

Material Memories

Time And The Cinematic Image

[Paul D. Miller \(DJ Spooky\)](#)

"Time is invention, or it is nothing at all..."

Gilles Deleuze, *Movement-Image*

"I am the OmniAmerican born of beats and blood, the concert of the sun unplugged..."

Saul Williams, *Om Ni American*

It was Maya Deren who said it a long time ago: "A ritual is an action distinguished from all others in that it seeks the realization of its purpose through the exercise of form." ¹ The time was 1945 and she was to later go on to be one of the first cinematographers to document the Voudon dances of Haiti. For her film was both rupture and convergence the screen was a place where the sense of vision was conveyed by time and its unfolding in the images of her investigation. Black bodies, white screens a ritual played out in the form of possession and release in her projections. The rhythms of fragmentation and loss for her were a new currency, a new way to explore the optical poetry of the Americas reflected in the dances of the Caribbean. Time and cinema for her were one dance, one meshwork of physical and psychological time, the rhythms were altars of a new history written in the movements of dance. In her 1945 film "Ritual in Transfigured Time" she explored the poetry of suspended time to try to create a new artform of the American cinema, a ritual of rhythm and noise that would engage everything from later films like "Divine Horsemen" (her homage to the Loa of Haiti) to her classic 1948 film "Meditation on Violence" that explored the Wu-Tang school of boxing (not the liquid swords of Staten Island, but the Chinese art based on the *Book of Changes* in China). Ritual time, visual time both were part of a new history unfolding on the white screens of her contemporary world. She sought a new art to mold time out of dance, a social sculpture carved out of celluloid gestures and body movements caught in the prismatic light of the camera lens: "in this sense [ritual] is art, and even historically, all art derives from ritual. Being a film ritual, it is achieved not in spatial terms alone, but in terms of Time created by the camera." ² In the lens of the camera the dance became a way of making time expand and become a ritual reflection of reality itself. Film became total. Became time itself a mnemonic, a memory palace made of the gestures captured on the infinitely blank screen.

"**Money is time**, but time is not money." It's an old phrase that somehow encapsulates that strange moment when you look out your window and see the world flow by a question comes to mind: "How does it all work?" Trains, planes, automobiles, people, transnational corporations, monitor screens... large and small, human and non-human... all of these represent a seamless convergence of time and space in a world consisting of compartmentalized moments and discrete invisible transactions. Somehow it all just works. Frames per second, pixels per square inch, color depth resolution measured in the millions of subtle combinations possible on a monitor screen... all of these media representations still need a designated driver. From the construction of time in a world of images and advertising, it's not that big a leap to arrive at a place like that old Wu-Tang song said a while ago "C.R.E.A.M" "Cash Rules Everything Around Me." That's the end result of the logic of late capitalist representations redux.

Think of the scenario as a Surrealists' walking dream put into a contemporary context. Andre Breton first stated the kind of will to break from the industrial *roles* culture assigned everyone in Europe back in 1930: "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly as fast as you can, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level." ³ Weapons drawn and firing as you take a sleepwalk through the crowded thoroughfares and shopping malls of the information age, your surrealistic statement makes even less sense than the world that you want to join as you become a mediated celebrity straight out of a Ballard short story or maybe Warhol's kind of 15 minutes of fame.

What the Surrealists called "automatic writing" letting subconscious thought become a formalized artistic act gets flipped, becoming a gangsta dreamtime remix, like an open source Linux coded operating system, psychogeographic shareware for the open market in a world where identity is for sale to the highest bidder. Screen time. Prime Time: Life as a infinite level video game with an infinite array of characters to pick from. It's one of those situations where, poker-faced, the dealer asks you, "pick a card, any card..." It's a game that asks "who speaks through you?" There are a lot of echoes in the operating system, but that's the point. The game goes on. The moment of revelation is encoded in the action: you become the star of the scene, your name etched in bullets ripping through the crowd. Neon lit Social-Darwinism for the technicolor age. Set your browser to drift mode and simply float: the sequence really doesn't care what you do as long as you are watching. "Now" becomes a method for exploring the coded landscapes of contemporary post-industrial reality, a flux, a Situationist reverie, a "psychographie" a drift without

beginning or end... Ask any high school student in the U.S. and they can tell you the same thing.

