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Review: *Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database* Author: Lev Manovich, Andreas Kratky Publisher: Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005

In P. Adams Sitney's classic text on experimental cinema, *Visionary Film*, he describes structuralist film as a cinema in which the "shape" of such films is "predetermined and simplified" and which provides the "primary impression" upon their spectators (1979: 369). Although much of the work that is produced under the banner of digital cinema does not pursue the same aesthetic rationale that defined structuralist filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s, it is evident that the films in *Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database* owe much to that moment in avant-garde film history.

The three films and accompanying booklet contained in the *Soft Cinema* DVD are part of a broader Soft Cinema project coordinated by Lev Manovich and Andreas Kratky that includes films, installations, visualizations, architectural designs, and catalogues. The films are truncated adaptations made available on DVD format of works originally shown as video installation pieces. Anyone familiar with Lev Manovich's writings, especially his theoretical treatise *The Language of New Media*, will be aware of his exhaustive investigations of the various intersections between the cinema and the computer. *Soft Cinema* is to be seen as providing concrete examples of these investigations by exploring creatively the intersection where software meets film. Also apparent in Manovich's writings is the fact that his cinematic reference points are not restricted to the mainstream cinema but often derive from the work of avant-garde filmmakers, such as Dziga Vertov, Peter Greenaway, and Zbigniew Rybczynski.

Given Manovich's avowed interest in avant-garde cinema, it is not surprising to observe certain significant parallels between the *Soft Cinema* films and structuralist filmmaking. James Peterson has noted in his study on avant-garde cinema, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, that the most distinctive feature of canonical structuralist films, such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) or Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* (1970), is the specific interpretive framework they solicit. According to Peterson, structuralist films often call upon spectators to apply an art-process schema, a reflexive framework to help facilitate attention toward how the film was actually constructed (1994). Since the

overriding structure of such films cannot be too evident to the viewer as to avoid responses characterized by tedium and inattention, structuralist filmmakers often introduce permutational complexity into their works that inhibit the apprehension of the film's overarching and local structures.

The experience of watching the *Soft Cinema* films is similar. All of the films manifest a degree of formal complexity where strategies such as spatial montage (the splitting of the screen into multiples images) and the use of a range of media elements including video, animated graphics, sound, and text are deployed in combination to inhibit the easy identification of their underlying organizational principles. These organizational principles are manifested in the algorithms that determine the overall form of the sequences, the interrelations between media elements, and the sequencing of the films as they progress. If the formal shape of *Wavelength* and *Zorn's Lemma* is respectively a zoom and the alphabet, then the *Soft Cinema* films are shaped by the specific algorithms that select and combine elements from each of the film's media databases. The ability of the *Soft Cinema* DVD to offer slightly different versions of the films during each viewing is itself a return to the 'chance operations' that John Cage championed, an aesthetic strategy that many structuralist filmmakers sought to incorporate into their films.

Further complexity can be observed at the level of the relations between narrative and database in each of the *Soft Cinema* films. The inclusion of a narrative dimension into ostensibly structuralist works is not entirely unprecedented since as early as Snow's *Wavelength* and *Back and Forth* (1969) token gestures towards narrative were made through the inclusion of characters whose activities are subordinated to the overarching formal structures of these works. In his theoretical writings, Manovich treats narrative and database as two conflicting representational impulses with the former emphasizing a cause and effect chain of events and the latter a list of disparate elements. This theoretical tension between narrative and database is manifested in the *Soft Cinema* films as two competing interpretive systems through which the spectator can impose coherence onto the films. Each of the *Soft Cinema* films can be distinguished from each other by the different strategies they employ to reconcile the narrative/database opposition.

