Live Cinema: Context and "Liveness"

Introduction

Live audio-visual performance has a rich history connected to video art, performance art, the visual arts and cinema, but distinctions within the quickly expanding field are less understood. This paper reviews and explores the influences, characteristics and elements of three major genres: live cinema, a montage-driven digitally-enhanced rendition of traditional cinema, visual music, a form associated with expanded cinema and involving the synchrony of abstract visuals and sound, and VJ'ing, which typically involves selecting, mixing and remixing visuals as accompaniment to a separate, and often unrelated audio DJ. I will propose a possible lexicon for these contemporary forms in an attempt to map the essential formal elements and unique characteristics of live cinema, visual music and VJ'ing.

One distinguishing characteristic of all of these genres is ostensibly the fact that it is live, but what does that mean really? How does an audience know something is live and does that matter? Much of the conversation amongst practitioners revolves around "real-time" production (or post-production), and I tend to feel the success or failure of works in this genre should actually be critiqued with that aspect heavily weighted. Another distinguishing characteristic is related to context of presentation. Is the audience seated? Are there other possibly distracting elements present during the performance? Are the performers easily visible by the audience?

These questions are important to ask as we tumble headlong into ever newer and more available technologies so that we do not lose sight of the historical context of the form. While no critical framework can claim to predict future directions or even to accurately describe all existing practice, we can attempt to leave analytical breadcumbs along the way, if only to help us accurately trace the myriad trajectories that have emerged.

I will first explore the background of the three genre's approaches to live audio-visual performance and subsequently discuss these and other distinguishing factors for the successful reception of this kind of work.

Background

Visual Music

Let's first consider Visual Music, a historical antecedent that much of current live AV performance can be traced to. According to Ox and Keefer, Visual Music as a unique form of live audio-visual art can be described thusly:

> A visualization of music that is the translation of a specific musical composition (or sound) into a visual language, with the original syntax being emulated in the new visual rendition. This can be done with or without a computer. This can also be defined as intermedia.… It is a new composition created visually but as if it were an aural piece. This can have sound, or be silent.… A direct translation of image to sound or music, as images photographed, drawn or scratched onto a film's soundtrack are directly converted to sound when the film is projected. Often these images are simultaneously shown visually. Literally, what you see is also what you hear. (Ox and Keefer)

Even though there is an abundance of information regarding the history of visual music, one still finds references to the practice as if it were a newly discovered artform. Adrien Bernard Klein, in his 1927 book *Color-Music: the Art of Light*, points this out: "It is an odd fact that almost everyone who develops a color-organ is under the misapprehension that he, or she, is the first mortal to attempt to do so" (Levin, "Painterly," 21).

This lack of history for work of this sort can be somewhat explained by its being associated with fringe practices that have been connected to spirituality and the occult as well as the art world's lack of interest due to problems associated with selling work of this nature. (Snibbe and Levin 4). This connection between artistic media, perception, and the spiritual has been examined and reexamined over the centuries as the basis for a perceptual aesthetics (Snibbe and Levin 1). Wassily Kandinsky is well-known for his explorations of this aesthetic and the accompanying psychological and physical underpinnings of synesthesia in both his writings and painting (Kandinsky).

While operators of the various devices for producing visual music certainly played them live, the overall audience was limited due to the complexity of the apparatus. Prominent historical

figures in this area include Oscar Fischinger, a Bauhaus-era engineer and filmmaker, who is credited with producing the first music videos and was inventor and builder of the Lumigraph, a color-organ intended for use by home audiences (Moritz). In 1926-27 Fischinger performed his own multiple projector film shows with various musical accompaniment (Keefer).

In 1957, San Francisco artist Jordan Belson embarked on a collaboration with Henry Jacobs, an audio artist. Centered at the Morrison Planetarium and continuing through 1959, Belson and Jacobs created a groundbreaking set of audiovisual events called the Vortex Concerts. These events utilized prepared film clips and other projected imagery uniquely designed for use on the full-domed screen. Belson and Jacob's work at the planetarium was not just an opportunity to develop new visual technologies and techniques, but also allowed Belson the chance to explore themes which would re-surface in his film work. These themes, not surprisingly, loop back to the spiritual and transcendent experience of abstraction within perceptual phenomenon (Youngblood 160-173).

