been solidified in the vernacular of art, or perhaps because he truly wanted to identify himself as a filmmaker. The irrefutable fact stands, however, that these performances reinvigorated an experimental approach to embedding cinematic elements in music performance.

As we understand the term today, the first time that the term 'VJ' appeared was on August 1, 1981 on MTV. Nina Blackwood, Alan Goodman, and others were television personas that introduced music videos and commented on the industry in the same way that radio show hosts did in previous decades.¹⁶ As the shift away from radio began, music videos grew increasingly popular in America and the VJ was the personality that presented the music videos as a cohesive television channel. The popularity of MTV reimagined how audiences experienced music, indefinitely tying song to cohesive visual aesthetics and narratives through music videos. Over time, MTV lost its affinity for strictly presenting popular music videos and grew into a more

¹⁶ *I Was an MTV VJ*. MTV, 1998. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=WDtFbjNPjn0

diversified television channel for a larger audience, and the MTV VJs fell out of fashion. With this shift, the identity of the VJ adapted and grew to be vital in another cultural arena: the live music performance. In this way, the term ‘VJ’ became a signifier for a new cultural interest in music and video, in addition to performance practices that had already been in practice for the last 70 years.

1910s-1950s

Within this time period, two developments laid the foundation for the possibility of VJing to occur: The color organ and film. Each of these practices have long term implications for how performance and narrative function would be crystallized as old media became new.

As electricity became widely accessible in the early part of the twentieth century, the possibilities to project light were expanded. The color organ was an electromechanical instrument invented by the early 1900s and its function was to use the same technology of an organ or other such instrument to produce light and manipulate its qualities, like color, intensity, direction, movement, and brightness. As inventors created such instruments varying slightly in technical use, numerous people claimed to be the ‘first’ to work in synchronizing light and music. Many of these instruments were limited, in the sense that the light and color could not be modulated by the user and was instead reliant on film rolls to change the tonality of the light. As a result, with the reliance on film rolls, early color organs were frequently used to make abstract films. Thomas Wilfred was perhaps the most famous of the color organists, often credited as the pioneer of lumia, or the art of light painting. Contrastingly, Mary Hallock-Greenewalt sought to forge an expressive and emotional approach to visual music. Her color organ, Nourathar, differed

from others because she invented the improved rheostat and liquid mercury switch boards, which allowed her to expressively modulate color, brightness, and movement with her light as she interpreted the music. Greenewalt and Wilfred battled one another in patent lawsuits over the rheostat and liquid mercury switch boards.¹⁷ Many historical texts credit Wilfred's organ as the most important organist despite the mounting evidence that Greenewalt forged her place in the inventing scene. Of course, these patent disputes are indicative of the sexism that women face in science and technology, and important to mention given the ever-present sexism in technical performances in the twentieth century. Both of these inventors' primary texts can be read as prophetic in how VJing and projection arts would eventually operate. Greenewalt's four hundred page *Nourathar or the Fine Art of Color Playing* exists as a primary text thoroughly explaining her emotive approach to synesthetic expression of music and light, which leads to later performance practices like liquid light shows and animation based VJing.¹⁸

Wilfred's schematic for controlling Lumia includes all aspects of VJing in its infancy, including the harnessing of light through form, and color in relation to characteristics of music projected to the spectator onto a white screen by means of a controlled keyboard (see Fig 4).¹⁹ Naturally, there are aspects of VJing approaches that had not yet been conceived with Lumia, namely the accumulation of new media objects to be manipulated. Regardless, Winifred's original schematic is certainly an important relic in the history of VJing and projection arts.

¹⁷ See William Moritz, "The Dream of Color Music and the Machines That Made It Possible" in *Animation World Magazine*, April 1997. <https://www.awn.com/mag/issue2.1/articles/moritz2.1.html>.

¹⁸ Greenewalt's manifesto also alludes to the sexism she faced as an inventor. Winifred left behind a smaller body of work. However his notes on the schematics for Lumia are strikingly similar to the basic schematics of all projection arts, particularly of VJing.

¹⁹ Thomas Wilfred, *Thomas Wilfred's Notes on Exhibition in Smithsonian. Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light*. Smithsonian American Art Museum, October 6, 2017. <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/lumia>.