Most people trace the idea of time without variation to Newton's 1687 *Principia*. With the term "Absolute Time" he created a sense that the world moved in a way that only allow one progression, one sequence of actions. Joel Chadabe's (director of the Electronic Music Foundation in the U.S.) book length essay on the idea of Time and electronic music, "Electric Sound," points us to the old referential style of thought that Newton highlighted:

as if models of a synchronous universe, every musical composition and painting of the Newtonian period roughly from 1600 to 1900 reflected one line of time. In every musical composition, there was but one line of chord progressions to which all notes were synchronized. In every painting, there was but one line of travel for the viewers' eyes, one perspective to which all objects were synchronized.⁴

The kind of synchronized time imagined in this scenario is what, by most accounts, fueled the Industrial Revolution, and lubricated a culture based on highly stratified regulation of the limited amounts of time available for production. Einstein's 1905 special theory of relativity paved the way for the physics that Richard P. Feynman would extend and develop much later in the century. As Chadabe puts it: "Einstein's universe was a multiplicity of parallel and asynchronous timelines."⁵ Chronos, the Greek god of Time, was a cannibal: he devoured his children and left the universe barren. From time all things emerge and into Time all things go. Chronos at the heart of Europe, Chronos at the crossroads becomes a signpost in suspension multiplication of time versus the all consuming one track time, one track mind.

Anyway, feel a million flurries of now, a million intangibles of the present moment, an infinite permutation of what could be... the thought gets caught... You get the picture. In the data cloud of collective consciousness, it's one of those issues that just seems to keep popping up. Where did I start? Where did I end? First and foremost, it's that flash of insight, a way of looking at the fragments of time. Check it: visual mode open source, a kinematoscope of the unconscious: a bullet that cuts through everything like a Doc Edgerton, E.J. Maret or Muybridge flash frozen frame. You look for the elements of the experience, and if you think about it, even the word "analysis" means to break down something into its component parts. Stop motion: weapons drawn, flip the situation into a new kind of dawn... It's only a rendition of Breton's dream surrealism as a mid-summer night's scheme, check the drift in the 21st Situationist scene. A scenario on the screen: camera obscura, the perspective unbound walking through a crowd, gun drawn, firing wildly until everyone is gone... could it be another version, another situation... like the police whose 19 out of 41 bullets shot Diallo dead or the kids that walk into the schools to live out their most

powerful stunningly banal lives by ending their classmates. This is how it is in the sign of the times — an advertising link to the symbols of a lawless world, something anything to grasp onto to give meaning to the ultra swirl...

Or something like that.

For Breton and the Surrealists that moment of total freedom — walking into a crowd firing blindly, was a psycho-social critique of the way that time and culture had been regimented in an industrial society. Freedom was in the abandonment of the roles that they, like everyone else around them, were forced to play. Flip the script, timestretch the code: From Frederick Winslow Taylor's "clockwork economy" that was taken from his *Principles of Scientific Management* on up to the hypercondensed TV commercials of the early 21st century the motif: "Money is time, but time is not money."

What happens when you look at the time part of the phrase? You're left with a paradox in math and physics translated into the social realm of human transactions and the uncanny system of correspondences that make up the components of reality as we know it. What would happen if the dream stopped? What would happen if the bright lights and technicolor illusions that hold contemporary reality together were swept away in a swirl of static? What would we do if that place where all the stories come from suddenly vanished like a mirage in the desert of our collective dreams? As the amount of information out there explodes exponentially and threatens to become almost the only way people relate to one another, it's a question that seems to beg a response: what would happen if it just vanished and the lights went out?

I write this after a week of intense activity — a trip to Washington D.C. where I saw first-hand some of the time machines the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue uses to measure half-life decay of cesium particles and their relationship to the precise measurement of time, and then the image and soundtrack switched and now I'm in Austin, Texas, half a country away, for the SXSW film festival of interactive media. Crossfade to a week later, Newark Airport, transfer to the Toronto Music Festival... The script unfolds while the fragments coalesce. I like to think of this kind of writing as a script information — the self as "subject-in-synchronization" (the moving parts aligned in the viewfinder of an other), rather than the old 20th century inheritance of the Cartesian subject-object relation. What are the ontological implications for such a shift? What does this kind of "filmic time" do to the creative act, and how do we represent it? It's been well documented that music has engaged these issues from the beginning of the cinematic moment. From D.W. Griffith's awe inspiring classic *Birth of a Nation*, to the first sound film *The Jazz Singer*, the issue of how to deal with different approaches to the notion of fragmented time — and how we portray it — has haunted the cinema. After a couple of years of movies like *The*

Matrix, *Bamboozled*, and *Blair Witch Project* it seems that, without a doubt, the conflicting impulse of how to portray psychological time has become a core motif in cinema. Early films, like Oskar Fischinger animation intro for Disney's *Fantasia* or Man Ray's film shorts explored how to portray the human subject in relation to the objects around us. But when jazz entered the picture, that's when things really flipped into a more immersive narrative context. The first sound film to hit pop culture's criteria of mass sales and massive influence was Alan Crosland's 1927 epic *The Jazz Singer* film shorts were used to keep audiences occupied while film reels were changed. The ongoing relationship of how to go between images arrives and conquers becomes song.

