

# framed: Sean Cubitt

## Simon Mills

*Interview originally published in <http://www.framejournal.net> between Simon Mills and Sean Cubitt*

SM: What differences do you see in the current practice of artists and critics regarding new media compared to a decade ago? What is your perception of that era? In what ways do you think things have changed since then?

SC: Firstly we were all rather starry-eyed in the mid-90s. The images had begun to be available via gopher, the arrival of Mosaic and Netscape were eye-popping, and the speed of their dissemination was phenomenal.

In addition, HTML was probably the simplest programming tool ever, so you could teach students how to make web pages in a matter of minutes.

The first attempts to commercialise the web fell on their faces, to our delight, so it seemed that there was an open field for whatever we wanted—and equally a very open sense of who we were. Democracy and internet seemed to be synonymous.

Few people today would make that kind of statement. It's not that the early discourse was wrong. It did describe where we were at that stage. Today the reliance of the web on massive governance infrastructures, the overwhelming presence of older and newer commercial players, the prevalence of cookie technology, e-commerce, e-government, dark internet, intellectual property extremism, and perhaps the sheer scale of the thing mean that those aspirations for a wholly open terrain are unrecognisable now.

Digital Aesthetics - book cover I wrote "Digital Aesthetics" between 94 and 97. Even then it was pretty clear that there was something wrong about writing on the digital as if there were only one aesthetic involved. The kinds of software critique that Matt Fuller, Anna Munster, Greg Elmer and others have developed is clear indication that there is (no longer?) a singular digital aesthetic but many.

SM: A lot of your work focuses on the cinema, and indeed some people, such as Lev Manovich, have theorised new media in cinematic terms. If it's not too large a question how do you see new media's place in relation to the cinematic?

SC: Obviously cinema has changed as a result of new media technologies, though surprisingly few genuinely new tools have emerged. Rather the old tasks are automated, and some of the craft skill has been replaced by digital tools at lower costs. The reverse is not entirely the case.

Cinema has developed a remarkable set of audiovisual tools that are not necessarily used in new media forms like games. The whole audio domain is quite different between films and games—and electronic music is of course in many respects far more mature than what Andy Darley calls "digital visual culture". Like Lev, I've argued the case for cinema having adopted the database as the structuring device for a certain type of film; but I would argue that the dominant media of our times are neither films nor games (ie the ludology vs narratology argument is a bit of a red herring). The really dominant media are databases, spreadsheets and geographic information systems. What they have in common is their spatialising drive. Many other digital and hybrid old-new media forms like cinema are at their most interesting when they address this spatial drift with a counter movement into times and temporalities. Here cinema and music come into their own, but only as exemplary media, rather than as hegemonic.

SM: Perhaps related to the last question, how do you see the future of writing/literature in relation to new

media? How do you think writers might need to change in order to adopt new media, if at all?

SC: Writers can't help changing, unless they're married to a specific formula. The language changes, the world changes, and the outlets and audiences change. Much of modernist writing in English, despite its rather barren politics, in some way seems now like a pre-echo of the hypertextual. I'm thinking of Pound, Joyce, William Carlos Williams.

The problem was, at least in part, that they are now read mainly in a kind of professional manner: there aren't that many people outside academia reading the Cantos or Paterson for pleasure. This is the perpetual risk with innovation as cult. On the one hand, it fudges Benjamin's requirement that the author teach other authors, since the voices of these folks seem so particular and their influences as often baleful as benign; while the popular and middle-brow Booker-Prize-oriented authors keep to fairly populist and (small c) conservative prose and structure. Then there's the gradual parting of the ways between aural and visual in contemporary poetry, despite the work of Bob Cobbing and a few others making their attempts to remarry the divorcing couple.