In the late 60's and early 70's Steina and Woody Vasulka pioneered live electronic imaging capabilities, and were among the first to explore the intermedia capabilities of electronic sound and image. The Vasulka's formal work with electronic signals paved the way for future generations of visual music artists exploring the live intertwined relationship between audio and video (Rife and Steele 2). This intermediality, and particularly the real-time aspect of its creation, is most important in my discussion and provides the bridge between Visual Music and Live Cinema.

Live Cinema

Live Cinema is a relatively new term for real-time audiovisual performances. Cinema itself has a long rich history, and one would expect that Live Cinema would somehow be dependent on this history or to be an extension of it.

Traditional cinema relies heavily on montage, and linear storytelling. Alexander Mackendrick articulates the relationship between narrative and non-verbal modes of meaning making in cinema as dependent on formal means such as different screen sizes and the framing of shots, the relationships between camera angles and point of view, the use of music and lighting, and techniques of editing. "Cinema deals with feelings, sensations, intuitions and movement… [the] meaning of film dialogue is often much more effectively transmitted by a complex and intricate organization of cinematic elements that are not only *not* verbal, but that can never be fully analyzed by verbal means" (Makela 2). So what we find is that under scrutiny, the

mechanisms of meaning-making in what is considered a very narrative form, are in fact very similar to the mechanisms apparent in non-representational abstraction.

In traditional cinema, the pacing and overall sense of the film is created after the original footage has been shot, during the editing process. This process can incorporate the use of montage, a technique for compressing the flow of narrative using quick edits, special effects and accompanying audio. In early Soviet cinema of the 1920s, montage was theorized by Eisenstein to be "the nerve of cinema" (Eisenstein 45). In live cinema, this montage is created in real-time, using a variety of techniques, but the same theories can still inform our attempts to define how meaning is created (Makela 3). Far more important than the specific cinematic conventions employed in a performance of live cinema, as we shall see, is the degree to which the artist is able to communicate the necessity for its "liveness" and the extent to which this element relates to the overall intent of the artist, and content of the work. It seems a misuse of the medium to merely perform a work live, which could just as easily be presented in a traditional cinematic setting.

VJ'ing

VJ'ing seems to be the most complex area to define and perhaps this is related to the development of the term itself (emerging from the era of MTV "video jockeys") and the many trajectories that converge on its practice. In general however, VJ'ing encompasses those audio-visual performance activities, which typically take place within a club setting, where the focus of the audience is shifting and the intent of the performance is as accompaniment to the music or as an ambient backdrop to the social context. In contrast to this, each of the previous forms of live audio-visual performance are intended, more often than not, for a more attentive audience, an audience whose attention is constrained by context.

The history and development of VJ'ing is tied more closely to the history of technology than anything else. While this is true of all of the forms of live audio–visual performance we are investigating, it seems most notably apparent in the *aesthetic* of VJ'ing, at least in the manner in which I am situating it for this paper. From the early days of "liquid light" shows in the 1960's rock entertainment arena, to contemporary forms, the modes of expression were securely tethered to available technology; and the work produced tends to appear in retrospect as a showcase of what the latest equipment was at the time. Synchronized slide projections, the Fairlight, the Video Toaster, and more recently the Edirol V4 and the Pioneer DVJ, all tend to carry with them a particular aesthetic, and are associated with professional light show artists with backgrounds in the entertainment industry.

With the introduction, however, of video sampling in the early 1990's, and the emergence of relatively inexpensive portable laptop computers, the stage was set for an explosion of practitioners with little or no formal training. Some have attempted to characterize this aspect of VJ'ing, like its predecessor in laptop music performance, as a new "folk art", because of the relative ubiquity of the technology, and the preponderance of appropriated imagery typically found in many strains of this practice (devslashnull). Folk art or not, the form has taken hold and has become a mainstay in club culture, from the informal house party to epic scale outdoor festivals.