A blip on the radar? A database sweep? A streamed numerical sequence? In a short space, my narrative has switched formats and functions, time and place all were kind of like fonts something to be used for a moment to highlight a certain mode of expression, and, of course, utterly pliable. As I sit here and type on my laptop, even the basic format of the words I write still mirrors some of the early developments in graphical user interface based texts, still echoes not only in how I write, but how I think about the temporal placement of the words and ideas I'm thinking about. It's a world-view that definitely ain't linear but came out of the graphical user interfaces invented by the likes of Alan Kay, and Douglas Engelberts, and Ivan Sutherland stuff that let you move into the screen and interact with the icons and objects on the monitors surface. Into the picture, into the frame that's the name of the game. Context becomes metatext, and the enframing process, as folks as diverse as Iannis Xenakis, Kool Keith aka Dr. Octagon or Eminem can tell you, like Freidrich Kittler, "Aesthetics begins as 'pattern recognition.'" [6](#)

Repetition and Claude Shannon? Repetition and James Snead? As has been well documented by folks such as Tricia Rose, James Snead, and Sherry Turkle (whose book *The Second Self* could be a digital era update on W.E.B. Dubois' critique of African American "Double Consciousness" and the multiplying effects of digital media on self representation) the sense here is one of prolonging the formal implications of the expressive act move into the frame, get the picture, re-invent your name. Movement, flow, flux: the nomad takes on the sedentary qualities of the urban dweller. Movement on the screen becomes an omnipresent quality. Absolute time becomes dream machine flicker. The eyes move. The body stays still. Travel. Big picture small frame, so what's the name of the game? Symbol and synecdoche, sign and signification, all at once, the digital codes become a reflection, a mirror permutation of the nation... Where to go? What to do to get there?

Sometimes the best way to get an idea across is to simply tell it as a story. It's been a while since one autumn afternoon in 1896 when Georges Melies was filming a late afternoon Paris crowd caught in the ebb and flow of the city's traffic. Melies was in

the process of filming an omnibus as it came out of a tunnel, and his camera jammed. He tried for several moments to get it going again, but with no luck. After a couple of minutes he got it working again, and the camera's lens caught a hearse going by. It was an accident that went unnoticed until he got home. When the film was developed and projected it seemed as if the bus morphed into a funeral hearse and back to its original form again. In the space of what used to be called *actualites* — real contexts reconfigured into stories that the audiences could relate to — a simple opening and closing of a lens had placed the viewer in several places and times simultaneously. In the space of one random error, Melies created what we know of today as the "cut" words, images, sounds flowing out the lens projection would deliver, like James Joyce used to say "sounds like a river." Flow, rupture, and fragmentation — all seamlessly bound to the viewers perspectival architecture of film and sound, all utterly malleable — in the blink of an eye space and time as the pre-industrial culture had known it came to an end.

Whenever you look at an image, there's a ruthless logic of selection that you have to go through to simply create a sense of order. The end-product of this palimpsest of perception is a composite of all the thoughts and actions you sift through over the last several micro-seconds — a soundbite reflection of a process that's a new update of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or the German proto Expressionist 1920 film *Der Golem*, but this time it's the imaginary creature made of the interplay fragments of time, code, and (all puns intended) memory and flesh. The eyes stream data to the brain through something like two million fiber bundles of nerves. Consider the exponential aspects of perception when you multiply this kind of density by the fact that not only does the brain do this all the time, but the millions of bits of information streaming through your mind at any moment have to be coordinated. Any shift in the traffic of information — even the slightest rerouting — can create, like the hearse and omnibus of Melies film accident, not only new thoughts, but new ways of thinking. Literally. Non-fiction, check the meta-contradiction... Back in the early portion of the 20th century this kind of emotive fragmentation implied a crisis of representation, and it was filmmakers, not Dj's who were on the cutting edge of how to create a kind of subjective intercutting of narratives and times — there's even the famous story of how President Woodrow Wilson when he saw the now legendary amount of images and narrative jump-cuts that were in turn cut and spliced up in D.W. Griffith's film classic *Birth of a Nation* called the style of ultra-montage "like writing history with lightning." I wonder what he would have said of Grand Master Flash's 1981 classic "Adventures on the Wheels of Steel"?