Appolinaire and Tzara, and a huge range of artists, have tried to work through the relationships between writing and vision, but even that is hard to do now, even after a hundred years of advertising and comic books. The relationship of sound and vision seems to me equally unworked – one important lesson from the history of cinema is that sound is either dominant (as script, usually, typically now on TV) or subordinate (decorative, emphatic, excessive, noisy in the sense that it repeats what the vision track has already told you). The relationships between sound, vision and word are fraught in part because of the equally fraught relationship between time and space. We aren't accustomed to seeing in time, but reading is a time-based form of seeing. The visualisation and sonification of language is the lexical dimension of the problem the other is the syntagmatic problem: the emergent grammars of navigable media (like everyone else I'm leery of the word ~interactive~). To a great extent these too concern relationships of time and space, in the sense that navigation is obviously spatial, but to make connections count requires some kind of work of memory

SM: Do you think the commercialisation of the web has affected artists use of it as a site to challenge established art culture? Is there still an avant-garde aspect to new media art and literature?

SC: To take these backwards: there's still an aspect of new media which is in some sense what, perhaps in another period of history, might be called avant-garde. There is certainly an advance guard of artists introducing new tools that will be insanely difficult and probably worthless to commercialise. Mongrel, Raqs media, even games at the brink of commercialisation like some recent moves of Vuk Cosic. But as to whether this is avant-garde in, say, the way the contemporary art scene understands the term: probably not. The historical avant-gardes were passionate about changing art. That impetus has become a kind of parlour game in which contemporary art, following a set of implicit guidelines, questions where the limits of art lie.

This was a good game in 1912 when Duchamp showed his Fountain. It's kind of lost the plot today. Peter Osborne used to argue that modernism took up the tasks philosophy abandoned in the turn to language. Maybe now art has turned to intradiscursive navel-gazing, that task – the task of understanding what it is to exist, to sense, to know, to doubt, to feel – maybe all that is passing from art to something else: media arts, perhaps, of which, if I'm right about sonification + visualisation, writing will be a signal part.

Videography - book cover But as to the commercialisation of the internet and what it means to artists. Established art culture means to me the biennial art world. For example the plethora of video projections, few of which show any understanding of video or projection, and very few of which show any level of craft, and in its absence any respect for its audience. The new media arts are characterised by a far higher basic level of craft skill. To me this is fundamental: respect for materials, respect for audience, and respect for the creative process. Like a lot of people in the scene I'm far more interested in the works of the old masters – I'm currently writing about Dürer prints and Ansel Adams, for example – than in splashy paint or rooms full of detritus; not because I don't get the concept, but on the contrary, because I do, and the

concept isn't fundamentally interesting.

The feeling is, of course, mutual. The con-art world is contemptuous of digital media (albeit with honourable exceptions). Thirty years on the institutions are beginning to recognise the value of the history of video art and artist's film – especially in the UK where both fell between the art and cinema institutions. But the position of the Whitneys, Ascott, Frampton and all the other pioneers is equally masked, despite the good efforts of a handful of scholars and archivists around the world (<http://www.mediaarthistory.org>).

I have been drifting for a long while away from the word 'art' as anything other than a descriptor of 'the stuff you find in art galleries, art magazines, art auctions' – ie as a discourse and an institution. To me, a good piece of software like Photoshop gives hours of insight and pleasure that very, very few con-art works can offer (Whiteread's House would be the kind of exception that would convince me, but only because I can't think of another word for what she achieved there).

The avant-garde is a historical term now. It derived from military usage. Like the military, it took no prisoners, and like a war it tended to leave scorched earth behind. The digital realm is an avant-garde to the extent that it is driven by perpetual innovation and perpetual destruction. The built-in obsolescence of digital culture, the endless trashing of last year's model, the spendthrift throwing away of batteries and mobile phones and monitors and mice . . . and all the heavy metals, all the toxins, sent off to some god-forsaken Chinese recycling village . . . that is the digital avant-garde.