The content of many VJ performances, more often than not, seems to include material appropriated from media culture: television, Hollywood films, commercials, and more recently material popularized via services like YouTube. The intent in many of these cases seems to be to present the familiar, but to make it strange. Using compositing techniques and rapid-fire cuts, the juxtapositioning of popular images infuses these images with alternate meanings, or merely renders them meaningless.

On Production and Post-production

One additional area of distinction that crosses these genres involves the source of materials used. Live production typically involves generative processes that create imagery and sound "on-the-fly" within the computational framework of the computer.[1] Post-production processes on the other hand involve the real-time mixing, and re-mixing of *existing imagery,* and the subsequent processing of those images via special effects, manual manipulation, and/or various other forms of intervention imposed by the artist. This distinction is important to many practitioners, as it tends to polarize those who work within "pure" abstraction and those who work with montage. Of course, many performers freely intersperse these elements, with no sense of compromise of their artistic intent. As we shall see, this intent is context sensitive, as is the reception of the relative quality of "liveness."

Discussion

The idea of the *liveness* of an AV performance falls along a continuum that, on one end, relates to cinema, where a passive and disembodied audience sits and watches a presentation of sound and image fixed in its content, to the other extreme, where it is clear that a living performer

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[1] While this definition may fail upon deeper analysis, such as when distinguishing the components of that computational realm as the "material" upon which post-production processes are performed (i.e. mathematical functions that comprise 2D or 3D forms) for the purposes of this paper this definition shall suffice.

is acting out some sequence of embodied motion, which can be directly mapped to sound and image unfolding within a fixed or variable space, and with the active participation of the audience.

Along this continuum of course, is where most live AV practice occurs. Typical is the mostly unseen artist tucked off to one side of a venue, making barely perceptible movements by clicking buttons and slider levers, like the Wizard of Oz. I would argue however, that in this context the liveness of the event itself supercedes any necessity for each of the participants (VJ, DJ, audience) to exhibit any of the behaviors we might typically associate with "performing"; there is a collective liveness, constructed through audience and performer interaction, embedded in the event itself. The "text" of the event is "read" as a gestalt, and so the distinctions we might normally want to ascribe to performer / audience seem to dissolve in some way. Many attempt to utilize theatrical techniques, as seen in some performances where the VJ and DJ interact in arm raising and fist pounding gyrations and crowd rousing antics, but these activities have little to do with the content being presented. It does not matter really if the VJ is generating algorithmic compositions in real-time or merely playing a DVD that was recorded earlier. What is more important in this case are the layers of interaction occurring within the social construct of the event. Often chaotic, and dependent on shifting modes of reception, this kind of context may leave an individual with a sense of being involved in something special, unique, and "live" in a collective chronological sense, but not in a way that mimics reception of a performative work.

By contrast the cinema event is one that removes these elements by the context of the immersion. We all file into the same room together, and disappear into its darkness, only to emerge later, in time for the next batch to file in after us, a regimented repeatable experience that occurs in our heads, without social interaction or bodily involvement. However, the live cinema practitioner in this case, typically takes center stage and the actions of the performer are foregrounded. In this context, where the performance of the content becomes the focus of the audience, it becomes crucial for the practitioner to examine the cues and relationships to the material and process of the performance. It is within these boundaries, determined by the interface to the content, where exciting possibilities arise for exploring new forms of narrativity and meaning generation. In some cases, specific interface tools are being developed that have been designed and fabricated by artists to augment, enhance and support the content.

Donald Norman has said, "An interface is an obstacle. It stands between a person and the system being used" (Norman 209). I would argue however that in the case of live audio-visual

performance, an interface is a sign, in the Peircean[2] sense. The interface, which includes the process of the artist(s) interacting with a system, carries it's own set of messages, and these become a part of the content of any performance, but most especially those with an attentive seated audience, as in the case of what has become known as Live Cinema.

Examples

To provide some grounding in current practice, I'd like to explore, through examples, the various approaches to live AV performance, and how each of these examples navigates and synthesizes the previously described criteria of "liveness," interface, narrative, and production approach, and how context may or may not influence the choices an artist might make.

