

An addiction to Memory [and the desire to annihilate images]

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Non-linear editing has engineered the increasing use of repeat structures in video. "Phrases" of images and sync-sound are repeated or recombined to establish the form and substance of video compositions. The analogies are minimalist musical structures, or more profoundly genetic recombination, where the elements of DNA are reassembled in seemingly endless combinations to yield the diversity of life. Unfortunately, this recombinant strategy in video produces a synthetic pabulum where the reconstituted image/sound appears to be a single "species" of video. It is difficult to distinguish one recombinant composition from another.

Recombinant aesthetics in video were established by artists Dara Birnbaum (U.S.) and Tomiyo Sasaki (Canada/USA) in the late 1970s/early 1980s, and by Granular Synthesis (Austria) and EBN (Emergency Broadcasting Network, USA) in the 1990s. The television-remixing Scratch movements in the 1980s in the U.K. bridged the work of Birnbaum and EBN. All these artists adopted the recombinant strategy prior to the availability of digital non-linear editing. There were reasons. For Birnbaum it was a critical deconstruction of pop culture. Sasaki used repeating clips of wildlife and foreign cultures to permit audiences to see through the shield of exoticism. U.K. Scratch paralleled the emergence of vinyl scratching in clubs. Granular Synthesis granulated and reassembled samples of video life, transforming the human form into a machine, an essence of technology. EBN took video hip-hop to the level of spectacle.

Video permitted these artists to build on repeat structures initiated in experimental film (montage/collage) and minimal music (Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Philip Glass). There are traditions at the base of our recombinant cultures. Audio tape recorders and VCRs had permitted artists like John Cage, Edgard Varese and Nam June Paik to play with literal memory. As Marshall McLuhan was fond of saying, the instant replay was the most significant development of the 20th century.

There is an explosion of recombinant video today. Istvan Kantor (Monty Cantsin), and Jubal Brown, both based in Toronto, immediately come to mind. Kantor and Brown produce their own distinct brands of recombinant video music. Kantor fuses sex and violence in a percussive new form of image-based rock and roll. Brown operates at higher frequencies of percussion, dealing with images at a jungle-beat rate. Another artist to watch is Michael Dimitri Ceraldi. Ceraldi, based in Syracuse, New York, and signing his tapes "mdc," comes from the world of skaters, and pushes the deliberate stroll of hip-hop into extremes paralleling the flight and crash realities of skateboarding. On the West Coast of the U.S., a new breed of video-scratching groups, including Animal Charm (Los Angeles), and

Century Quartet (San Francisco Bay area), mix their video “live” in clubs and art houses.

In the millennial decade, a time when memory is cheap and the density and intensity of layered, abutted files increases exponentially from remix to remix, the traditions of collage and montage are left in the dust, now looking like an early warning system for an inevitable, societal addiction to synthetic memory-abuse. Ultimately, this will be a folk movement. Any ordinary person with a Mac and iMovie may succumb to the intoxication of exercising the power of digital video memory. Final Cut Pro offers more control, but video samples stacked in straight-cut repeat using iMovie are raw and edgy and fresh. The edges of stuttering iMovie video-clips are so pronounced and rich, encouraging most operators to go over the top, leading them to make loud, percussive, dense strings of mechanical, metallic video compositions.

With enough RAM and ROM and an endless desire and capacity for repeated experience, a new obsessive-compulsive art is seen emerging from desktop and laptop studios everywhere. Non-linear editing systems are powerful image processing systems. For anyone angered by the constant barrage of advertising, political propaganda, info-tainment and advertorials (the pulsing obnoxious surplus of vulgar images in their own regimen of endless repeat), a personal technological device that chops and grinds up these threatening, seductive images is extremely valuable, even necessary for survival. Basically the digital non-linear video editing system is an image buzz-saw, the electronic equivalent of a sausage grinder, or an electric vegetable chopper or juicer.

There is nothing subtle about recombinant aesthetics today. Recombinant work is aggressive, vindictive and destructive (not necessarily deconstructive). Deconstruction depends on a certain level of representation. The howl of image-blenders today is the scream of a new abstraction. Rapid, sustained repeats of an image leave an impression of total, otherworldly, abstraction. Electronic images, having already broken away from the physical world (automobiles often “fly” like an “eagle”), are even more terminally distanced from “reality”, emptied of associative meaning by numbing redundancy. Images are made strangely concrete through isolation and repeat. Descriptive, analogous and metaphoric relationships are wiped out. Images are emptied of meaning, reduced to retinal objects. The global world of image, incomprehensibly complex and other-worldly in scale, is crushed and reduced to a manageable sub-human scale. Context and meaning are annihilated on the microelectronic level of personal technology.

Isn't this the buzz? Isn't it satisfying to operate, to take violent, effective action on a manageable fragment from the colossal, global world of image? For most people the world's infosphere is a totality overwhelming in scale. Images of advertising and political influence permeate the universe of our consciousness. The jetstreams of satellite-spawned image-flow blow right through our psychological microenvironments (embodied units of individual human consciousness). For anyone resenting the barrage of intrusive, oppressive advertising, propaganda and ideologically conformist entertainment, isn't it satisfying to be able to capture a hostile image in a file, and then to beat it into the ground by repeating it over and over again until every last reference or attachment to the world at large is gone?

Does this explain the tendency to pound images to death? While some say it is simply a return to the formal excesses of modernity (expressive abstraction or the necessary structural aspects of minimalism - recombinant “beats” basically “structure” themselves as audiences are subjected to and recognize the patterns of repeats), maybe the instinct to sample and repeat is simply an act of aggressive hostility? Non-linear editing systems are used as weapons for electric-guitar-like solo demonstrations of machine-gun editing.

First the moving image is contained or frozen in a file. Then this file is replicated and introduced as an image specimen on a screen. Its sync-sound yelps as it is strobed mercilessly and all meaningful references to the living image are destroyed. This is the pure objectification of image. As the references fade the image becomes meaningless, a remnant of memory. Even dead images are beautiful.

There is an seemingly unlimited quantity of images in various degrees of repeat in the current global infosphere. We all go through unlimited quantities of images in various degrees of decay and expiration in memory. The global image environment is a nether world. This could be the basis of a new information-based economics. Micro-info-economists would measure and predict the relative life or death of an image. In this light, artists who practice recombinant aesthetics at a stroboscopic rate, are literally trying to beat images to death.

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His most recent book, *Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment*, released in 2002, is available directly from the Banff Centre Press (Alberta, Canada): <http://www.banffcentre.ab.ca/press/publications/>