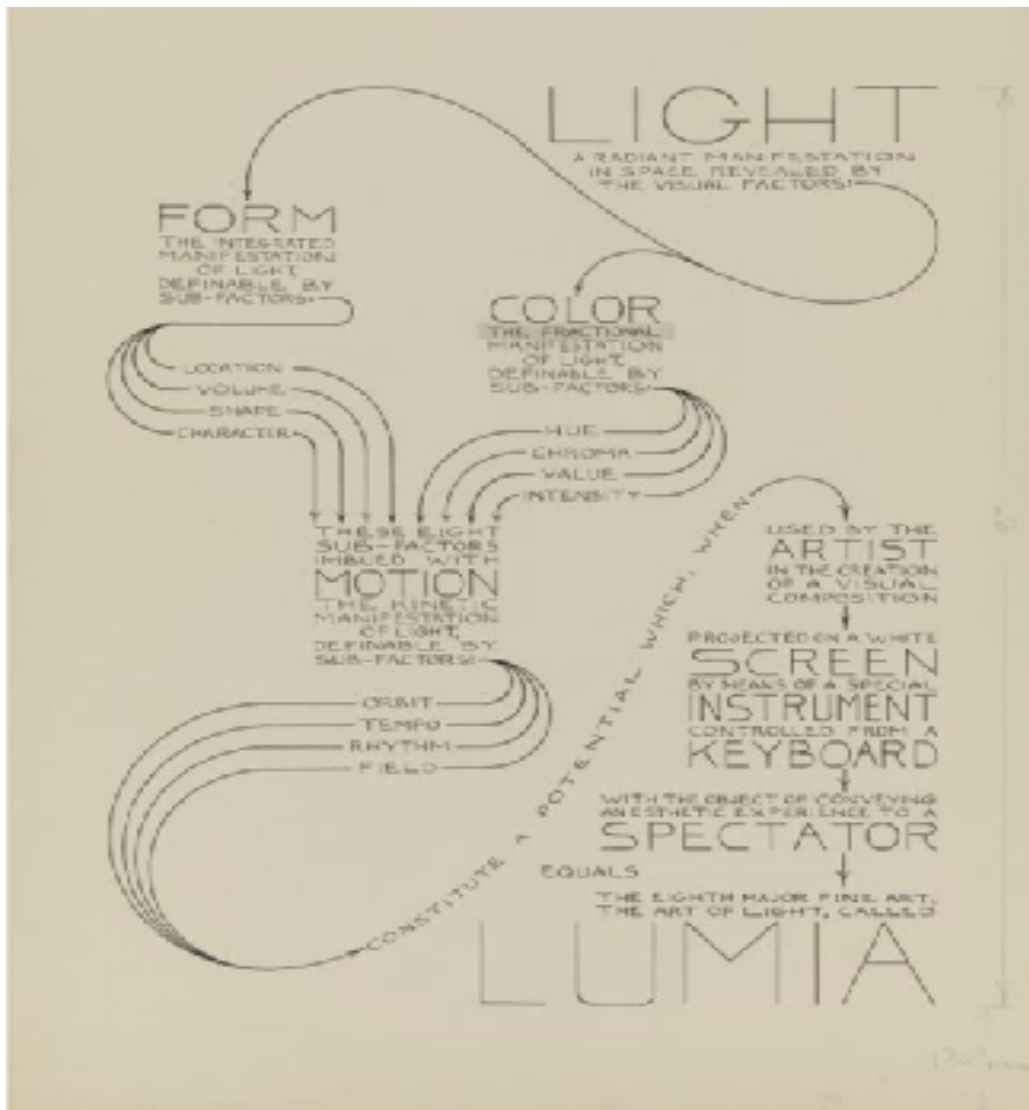


Fig 4. Wilfred's Lumia schematic

The inventive interest of color organs and color music in the early twentieth century reflects the long-term human interest in relating music and the visual arts. The popularity of these instruments not only demonstrates the formulaic meshing of the two, but also variability in the technical use of musical and visual-art instruments. To relate this to modern VJing, the

development of software which was compatible with the DJ's MIDI board appears to be a natural extension of this technical variability. Nourathar's technical ability to modulate light on a gradual scale is reminiscent of the use of MIDI boards and visual modulators of the 1990s. In many cases, the smooth transitioning of images is key to a VJ's set. Additionally, Greenewalt's pursuit to expand the possibilities of how light could be synchronized with music laid the foundation for how the color-organists' own interpretation of the music could be expressed. In her book, Greenewalt explains her idea: "The drawing was a table-like control center for playing on and through light. And this was a means of aesthetic and emotional expression" (84). This same idea is seen in VJing. Liquid light shows, Tony Potts, and VJ's of the twenty-first century all seek to relay their interpretations of music to the audience.

In these same decades, the film industry exploded with competing philosophies and approaches to harnessing the ability to record the moving image. During cinema's development in the 1910s-1940's, it faced a certain kind of existential problem. Film and distribution practices were relatively new, and so film lacked the ability to be self-reflective. What resulted was a multitude of approaches to conveying narrative, discerning which narratives to convey, and how film ought to function within society. Early film theorist Andre Bazin asserts in *What is Cinema?* that "the cinema is an idealistic phenomenon" (17). He argues that because cinema relies on the mediation of the camera, which works to represent reality as closely as possible, cinema must be inherently realist. For Bazin, total cinema does not yet exist because it is still incapable of perfectly reproducing reality. Yet, Bazin's notion of perfect realism and the reproduced VJ set involving live camera feed inspires a dialogue that could begin to challenge the myth of total cinema. Embedded in the production language itself, 'live camera feed' works to push Bazin's

theory to its limits. VJs project live footage of the audience to the audience during the set in real time. If this action does not prove to be total cinema, what could?

Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet director and theorist, understands film differently. Eisenstein recognizes the fragmented nature of film, as the individual shots are purposefully strung together to create something whole. As a result, in “From Theatre to Cinema” he bases his film theory on ‘typage’ and montage, arguing that film relies on a dialectic with realism. The narrative of the film under Eisenstein’s framework is in large part the responsibility of the viewer to interpret associational shots to derive meaning from a montage sequence. Remnants of montage theory can be seen particularly in filmic sets created by VJs; the continuity of the composition properly functions when the rhetorical relationships between individual clips develop dialogue with one another, so that the audience can interpret the set as a whole.

However, the definition of film to which we are responding here is most closely indebted to Lev Manovich, who works to understand the nature of digital cinema. To Manovich, “cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint” (294). In this way, the film is a whole moving image that references itself in a certain series to convey meaning. This is exemplified through post-production and editing, where the crew compiles the footage and manipulates the footage. Additionally, he defines digital cinema as “a particular case of animation that uses live action footage as one of its many elements” (302). In this respect, animation precedes live action footage because cinema in the digital age is founded on animation and graphics. He also makes note of the fact that before narrative based cinema was popularized as the norm, the art of the moving image was the art of animation. Digital cinema would not exist without the early disjuncture between animation and film within the practice of cinema. These

aesthetics of animation and film have each been adopted by VJs in varying capacities to create a cohesive performance of digital cinema. The different combinations of these tenants that VJs use all have different implications for what their authorial intent upon the audience may be, and so studying these roots reveals different performance affect possibilities. Before the culmination of these aesthetic practices in live performance were adopted across genres, the VJ first had to enter the public sphere.