To initialize this field of play, I'd like to first establish a continuum of live AV performance practice, creating some boundaries, and subsequently situate artists' practice along this continuum.

On one end of the continuum, is Noisefold (David Stout and Corey Metcalf) who perform an immersive, cinematic and at times theatrical mix of abstract sound and image. Noisefold create a live AV performance that uses elements and themes from mathematics, the biological sciences and the visual and audio arts. Noisefold perform as a networked duo and utilize infrared and electromagnetic sensors to synthesize computer-generated 3-D objects that in turn, create their own sounds from their geometry. Their performances use real-time 3-D animation, visualizations of morphing mathematical functions, artifical-life simulations, and data transcoding techniques, within a complex data feedback structure. This recombinatory process yields a variety of sonic and visual artifacts (Stout). In performance, these complex relationships weave in and out of easily recognizable correspondence – there is never a simple one-to-one cause and effect relationship between image and sound, nor between performers and their systems. What is apparent, however, is that the duo are engaged in the corralling of what seems at times to be an almost runaway system, waving their arms in the air like turn of the century Thereminists, or pointing oddly vintage looking sci-fi ray-guns around the venue.

One important component for Noisefold appears to be the relationship of performer to audience, and their strategy of employing gestural and somewhat theatrical elements contributes to this attempt to involve the audience, not as co-authors, but as a way to illustrate the

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[2] Peirce's basic claim is that signs consist of three inter-related parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. For the sake of simplicity, we can think of the sign as the signifier, for example, a written word, an utterance, smoke as a sign for fire etc. The object, on the other hand, is best thought of as whatever is signified, for example, the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, or the fire signified by the smoke. The interpretant, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's account, is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation. (Atkin, p2).

relationship between the performers and the resulting sounds and images. While the artists draw attention to the underlying logics and mechanisms within the context of a live cinema presentation, complete with question and answer sessions with a seated audience, the power of their performance and its almost overwhelming viscerality are not dependent on explanation, and would also be effectively received as a VJ set in a crowded club setting.

On the opposite end of the continuum, artist Julien Maire creates intimate encounters that are highly dependent on audience attentiveness, and draw specific attention to interface, but still maintain a cinematic connection. According to Timothy Druckrey, "Julien Maire's performances using proto-cinematic micro-machines both evoke and outdistance the illusions of the phantasmagoric projectionists of the pre-cinema… reimagining the apparatus itself as illusory, one in which the image and its operation are meticulously intertwined"(Druckrey 446). Maire himself describes a recent work, *Demi-Pas,* as a "20 minute film performance consisting only of three dimensional projected objects" (Maire). He constructs these objects using laser cutting techniques applied to traditional film, incorporates electric motors, and varied other electronic components, animating the images directly within his constructed projection apparatus. He also uses these mechanical components to produce percieved "movements" by changing the depth of field within the physical construction of each "slide". The slides themselves have a greater depth of field than a typical piece of film, thus allowing the artist to shift the focus (literally) from one layer to another. Using this experimental form of projection, Maire narrates a simple story (ibid).

By projecting three-dimensional objects, using mechanical means, Maire is harkening back to the days of the Magic Lantern. The presence of these physical objects creates a tension in the audience, between mechanism and content, between narrative and technology. In Maires work we see the tangible evidence of the interface, and in fact the work situtates interface *as* content, with the traditional "story" minimized as a mere vehicle, the inverted carrier wave of interface as signal.

Situated somewhere between these boundaries are a group of practitioners who explore narrative in slightly less intimate contexts, through attentive choices in content and interface. One example of this use of interface is SUE.C (Sue Costabile), a visual and performing artist based in the San Francisco Bay area. Her works "challenge the norms of photography, video, and technology by blending them all into an organic and improvisational live performance setting" (Costabile, "bio/CV"). Costabile employs a host of tools, both digital and analog, with the end result being something of a self described "experimental animation instrument". Costabile creates her version of live cinema from photographs, drawings, watercolors, hand-made papers, and fabrics to emphasize what she describes as "the beauty of the banal… the half-forgotten, often

unnoticed, in-between spaces in her surroundings"(ibid). What is notable about her work is the way in which the interface choices also reflect and reinforce the content. Her hands are visible manipulating the objects under a live camera, which create a transparency in her process, albeit removed, mediated, there but not there, suggesting that same kind of "in-betweenness" evident in the artist's choice of source materials.

