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What Is So Cinematic About Software?

> *"If, on the screen, the mechanism disappears and the phrases you have made them say, the gestures you have made them make, have become one with your models, with your film, with you - then a miracle."*
>
> -- Robert Bresson*, Notes on the Cinematographer*

The series of performed and recorded videos, under the collective title "Original Software applied to Cinematography by NASA," riffs a period in U.S. history marked by technological optimism and ideological strife. Each of the videos in the series samples NASA footage from the 1968-72 U.S. Apollo missions to the moon. Applied to these archival fragments is my original software, consisting of simple, dynamically-modifiable algorithms. The software itself derives from other archives - that of the American avant-garde film movement from the same historical period. For example, the algorithm, "HF Critical Mass," abstracts and encodes the structural motif of one of the signature experimental films from that period - a time when avant-garde film practice had reached a point of particular intensity.

There were two crewed landings on the moon during 1971, the same year that the experimental filmmaker, Hollis Frampton, produced "Critical Mass". Apollo 14 launched January 31 and landed on the moon February 5, on the site named Fra

Mauro. It returned to Earth on February 9. The next Apollo mission, Apollo 15, launched on July 26 and landed on the moon July 20. The landing site was Hadley Rille/Apennines. Apollo 15 returned to Earth on August 7, 1971.

The relevance of this look back into NASA's archives points in two directions: one political and the other cultural. The current U.S. ambition to militarize outer space stands in strange contrast to the alibis for space exploration of a previous era. While the military-industrial complex moves in the direction of its overt objectives, there continues, in the cultural realm, a persistent and enigmatic, luddite skepticism whether the Apollo moon landings ever happened at all.

The videos derived from the application of software to NASA video archives participate in the genre of the "software demo" as a distinct aesthetic. In traditional cinema, the experience of meaning depends upon montage, a visceral closure completed by the viewer across the gaps between film shots. With the screen-based software interface, the experience of meaning erupts out of a different set of gaps: the boundaries between and among simulacra, that is, between and among different representations – presented “in tandem” - of the same audio-visual event. This is made obvious in any computer game where the graphic interface controlling a player's stats/states/pov are displayed along with the narrative actions (graphically representing the same data in a different way). In contrast, multiple representations of the same data are typically suppressed or split up in vjaying software (i.e., the vjay performer looks at one form of data representation embedded in an elaborate interface, while the audience views a different visual representation of the same states/behaviors/data). This is why the aesthetic of the software demo has more in common with computer gameplay than it has with vjay improvisation performances. It is the viewers' "cross-referencing" among multiple audio-visual translations of the same code objects screened simultaneously that constitutes the experience of the software demo. It is the gaps between and among the variety of audio-visual representations of code that ground both the perceptions of the viewer and the performative interactions of the user. Hence one characteristic feature of "Original Software applied to Cinematography by NASA" becomes the visible manipulation of the interface, available for viewing alongside the improvised video montage.

- Barbara Lattanzi, March 2006