1990's to Present

Bearing these precedents and various discourses in mind, how do VJs conceive of themselves in the twenty-first century? With a brand name and a complicated history behind them, what can a VJ hope to accomplish given the myriad avenues they may take to synchronize the moving image with sound? Michael Faulkner's edited volume, *VJ: Audio-Visual Art VJ Culture*, is an essential anthology of interviews and research done by VJs around the world. Two common themes arise out of these interviews: VJs aim to repurpose meaning in moving images, and VJ's desire to create a synaesthetic multimedia space. Many VJs would be offended if their art was regarded as "glorified wallpaper."²⁰ So the goal evolves beyond merely generating an interesting composition for the viewer to glance at during a performance. Instead, VJs today frequently seek to find new technologies and resources to convey feeling and narrative through their mix. The VJ may use editing techniques similar to montage, or animation effects reminiscent of liquid light shows, or both. In the same way that a DJ wants the audience to dance, the VJ wants the audience to think and become more aware of their surroundings:

²⁰ See Walter Shane in *VJ: Audio-Visual Art VJ Culture*, 8, and Jessica Kelly, "What the Fuck is Vjing" in *VJ Interview-Mercury Boy*, December 10, 2008. <https://jessicakelly.wordpress.com/tag/what-the-fuck-is-vjing/> .

culturally, politically, personally, communally, and so on. A VJ cannot force these forms of awareness, just like a DJ cannot force a crowd to jump. However, the combination of music and image extends the venue and the audience beyond their physical attributes. This extension beyond the physical is what makes the synaesthetic effects and the narratives possible when the VJ is present.

An understanding of the interconnectedness of various art movements as they lead to VJs as they exist today provides a contextual foundation for more culturally relevant analyses regarding the implications of VJing today. Thus, what does it mean that VJing has become such a central part of a performance? Many of the arts outlined above functioned as a response to changes in culture and technology. Audiences' interests also changed, or inventors and artists were presented with new technology with which to experiment. In the next sections, I will try to uncover the current cultural implications of VJing by examining its relation to mass media and new media.

V. On Intertextuality and Authorship (or, Please Stop Asking About the Author)

To expand upon the relationship between the VJ and the audience, and the consequential effects of the performance on the audience, it is necessary to reconsider the image and sound of the show as a "text." By interpreting image and sound as text, different aspects of literary theory can be applied to the concept of VJing. Within the general public discourse of performances involving VJs, two central discussions that frequently arise are the issue of authorship and authorial intent or meaning. Legalities regarding copyrights, licensing, and plagiarism frequently animate these discussions, as do artistic ethical concerns regarding the authenticity of an artist's

work. Instead of confining these questions to the realm of legality, however, references to post-structural literary theory generates a richer discussion.

Both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault wrote defining essays on the concept of authorship, suggesting the need to abandon the prevailing notion of ‘author.’ Barthes’ ideas come in response to modern literary theory, specifically within the context of different notions of authorial intent. In turn, Foucault thought that Barthes may have been too idealistic in his argument that the abandonment of the author would liberate the reader. Foucault instead wonders how the author “functions” in discourse. His 1969 essay, “What is an Author,” focuses on problematizing the author by outlining characteristics of what he terms the “author-function.” The first characteristic addresses the original purposes of identifying an author legally, which served to hold accountable those authors writing possibly transgressive material about bodies of power, which later evolved into our current copyright legal system, where plagiarism becomes a chief social concern (305). Foucault goes on to discuss how the author-function is not treated with the same assiduity across literature, and thus affects how we respond to authorship in different discourses and in different ways (consider the difference between how one treats the author of poetry versus the author of scientific facts like the periodic table) (306). The third characteristic of the author-function that Foucault addresses can be contextualized in the relation to the French New Wave auteur theory. The ability to recognize an author’s individual ‘style,’ despite the numerous other people who contributed to the work, is indicative of what is assumed to be the authenticity of the author and the work (consider the similarities between an author working with multiple discourses and referencing and being influenced by outside sources, and a director working on a film). In this sense, the author becomes an ideological figure. Finally,

Foucault makes the claim that the author should be viewed as a narrator within their work, thereby making the author-function a representation of the plurality of egos in a text (308). These characteristics of the author-function are ways in which Foucault believes we should work to look beyond the author, leaving open the necessity of asking more complex questions about our relationship to discourse:

Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse. (314)

Foucault's outline of the author-function reveals the often severely limited reading of texts within larger discourses relating to sociocultural issues, suggesting that characteristics of the author-function should reveal a deeper understanding of the author and the function of text. The authority of the author is described as mutable and anonymity within discourse could eventually be possible. These ideas are pertinent to the discussion of authorship in VJing because, in many instances, the visual performance works towards this anonymity within the larger discourse of the performance experience. Consider that there are few VJs who are internationally or nationally famous by name, yet the art is seen across genres, uses innumerable subject materials, and hails from a complex history. This fact alone illustrates the ways in which VJing as an artform actively works against modern ideas of authorship, in order to posit more

interesting ideas about the role of the VJ within the “discourse” of visual culture. The questions involved in VJ culture and performance are not about the VJ but instead about the effect or “author function” of the VJ.