Commissioned for the *Soft Cinema* project, Andreas Kratky's *Absences* is the least narrative driven work of all the *Soft Cinema* films. Consisting primarily of images taken from urban and natural landscapes, the overall arc of the film is generally a progression from clearly identifiable spaces to a presentation of images that are distinctly more abstract in nature. This progression stems from the formal parameters assigned to the

images in the film's database and the editing rules that determine their combination and sequencing. The soundtrack of the film mirrors the formal progression of the imagetrack through a movement from location sounds to an abstract and layered soundscape. Although the inclusion of text provides the film's principal narrative dimension through sentences that allude to a journey, the text in the end provides little narrative anchorage and is eventually absorbed into the film's more encompassing computational logic.

Manovich's *Mission to Earth*, in contrast, uses its voice over narration to impose a narrative framework upon the film's images and motion graphics and offers, despite its episodic structure, the strongest sense of closure of all the *Soft Cinema* films. Its science-fiction story of an alien sent on a quasi-ethnographic mission to study the cultural practices on earth is an allegory of immigrant experience, not all too dissimilar, one suspects, from Manovich's own encounter with cultural displacement as a Russian emigre living in the United States. The multiple images appearing on screen are employed to represent the subjectivity of the main female lead with the abstract motion graphics providing an additional canvas to express the film's themes and the character's emotional states. While hardly conventional strategies through which to depict character subjectivity, their narrative function is nonetheless patent. Seen as a particular solution to reconcile the narrative/database opposition, *Mission to Earth* subsumes its database impulse into a structuralist rendition of narrative.

Although *Texas* is introduced in the *Soft Cinema* DVD as an "experiment in 'pure' database aesthetics," it is more productive to view the film as occupying the middle ground along the narrative/database continuum. Like *Mission to Earth*, the voice-over narration imparts a degree of narrative coherence onto the multiple images and color fields as the narrator describes fairly ordinary forms of social interaction. Yet such coherence, minimal as it is, only applies at the level of the sequence as result of the modular structure of the film, which lacks the overarching narrative unity manifested in *Mission to Earth*. Like *Absences*, the parameters of the film's database determine the selection of images, although in this case the images consist of video footage shot from various locations around the globe.

The use of spatial montage in *Texas* is also distinct from that employed in *Mission to Earth*. In the latter, spatial montage functions to convey character-centred subjectivity whereas in the former it is deployed to represent a universal non-personalized form of subjectivity associated with the current global information society. Since neither the narrative or

database dimensions of the film are able to establish a totalizing coherence, the impression imparted by watching *Texas* is an experience marked by uncertainty and bewilderment rather than the sense of reassurance derived from ascertaining a formal order, however permutationally complex that may be.

For this reason, *Texas* is the least engaging of the *Soft Cinema* films. Whereas *Mission to Earth* and *Absences* use narrative and database respectively to encourage spectators to generate conjectures on how the films will progress and eventually end, no such equivalent spectatorial solicitation is at work in *Texas* as a result of its open-ended and cognitively opaque structure. While one can argue that the film's organization is intended to replicate the fractured and directionless aspects of postmodern subjectivity itself, it is quite another thing to maintain that this necessarily leads to a satisfying aesthetic experience.

Such faults do not compromise the achievements of the other films nor should they overshadow the artistic value of the *Soft Cinema* films as a whole. While the films do not rival the best structuralist work made during the movement's heyday or signal the most radical possibilities of digital cinema, the *Soft Cinema* films nonetheless stake out the aesthetic parameters of narrative and database aesthetics when used in conjunction, a terrain that has yet to be sufficiently explored by new media artists. That the films go some way to provide concrete illustrations of Manovich's own theoretical arguments as to the aesthetic possibilities of new media suggests that the *Soft Cinema* DVD is not without its pedagogic value as well.

Peterson, J. (1994) *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the Avant-Garde Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Sitney, P.A. (1979) *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1987*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **Tico Romao:**

Tico Romao is field chair of Digital Film Production and course leader for the MA in Digital Cinema Production at the University of Gloucestershire. His research interests include film historiography and the theorization of spectacle in Hollywood films.