In conversation, Costabile expresses a frustration with the liberal use of the Live Cinema label for many performances that she sees as "really just humans operating machines in real time" ("Re: Introduction"). She also expresses a hope that more people will take back the "liveness" from the things that have encouraged us to lose it. Costabile continues,

I think that the audience experience is highly influenced by the fact that they can "see" what I am doing, even though it is very abstract work and often processed in some way. I also think the abstract nature plays a role in the liveness, because I am not telling the audience what they are seeing, they have to be more present in a way. I feel strongly that live performances of any kind are only truly live if there is the possibility for complete failure (ibid).

Dutch artist Sarah Kolster, whose work has explored similar territory in live cinema practice, employs a related approach. Visually, Kolster´s work examines the apparent contradictions in the analog vs. digital argument, by presenting carefully blended prepared film positives, natural and found objects in a software-manipulated environment. Kolster captures details from urban locations, visualizing fragments of stories from these environments. She draws on different techniques, from time-based media such as video and film to research methodologies lifted from various disciplines such as journalism and archeology (Kolster). Kolster's use of a copy stand camera, lightbox, and the use of white photo handling gloves, creates in the interface a language suggesting scrutiny, close attention to detail, a journalistic and scientific distancing, while suggesting intimacy and personal investment through her improvisational choices.

One final example of this approach involves a recent live cinema performance that explored the historical and social aspects of the Tango in Argentina. BrigidMcAuliffe, a Denver-based artist utilized footage of Spanish-language interviews of Argentineans at public dances, crossfading between individuals speaking, while superimposing real-time handwritten translations of the spoken stories over the footage. Additionally the sound of an accordion, played by McAuliffe, was mapped to visible aspects of the imagery of the dance (such as opacity and brightness). This technique reinforces the connection between traditional instrumentation, the dance, and how each have affected one another and been modernized by technology over time. Once again the interface has been crafted to support the narrative content of the work.

Exploring a relatively intimate performative space, but with a less narrative approach to content is Josh Ott. Utilizing a more formal approach to interface, with an aesthetic much more rooted in visual music than cinematic montage, Josh Ott performs real-time visuals on an instrument of his own design called SuperDraw. At first glance his approach would appear to be a combination that would squarely root him in the traditional club VJ category – Ott performs only as an accompanist with another musician / audio artist and creates only abstract imagery. What sets Ott's work apart are his choice of reflecting intimacy in his interface and the process of interaction with that interface, and the audio artist.

Ott, in the use of his self-created software tool, via an electronic tablet, must respond directly to what is happening on stage and on screen, rather than allowing automatic processes to create these relationships. This allows for a greater degree of realtime expression even within the formal limitations imposed by the relatively simple form of 2D line animation. The software becomes an expressive instrument, and an autonomous player adding to the overall performance, which frequently includes live instrumentation such as saxophone and accordion (Ott). Ott's intent to frame the visuals as part of the musical composition is reflected in the tool he designed and in its actual use. The simple connection of "pen" as instrument, and the complimentary actions forgrounded in the drawing process are consistent with the content of the material; a musical, visual drawing that ebbs and flows within the overall performance.

Shifting along our established continuum towards the immersive, while still clinging to some sense of narrative, let's look at examples where the context of presentation still influences a practitioner's choices of content and interface. In these cases, typically within a club or large festival setting, the artist must not only provide threads for the audience to follow, but must be equally willing to be guided by feedback from the audience, albeit indirectly and subjectively interpreted by the artist during their performance.

Artist Brian Kane, known as part of the seminal live AV "band" Emergency Broadcast Network suggests that in a club setting the quality of "liveness" is less apparent due primarily to the fact that the audience seldom even sees the performer. The work itself, however, must engage the attention of club-goers, and Kane reveals that this engagement ebbs and flows within the tempos of the music, and that precise readings of crowd energies enables the VJ to choose opportune moments to foreground elements in the visuals to shift the attention of the dancing crowd. These shifts allow the artist to fluidly move from abstract background visuals to more narrative structures that sometimes include pop and mass media imagery, engaging the audience such that they know they are being "talked to": addressed by a person, albeit a "wizard behind a curtain" (Kane).