It tends to be only in environments outside the performance space where concerns regarding citation or reference to the visual subject matter are raised. Within the context of performance itself, the synesthetic experience of combining sounds and visuals is more important to the audience than the individual behind the computer triggering a MIDI control pad, where the video clips came from, and whether or not copyright laws are being broken. This is not to say that meaning and commentary are entirely lost from the set as a result of the enigmatic nature of the VJ. In fact, it is exactly the result of challenging traditional notions of the author-function that allows for such rich edification to take place, both by the audience in the moment and within the context of forms of cultural analysis suggested here.

Roland Barthes’ contribution to this discussion comes from the essays “Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text.” Barthes’ understanding of the author in 1967 asserted that authorial intent was swiftly being rendered inconsequential, instead favoring the reader’s interaction with the deciphering the meaning of the text. By claiming that the text is a tissue of citations as a result numerous cultural sources, Barthes explains that an author relies on a dictionary of signifiers and combines different sorts of writing in order to write. Meaning, then, is made by the reader and their relationship with those signifiers. He recalls again that modern literary criticism has concerned itself with the origin of text instead of the destination of the text, and that the process of reading, not the process of writing, is where a unified meaning of a text is

created.²¹ Ten years later, in “From Work to Text”, Barthes theorizes further about the text and interpretation, notably where the distinction between work and text is understood by the degree with which the reader can interact with the text. To Barthes, a text is pleasurable when it can cross social barriers and is accessible to the reader, such that the reader can ‘play’ with the text in the same way the author did. The author calls upon a network of signs and signifiers and relies on this to communicate ideas. And so the reader too should be able to recognize the signs in the text and relate them to their own network of signifiers as well. This is the essential argument for intertextuality’s socio-cultural value. Intertextuality is the literary function wherein one text references another text through language or image, and then a dialogism is engaged between the two texts. As a result of this, the text is plural and irreducible, leading to what Barthes describes as an explosion or dissemination of information.²²

The connection between, on the one hand, Barthes’ and Foucault’s theories of the text and, on the other, VJ performances is an important one to draw and requires an understanding of image and sound acting as text within performance. Additionally, the author and reader must be translated to the performer and audience. The disappearance and indifference towards the author as an ideological figure that Foucault suggests is exemplified by the anonymity associated with VJs and VJing. As a result, the content and effect of the performance is judged substantively and within a broader cultural context. The process by which VJs assemble compositions is suggestive of Barthes’ claims that the author is searching through a network (in the VJs case, literally

²¹ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142–49.

²² See Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 56–64.

through computers) to obtain a text to create a larger work, which is then delivered to the audience.

Intertextuality in VJ performances works both between the sound, the reading of the image, and the interplay between those two texts. Barthes' description of intertextuality as an explosive dissemination of information is then powerful to anyone who has experienced an effective VJ collaborating with a musician. During these sets, a musical moment builds in tension as the visuals synesthetically express the sound, or through intertextuality add another layer of narrative to the performance through cinematic images. The audience's experience with these signifiers informs their interaction with them; when the sound releases tension and the VJ is able to visually express the release, the embodied experience of that moment is rhetorically powerful. This moment plays into the physicality of being in a synaesthetic space, where people around you are also fully engaged in the show. Everyone reacts to a VJ composition change and a beat drop differently because they are responding to their own networks of signifiers; but in that moment of release you are included in the text of the performance by virtue of your interaction with it.

VI. Found Footage Bricolage

Combatting Mass Media

VJing has enjoyed a surge in popularity which calls for an interrogation of the technocultural changes that have brought about the need for the artform. If the analysis of art movements includes understanding what changes in the human experience called for the

emergence of new and different art mediums, then we might ask: To what technocultural changes is VJing responding?

There exists a compositional and functional similarity between the compilation of varying images in a VJ set and the constant consumption of images which the contemporary subject experiences daily through mass media. Certain approaches to VJing have the potential to provide an artistic commentary towards aggressive advertising companies by creating a space of enjoyment which uses image domination for the pleasure of the audience. VJing also offers a possible solution to combat an oversaturated media environment through the development of genre-dependent visual tropes which serve to build visual literacy within a genre. By sampling found footage or reproducing visuals, the VJ demonstrates an individual's ability to create new meaning through images. As a result, the VJ's performance actively destabilizes the image through subversion. And as the art is postmodern in nature because it is grounded in new media, the VJ also allows the audience to extrapolate their own meaning from the visual set. This stands in opposition to how advertising companies and mass media outlets view consumers. The VJ set works to highlight the emotional manipulation of ad companies by using the mass media's own tools: domination of the image in the audience's mental landscape.

According to digital marketing experts at RedCrow Advertising Inc, "the average American consumes between 4,000 to 10,000 images a day."²³ This number only increases the longer one spends on social media, where targeted advertising companies track website use through data mining. Media consumption has increased by nearly 400% since the 1970s when

²³See Ron Marshall, "How Many Ads Do You See in a Day."

the average American could expect to see around 500 ads a day.²⁴ These statistics track how the explosion of VJing as a popular artform occurred as our everyday consumption of media also increased. Unfortunately, visual literacy has not developed at the same rate, leaving many people unable to interpret the rhetoric of images, and so are instead subject to manipulation by advertising firms. Some communication studies experts, like Lane Williams, believe that this lack in training on how to interpret images as rhetorical texts stems from a larger cultural misbelief that the fostering of intuitive cognitive processing, central to image consumption, is not as necessary as empirical analysis.²⁵ In 1986, neurobiologist Joseph LeDoux articulated the prerational nature of visual cognition, explaining “sensory signals from the eye travel first to the thalamus and then, in a kind of short circuit, to the amygdala before a second signal is sent to the neocortex.”²⁶ The nature of visual neurotransmission indicates that before one can apply empirical analysis to an image, one first reacts intuitively and emotionally to it, thus revealing the cultural power of the media.