Film makers like D.W. Griffith, Dziga Vertov, Oscar Michaux, and Sergei Eisenstein (especially with his theory of "dialectal montage" or "montage of attractions" that created a kind of subjective intercutting of multiple layers of stories within stories)

were forging stories for a world just coming out of the throes of World War I. A world which, like ours, was becoming increasingly inter-connected, and filled with stories of distant lands, times and places — a place where cross-cutting allowed the presentation not only of parallel actions occurring simultaneously in separate spatial dimensions, but also parallel actions occurring on separate temporal planes — in the case of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, four stories at once — and helped convey the sense of density that the world was confronting... Griffith was known as "the Man Who Invented Hollywood," and the words he used to describe his style of composition "intra-frame narrative" or the "cut-in" the "cross-cut" — staked out a space in America's linguistic terrain that hasn't really been explored too much. Griffith's films were mainly used as propaganda — *Birth of a Nation* was used as a recruitment film for the Ku Klux Klan at least up until the mid 1960's, and other films like *Intolerance* were commercial failures, and the paradox of his cultural stance versus the technical expertise that he brought to film, is still mirrored in Hollywood to this day. Jazz time versus Hollywood time. *The Jazz Singer* versus the silence of *Birth of a Nation* on the mind-screens of contemporary America: echo meets alias in the coded exchange of glances. What Mikhail Bakhtin might have once called "diacritical difference" now becomes "the mix.," or as James B. Twitchell says in "Adcult USA" his classic analysis of advertising culture, media, and the "carnival of the everyday" in the images and sounds that make up the fabric of American daily life: "[the situations are] homologues of each other and semilogues of those in the genre. Entertainments share diachronic and synchronic similarities; they refer to individual texts as well as to all precursors and successors — every programmers worst fear is that we might change the channel." ⁷

If you compare that kind of flux to stuff like Dj mixes, you can see a similar logic at work: it's all about selection of sound as narrative. I guess that's travelling by synecdoche. It's a process of sifting through the narrative rubble of a phenomenon that conceptual artist Adrian Piper liked to call the "indexical present:" "I use the notion of the 'indexical present' to describe the way in which I attempt to draw the viewer into a direct relationship with the work, to draw the viewer into a kind of self critical standpoint which encourages reflection on one's own responses to the work..."

To name, to call, to upload, to download... take on the notion of dance and memory. By moving across the screen you uncover slowly deteriorating images of dancehalls a lyrical critique of how much we move physically and the immense amount of potential culture has for change, a project that's based on geographic and temporal simultaneity — i.e. creating a new time-zone out of widely dispersed geographic regions — reflect the same ideas by using the net to focus our attention on a world rapidly moving into what I like to call "prosthetic realism." Sight and sound, sign and signification: the travel at this point becomes mental, and as with Griffith's hyper

dense technically prescient intercuts, it's all about how you play with the variables that creates the artwork. If you play, you get something out of the experience. If you don't, like Griffith the medium becomes a reinforcement of what's already there, and as one critic, said a long time ago of Griffith's *Intolerance*: "history itself seems to pour like a cataract across the screen..." This is the James Snead critique of what Spike Lee ironically called "Colored Peoples Time" in *Bamboozled*, or what Morpheus in the form of Lawrence Fishbourne asked Neo in the *Matrix*: "Do you think that's air you're breathing in here?"

Like an acrobat drifting through the topologies of codes, glyphs and signs that make up the fabric of my everyday life, I like to flip things around. With a culture based on stuff like Emergency Broadcast Network's hyper-edited news briefs, Ninja Tune dance moguls, Cold Cut's "7 Minutes of Madness" remix of Eric B and Rakim's "Paid in Full" to Grandmaster Flash's "Adventures on the Wheels of Steel" to later excursions into geographic, cultural, and temporal dispersion like MP3lit.com contemporary 21st Century aesthetics needs to focus on how to cope with the immersion we experience on a daily level a density that Sergei Eisenstein back in 1929 spoke of when he was asked about travel and film: "the hieroglyphic language of the cinema is capable of expressing any concept, any idea of class, any political or tactical slogan, without recourse to the help of suspect dramatic or psychological past" Does this mean that we make our own films as we live them? Travelling without moving. It's something even Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" wouldn't have thought possible. But hey, like I always say, "who's counting?" Chronos the all consuming father watches as somehow his children are given a "stay of execution" and he is forced to stay hungry what happens when a scene is no longer a scenario, but a computational process?

Notes

*Notes for the Oberhausen Film Festival, (Forthcoming).

[1.](#) Maya Deren, "Ritual in Transfigured Time," *Experimental Films*, New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1945-6.

[2.](#) Ibid.

[3.](#) Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972. p. 124.

[4.](#) Joel Chadabe, *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997. p. 21.

[5.](#) Ibid., p. 22.

[6.](#) Friedrich Kittler, *Literature/Media/Information Systems: Essays*. John Johnston, editor. Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997, p. 130.

[7.](#) James B. Twitcheell, *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

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