Within this same arena the work of The Light Surgeons also stands out for their ability to combine narrative and abstraction, within the context of the club or festival setting. Their recent work *True Fictions* is a large-scale audio-visual spectacle that combines techniques from documentary filmmaking, original music, traditional animation and motion graphics with the latest digital performance tools. *True Fictions* looks at the ideas of truth and myth through the lens of contemporary everyday Americans and their Native American ancestors (Allen). Again the interface, in this case, an elaborate system of screens which incorporate both architectural elements and technological objects, is appropriately employed to manage and present the content: "the substance of media culture, myth embedded in media, stories embedded in objects" as founder Christopher Thomas Allen puts it (ibid). While situated as more of an immersive *presentation* rather than *performance,* the work demands attention through its scale and intensity, while pulling the audience along via its somewhat fractured narrative.

In these last two cases, the *absence of presence* best describes the state of "liveness" exhibited in these contexts. By absence I mean a certain invisibility of operations. Within this immersive context, I would argue, both the artist and the audience disappear. The VJ and the typical barrage of imagery produced, is merely one aspect of the gestalt, as mentioned previously, of an entire spectacle, a spectacle which includes other lighting elements, the sound system and musicians or DJ's, the dancers and whatever concoctions of consciousness enhancing substances the audience may have inside them. All of these elements dissolve into what music critic Simon Reynolds has called the "Dionysian paroxysm" in his book *Generation Ecstasy* (Reynolds 5). Within the tumult of the bacchanalian spectacle, the concern for the subtle and intimate interplay between artist and interface, and the attention to the relationship between interface and content, are replaced by a desire for immersion, an immersion within the "liveness" of the event itself; a seamless, embodied, and yet ephemeral moment where the sense of novelty associated with the aura of live performance emerges spontaneously as autopoiesis[3], in the sociocybernetic sense.

Returning to this notion of "liveness," let us further explore the contextual nature of this quality. Golan Levin indicates that a concern for liveness is 100% at the core of the issue, if "your audience is seated, cinema-style, hand on chin, nodding their heads. But that same liveness *may* be totally irrelevant, if your audience is blitzed out of their minds, dancing and sweating, although true liveness can still make a profound difference for dancing audiences, if the improvising performer reads the audience well" (Levin, "Re: Request,"). The context of the performance does seem to dictate both the expectations of the audience, and the strategies of the artists.

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[3] I am referring here to the concept of autopoesis as posited by Maturana and Varela as "processes interlaced in the specific form of a network of productions of components which realizing the network that produced them constitute it as a unity" (Maturana and Varela 80)

Conclusion

We have looked at various modes of live audio-visual performance and distinguished characteristics of those modes such as production and post-production, interface appropriateness, and audience engagement. It seems clear that while each approach to live audio-visual performance carries with it a grammar and a vocabulary unique to the context of that performance, the reception of "*liveness*" (one of the entire field's most distinguishing characteristics), is also contextually based. Many artists seem to share this conclusion and feel that live audio-visual performance is at a turning point, or perhaps a birthing moment, pointing towards a refinement of intent, context, interface and reception. Nearly all would agree that "liveness" is central to the form, and that the context of presentation imposes unique constraints on the reception of any given performance. Additionally, the tools utilized by an artist – the interface to the content – present themselves as complex generators of meaning. An artists tools, however, are not always readily apparent as integral components of the work.

While these contradictions may problematize the field, they also define it. As each implementation or iteration of a live audio-visual performance unfolds for an audience, their discerning eyes and ears make determinations about the situation, the context, the tools and hence the relative success or failure of a work. Whether a work engages an audience is based on these criteria, consciously or not. In lifting these criteria from the unconscious mode of reception, of intuition, to a more clearly defined set of distinctions we lay the groundwork for future practitioners, and further investigations.

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