Advertisements psychologically work on the consumer by promoting the idea that without a product they are in some way inferior or excluded from an in-group. Ad companies aim for this emotional response from the consumer through carefully constructed narratives and images, often using celebrities and popular culture references as subliminal messaging. Through these references, signs and signifiers are constantly being redefined for the benefit of corporations by fostering new desires and fears in consumers. Mass media advertising creates

²⁴ See Michael Dawson, “The Marketing Race: Straight from the Horse’s Mouth.”

²⁵ See Rick Williams, “The Artist’s Eye: Understanding the Effects of the Unconscious Mind on Image Meaning, Image Consumption, and Behavior.”

²⁶ J. LeDoux, “Sensory Systems and Emotion, 237-243, in “The Artist’s Eye”, Williams, Rick.

new visual languages that an individual must learn to interpret rhetorically in order to resist media manipulation.

A relevant succession of advertisements that exemplifies the redefinition of signs is the repeated use of references to *The Godfather*, by Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola's film became an instant classic in 1972, and Marlon Brando's performance of Don Vito Corleone became a symbol of power, wealth, and achievement. Forty-three years later, during a 2015 Super Bowl commercial, an Audi R8 advertisement aired. The sixty second ad recreates the iconic 'horse head' sequence and mis-en-scene, but instead replaces the severed horse head and blood with motor oil and an outdated car grille. The commercial can be considered humorous, but the reference to an extortion scene from a classic mafia movie to advertise a product demonstrates how culturally significant images are being redefined in the name of corporate interest. Later, in 2019, KFC aired an advertisement that called upon the Love Theme song of *The Godfather*, while emulating aesthetics similar to mafia wealth. Both of these advertisements work intertextually with culturally relevant cinematic moments which emblemize the power of *The Godfather*, working to encourage the audience to purchase products by putting the product and a cultural symbol of success in association with one another. These tactics range in subtlety, but the effect of creating a complicated dialogism around narratives, image, and feeling is a relatively recent effect of advertising media. The issue is not with intertextual reference as much as it is with the aim to manipulate consumers into buying products through subjugating cultural symbols.

The process of VJing has the potential to offer solutions to this social problem through sampling and performance. By taking a moving image out of context and inserting it into a new

social context, the VJ can strip the image of its original authorial intent or manipulate it into a different dialogue. Chris Allen of The Light Surgeons views sampling as a form of resistance against a mental landscape cluttered with corporate interest:

[Sampling] is a form of encryption, a living and evolving, viral form of language, and an extension of the tongue in conversation with itself ... It allows us to see the components in our language in isolation -- the bricks that can then be used to construct new meanings.

(Chris Allen, "Sampling" in *VJ: Audio-visual Art and VJ Culture*, 19.)

Allen is not alone in this view. In the early 1980's, multimedia group Scratch Video used spliced television footage of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in conjunction with dance music as a form of what they deemed "rebellion."²⁷ In the early 2000s, LA-based VJ Triggermotion collaborated with a DJ on an anti-consumerism performance by using clips of Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*.²⁸ At the same time, in Germany, VJ group Bauhouse describe their process as collecting footage of all kinds and puzzling samples together to bring new meanings out of the material.²⁹ When a VJ samples, they demonstrate the ability to repurpose an image for a new context, reclaiming media through their own bricolage. This subversion uses similar tactics as advertising companies: reference and domination of the image in a landscape. However, where advertising companies use referential signs to bolster feelings of alienation and desire to

²⁷ See Michael Faulkner, "Passport to VJing" in *VJ: Audio-Visual Art VJ Culture*, 49.

²⁸ Ibid. 79

²⁹ Ibid. 107

purchase goods in the consumer, the VJ operates as a piece of a multimedia synesthetic performance in a recreational space. The VJ fully immerses the audience into a space where they are having fun, and then sampled visuals include them in the dialogue by destabilizing the image such that intertextuality between the music, visuals, and the audience's own experience with the text of the performance creates new meanings. Sampling and mixing visuals in real-time demonstrates how easily the rhetoric behind images can be destabilized. Consequently, VJ sets which utilize sampling generate a Barthesien dissemination of information by way of manipulating the image. When effectively executed, a found visual VJ subverts the tactics of advertising companies while creating a space where the audience can practice visual literacy and experience a new kind of knowledge-making outside the realm of consumerism.

Though the VJ practices a powerful method of subversion, sampled footage is currently the least popular source of visual material in VJ performances. Due to fear of copyright laws, collaborations between VJ's and musicians frequently lead to generative animation and reproduced visuals, like live feed footage or film shot specifically for the purpose of playback during the live performance. In cases where the subversion of found footage is not used, the performance can become a method of self-branding for a popular artist, especially in arena performances where the musician's logo is coupled with animations particular to their aesthetic is mixed by the VJ. In this way, the promotion of the artist's brand is strikingly familiar with the promotion of a product. This possibility of ideological contradiction is a contention that has become increasingly apparent in digital art, one that digital artists must be aware of during their process. As argued in Lovejoy, Walter Benjamin understands this as a paradox of technology, one

where technology can be an agent of social and spiritual loss, or social and cultural gain.³⁰

Digital artists, and VJs in particular, are often unwittingly caught between these two competing tensions. It is because of these underlying tensions that cultural analysis of such artforms, as well as artists having a critical view of society, is necessary for social gain to accrue through art.

Because the VJ engages with technology both as a tool and a medium for art production, any representation that comes as a result of the performance necessarily takes an ideological and reflexive stance toward technology and media. This gives VJing, simply by virtue of its process, a critical potential often not afforded to other artforms.

If it were the case that VJing has become culturally relevant for the sole purpose of presenting a method of resistance against mass media, one could argue that it frequently fails in this venture. The potential that social commentary is not an essential quality of VJing indicates that the technocultural shifts which ushered in the art are more foundational than the problem of mass media. Which leads us to consider the present nature of new media.

VII. New Media

The basic reason for new media's existence is communication; the communication of ideas, feelings, and narratives. The discussion of new media includes text, still images, moving images, and sound. As such, different media are the main mode for communication of culture.

The transition of old media towards new media entails the changing quality of the communication and characteristics of media as a result of what Lev Manovich calls the “new media revolution.” Such qualities of media that have become transformed include: acquisition,

³⁰ Margot Lovejoy, *Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age*, 271

storage, distribution, and manipulation. As we shift into the new media revolution, these qualities have become increasingly apparent. As a result, cultural questions concerning how we obtain, interpret, store, and collectively create media have become topics of concern for postmodern subjects. As Manovich argues: “Today we are in the middle of a new media revolution -- the shift of all culture to computer mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication” (18). Technological revolutions of similar effect but unequal caliber were the printing press and the photograph. And while the permanent cultural effects of these technological developments were immediately realized (i.e. dissemination of information and ability to capture still image), we have yet to fully understand the effects of the new media revolution.

Changes in human experience as a result of new media attributes are visible in every aspect of life, including art and performance. I would argue that the process and form of VJing can be used to contextualize the attributes of new media objects. These attributes contain critical implications for authorship in art, narrative structures, and our relationship to cyberspace. In short, these critical implications contribute to the exploration of the cultural significance of VJing.

In the chapter “What is New Media?” Manovich distinguishes new media objects and attributes as general tendencies, which are not exhaustive. Nor does each new media object need to meet each tendency in order to be considered new media. The general tendencies of new media objects according to Manovich include: Numerical Representation; Modularity; Automation; Variability; and Transcoding. Numerical representation in new media simply means that a new media object can be formally defined by numbers or mathematical equations. This is a result of the shift of old media's continuous data being digitized into discrete units. Examples of

this are evident in the existence of pixels used to numerically express the size of a new media object, and the single pixel expressing a HEX code to indicate its individual color. The digitization of new media as numbers and equations is perhaps the most foundational aspect of the new media revolution, as these numbers can be used to manipulate and distribute the new media object. Modularity can be thought of as the fractal like structure of new media, which reveals that a new media object is composed of multiple, individual elements, smaller than the new media object itself. Pixels can again be used to exemplify modularity insofar as each pixel maintains its individuality within the larger new media object; and each pixel can be modified or substituted. Numerical representation and modularity lead to the next tendency of new media: automation. Because new media objects can be numerically coded and contain modularity, manipulation and creation of new media can be automated. The experience of automation in new media is prevalent, but a common instance of automation is in photo editing software “correcting” images, like automatic red eye removal and filters. In VJing, automation exists in every set: looping videos, keying manipulation effects, generating animation codes, and even playing live feed all rely on the new media objects’ ability to be automatically programmed and manipulated.

The variability of new media is also sometimes referred to as characterized by its mutability. Through new media’s variability, innumerable versions of the new media object can exist. This characteristic asserts that a single image viewed on one computer is not a copy of the same image being viewed on a different computer but rather a different version of that image. Variability differs from a copy because a copy is a replication of the continuous data of an original image, and this continuous data is fixed. Variability in new media is demonstrated when

individual images can then be automated in different ways. A basic function of variability is in scalability, which is expressed each time someone changes the window size while viewing an image on a computer screen. This function recalls the previous three tendencies of new media objects: the numerical representation of the object through discrete data points, which then can be modified as a result of the modularity of the object, and the automation of the image recalibrating the pixel sizes to fit the needs of the user. Variability should be considered a more complex tendency of new media because it implicates user-object interactivity. As such, the necessarily more complex case within the tendency of variability is the popularization of hypermedia structures as a way to navigate cyberspace. Hyperlinks are the most common avenues through which new media objects are assembled in relation to one another. Cyberspace then presents the user with a freedom to navigate the screen, internet, and world of information through hypermedia by means of variability.

The final principle of new media objects as outlined by Manovich is transcoding. This is similar to variability in that it is a complex attribute of new media. However, where variability can be understood as a user-object interaction, transcoding illustrates the culture-computer interaction. Manovich defines this simply by stating: “to transcode something is to translate it into another format” (47). Transcoding does not result in the erasure of cultural objects and concepts but instead reconceptualizes them into the aforementioned characteristics of new media. Accordingly, culture affects how the computerization of culture has been organized. Words like “libraries,” “trash,” “desktop,” and “history” all demonstrate how our culture has influenced its own computerization, as does the indexical nature of computer files and the encyclopedic nature of navigating the internet. The transcoding of these ideas to function in computers serves as a

simple example of how new media objects have both a cultural layer and a computer layer. These two layers will continue to interact and influence the development of the other for the foreseeable future. Manovich expands on this relationship by suggesting:

To use another concept from new media, we can say that [the computer layer and the culture layer] are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture--a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world, and the computers own means of representing it. (46)

During a VJ's set, the VJ personifies the characteristic of transcoding through visual compositions. The music, aesthetics of the genre, and intent of the project are all aspects of the genre's culture, which is then expressed by the VJ using a computer and a composition of new media objects. Through logical selection, the VJ is emblematic of the increasing proximity between the user and producer as a result of the mutability of new media.

VIII. Towards New Narratologies

Redefining Montage

Contrasting montage theories from early cinema to montage practices in contemporary digital compositing can be analyzed as another way to contextualize the transition from media to new media. As VJing is a moving image art, it is necessary to address the artform within the context of film theory. In the same way that VJing represents a trajectory towards postmodern

literary criticism regarding author-reader relationships, VJing also simulates new media's resistance and redefinition of montage.

In its foundational stages, cinema was understood as the art of motion. Animation and film were equally important to the birth of cinema. This art of motion was inspired by nearly every visual and narrative form of expression. In the study of lasting influential early cinematic sequences, inspiration from painting, portraiture, and photography are all evident in cinematography. Cinema was equally influenced by literature and theatre and was inspired to express those stories through a recorded art of motion. Overtime, hierarchical narrative came to dominate cinema; in many ways, referring to literature was a method of cinema rationalizing its existence as an artform. Paying homage to the arts that preceded it served to fit cinema within a cultural context that was already respected and relevant. To some early filmmakers, this seemed to do a disservice to cinema, arguing instead for the forging of new content to express. So began the distinction between avant-garde (which included animation) and the super genre of 'live action film.' The super genre of live action film was imbued with the telling of stories, inspired from literature. As a result, the dominant ideology behind film became infused with the tendency towards realism; that in order to effectively convey a narrative, one must present the narrative realistically. This included presenting the narrative in somewhat chronological order and shots containing characters performing the actions of the story. While hierarchical narratives within cinema did become and continue to remain the dominant content within film, avant-garde practices and then animation and CGI also developed new forms, and now nearly all films are indebted to the use of animation. As Manovich argues, to understand cinema as the art of motion

is crucial in revealing how cinema displaces hierarchical narratives as new media have developed.

Film lends itself well to narrative, but as technology and the consumption of images have increased, narrative no longer needs to be hierarchical. Formal narrative structure dictates that a story has a plot containing a conflict, rising action, climax, and resolution, each expressed in different temporal moments. As popular film was inspired by literature, it logically follows that most films also conform to formal narrative structure. The development of montage came to be among the most important methods available to cinema in order to convey narrative. Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet director and film theorist, formalized methods of montage available to cinema in the early twentieth century, defining the effects of montage on the narrative and viewer. Central to Eisenstein's theories is the notion that a shot is not an element of montage but instead a montage cell, from which ideas can be born. Montage is not a chain of shots within a film; montage is the collision of shots within the film. The dialectic between the composition of the shots is where points of narrative are expressed.³¹ The notion that meaning from montage is created through the collision or conflict of representations within shots was revolutionary and continues to remain relevant. Distilling montage down to conflict between cells paves the way for how montage is being redefined in the wake of new media. The centering of film around narrative created specific montage methods that were used to advance the story, or rather, to lead the spectator through the story. The juxtaposition between shots typically made the cells of montage distinct from one another, serving to create a rhythm or define the tone of the film. Narratives expressed through film rely on distinction, juxtaposition, and conflict within the

³¹ See Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form."

cinematography to convey information. Of course, this was borrowed from literature and translated to cinema, but as new media has begun to affect film, new kinds of montage begun to form.

New media diverts from formal narrative because its characteristics work against conflict in many ways. The navigable nature of the internet, as well as the mutability of images, aims for smooth transitions in cyberspace. The internet, for example, presents information through hyperlinks which the user navigates. This differs from the conflict of cinema, since ideas in film are expressed through the dialectic between shots. Characteristics of new media objects and spaces rely on spatial relationships. Navigation of software and automation and mutability of editing images work to present a multiplicity of objects and spaces. As a result, spatial montage has begun to increase within digital art. The presentation of multiple images, including moving, static, manipulated, or raw, is seen within our experience interacting with new media. Through transcoding, spatial montage has been most widely performed in VJing, not narrative cinema. Recall that transcoding is essentially the computerization of culture and this translation is dictated, in part, in our practice with computers. Expressing data temporally has become less important because the digital age allows for simultaneity, since such data expressions have become spatial. Spatial montage, as described by Manovich, is nonhierarchical because multiple images can coexist simultaneously, leaving none to be forgotten. This exposes a cinematic need to explore the development of cyberspace as navigable through the moving image. Spatial montage has become increasingly relevant to depict artistically because it imitates the everyday occurrence of interacting with multiple applications and windows on a computer.³² And as

³² See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 328

narrative cinema has become the dominant, it is time to turn away from it in order to express these developments in new media. Indeed, the advent of VR and video games are the common modes through which we have begun to transcode cyberspace navigation, and critical discussion of their functioning is well documented. However, the VJ presents a different take on this phenomenon.

Central again to the uniqueness of the VJ is the ability to perform elements of these technocultural changes. Earlier, I briefly mentioned the significance of the VJ extending the physical reality of the performance environment into the digital by displaying digital content. With the same power that the VJ can enact image destabilization through purposeful found footage, the VJ performs the act of navigating digital reality. The live mixing of images simultaneously evokes a montage-like dialectic between the texts of the show, while seamlessly navigating the database of images within the VJs computer. The navigation of these images often resembles montage. As the images will interact and conflict with one another, together they give rise to meaning between the images. Many of Eisenstein's seminal montage theories are thus prevalent in VJ performances.³³ Rhythmic and metric montage is foundational to the VJ's set, since creating a rhythm with the music is a natural aim in many genres. Maintaining visual rhythm during the show lends to and enhances the sonic rhythm of the show. As a result, the overall feel of the combination of texts, both sound and visual, is made stronger. Tonal and associational montage are also central to many VJ compositions. By combining a series of visually related images relevant to the music, an overall tone or aesthetic is achieved within the space. This is particularly important to building visual tropes within genres, as well as generating

³³ See Eisenstein, Sergei, "Methods of Montage" in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*.

an aesthetic within fans of certain kinds of music. Associational montage, where two images are placed in succession in order to build meaning association between the two, is also evidenced in VJ performances. In maintaining the notion that all aspects of the show should be read as text, associational montage is built between the meaning of the image and sound to build a novel rhetoric. In a simplistic consideration of associational montage, the triggering of distinct looped video is by nature associational, and through this a VJ can begin to build a nonhierarchical narrative if they so choose. While these theories are present in VJ compositions, they thus derive from an early cinematic interest in conveying narrative. However, the synesthetic performance does not necessitate a formal narrative at all. Instead, VJ collaborations with musicians create a visual interpretation of the music, which itself leads to a rhetorical message through intertextuality. The narrative cinema utilizes temporal montage to signal the passage of time, which is certainly crucial in articulating a plot. The VJ's resistance to temporal montage indicates the shift from temporal montage to spatial montage in cinema. And spatial montage itself acts out the human experience of using computers, which replaces cinema's interest in time with the cultural interest of simultaneity.

As we experience it today, these uses of montage taken outside of strict formal narrative cinema is significant because it elucidates other possibilities and uses for cinema while also revealing the necessary artistic expression of the new media transition to spatial montage. As VJing is as widespread as it is, the cinematic practice of the VJ introduces these ideas to a broad population. In spaces where the VJ performs, audiences tend to not remain physically stagnant, and rhetoric in the synesthetic performance is still expressed. As evidenced by the previous section addressing meaning in text, the rhetoric behind the performance is in some sense

dependent on the audiences' interaction with the texts present. The idea that an audience could in some way participate or interact with non-narrative cinema in the way that the audience engages with a VJ set is relatively new. For this reason, VJing and other projection arts should be held to scrutiny in the same way that other artforms in academic discourse. And as projection arts as a whole develop the characteristics of other artforms, critical analysis of their cultural implications will become increasingly relevant in media studies.

IX. Closing Thoughts

Encore

The cultural study of VJing through a presentation of its predecessors, combined with an analysis of its methods of art production, serves to reveal evolving features of our human experience as technology develops. The presence of the VJ within a space presents the audience with the domination and manipulation of image, and this presence is affectively powerful. Introducing spectacle of the VJ's caliber to a performance can be radical, or it can debase itself into dominant ideals of mass media. The self-reflexivity of VJing calls for an awareness of its effects on the performance and is vital in order to create content that accrues cultural gain, rather than succumbing to hegemonic uses of image and technology. VJing is an expressive form, and it holds the potential to deliver powerful social commentary in the rhetorical moment of the performance. Beyond exploring the effects of VJing in a performance, this thesis has also sought to study VJing as a way to consider two original inquiries: How does a new media artist

communicate narrative and feeling? And in what ways do sound and moving image seem to call for one another?

The narratives that we are beginning to tell in new media art are appearing to be less formal and hierarchical than they are in literature and film. New media art is, in many ways, self-reflexive, using its own tools to form content. The content of new media art must nevertheless be inspired by something, and if not formal narrative perhaps new media artists tell the stories of the ever-changing attitude towards the computerization of culture. These attitudes are driven by our feelings toward the new media revolution. Digital art and new media have the capacity to contain formal narrative, certainly. But if the narrative which these artists always communicate is their own experience engaging in the computerization of culture. is this to rebel against mass media advertising, or to fall short in realizing the potential of an artform? Regardless, the outcome tells the story of the artist's attitude and subsequent engagement with new media.

To understand why sound and moving image call for one another requires that one accepts that both should be considered as text. The notion that sound and image must fight for the spotlight in multimedia spaces should be abandoned because it is in fact that case that the two are not calling out for one another; they are speaking to one another. Sound and image engage in dialogue with each other in order to enhance the significance of the space. Image and sound can each relay narratives, and they can each convey feelings. But when experienced together, in a space like that of a VJ composition, the possibilities for narrative and feeling are multiplied. It is for this reason that analysis of new media art, particularly performances such as VJing, should be integrated more heavily in interdisciplinary studies. In revealing the intertextual significance

between all elements of these performances, we open ourselves to a world of dialogue awaiting our scholarly contributions.

Though the study of VJing provides rich cultural commentary, VJing is but a single form within the broader study of projection arts. Through image domination and manipulation, VJing creates grounds for which one can question the relationships between performer and spectator, sound and image, and shifting narratologies. Imagine what a study of other projection arts could reveal? Projection mapping an image onto one's body or using motion capture technology to record and animate a dancer could open dialogue towards understanding how embodiment is changing in the face of the electronic age. Interrogating the use of surveillance technology in avant-garde art installations may spark conversations towards our reactions about data mining or teleaction. Even discussing why digital media design is growing to be essential to theatre can grant insights into how important it is to address our relationship to digital representations. The analysis of digital art and an awareness within digital artists is crucial if we are to expect that technology can be used to accrue cultural gain beyond hegemonic ideologies. To ignore the implications that projection art makes about our relationship to technology would be to fall victim to the existing dominant uses of technology. This conceptual exploration of VJing does not claim to be all encompassing, both in the implications of the VJ and in the study of projection arts. This thesis instead carves out a space within cultural studies to discuss the social and artistic implications of an increasingly relevant kind of digital art: the projection of images.

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