A major task in front of us right now: a renewable replacement for battery technology. The hour of the wind-up clockwork computer is at last at hand

SM: It seems to me that just as Deleuze saw Cinema as creating radically new affects that helped us understand time from a different perspective what is needed now is a similar investigation into new media forms.

SC: Whenever you move outside the reproduction of cultural norms, the replication of the code itself, you run into affect. This isn't always a good thing: repetition, as in the hundred hello's you voice each day, keeps channels open, makes the human world possible, and is the blank screen, as it were, that real communication can project onto. Much affect is blind incomprehension – at least that's a common enough experience for me, partly because my job sends me off towards areas at or beyond the limits of my competence, like technologies, political forums, new philosophies . . . Certain affects are delightful and praiseworthy: wonder. Some are neither: fear, anger, hatred. Even though sometimes they are necessary, and recovering from fear, for example, especially after a really good run, is delirious. The pursuit of affect for its own sake is mistakenly hedonist and commonly selfish. Massumi's charming and persuasive work aside, the emphasis on affect in some art circles seems to me already to be past its prime. The problem is not that the intention to design and deliver affect – as, say, Hitchcock did – is disrespectful of the audience, tho God knows it is. It is that it is sadistic, a patrician assumption of the right to amuse yourself at the emotional states of others. If this is the outcome of Nietzsche's superman, then it's a paltry conclusion to all this trouble.

Poor Gilles did not observe that the cinematic image itself doesn't move. Its frame stays rigidly in place; the screen is rigid, and the individual frame is held still for its moment of illumination, and then shuffled off the stage hidden behind the shutter. Noel Burch's descriptions of early cinema suggest something rather different: that the 'flickers' of the hand-cranked machines were already the 'direct image of time', and that the long detour of cinema may just be its return to the aesthetics of distraction.

Cinematic time operates in a plethora of forms, from the duration of the show to the reactions of audiences (I never noticed the time flying by . . .), with all the microtimes internal to shots, their transitions, their relation to actual events (slow motion, fast motion), to one another, to narration . . . Some of these are akin to or derived from other modes of temporality. What cinema taught us was that time is raw material. Space too,

for that matter, though architects, urbanists, painters, landscape gardeners and interior decorators had been playing with that since Pompeii.

If there is to be a new modality to new media arts, the obvious material for us to deal with is information. Space and time are clearly ours to work with, as matter and energy have been for millennia. What we have not yet, or what is only now struggling into existence, is a sense that the informatic, the third term of physical law, is becoming malleable. Entropy and emergence have been self-dictating phenomena. But in our informatic environment, they are phenomena that can be guided, moulded, shaped and transformed, played with and played upon. Contemporary digital arts are the beginnings of this process: nano and bio media are in the offing that will push the effects of this new condition of making into entirely new domains. To start from the idea that these will be affective seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. First invent your materials. Then your techniques. Then see what affects they elicit; what wonders, what disgusts, what nameless shudderings of the soul.

SM: How do you think the plethora of so-called Web 2.0 applications (E.g. Myspace, Youtube, BitTorrent, Google) are changing the media landscape? These are all predominantly based on constantly evolving databases so exhibit a distinctly new media aesthetic. They also seem to aid a more democratic means of cultural production making publication and involvement cheap and easy. Are you sold on the idea of a "network as platform"?

SC: Cheap and easy is always good. Talk, as they say, is cheap. Thank God. It takes millions of people talking (and writing, which is nearly as cheap) to produce one poet; and it takes millions strumming away to produce one musician. Those of us who only talk and strum are nonetheless experts, in the sense that we know how hard it is to make words and sounds do what you want them to, and so we are the perfect audience for the poet and the muso. It will take a million mash-ups to make one work that will really make your jaw drop.

And yet I can't help fretting that the NewsCorp purchase of MySpace, and the Google buy-out of YouTube, are exemplary moves towards the commercialisation of cultural democracy. A million content-producers raise the levels, and create the audience, but the coming Homer will be just another unpaid prosumer in the gardens of digital labour. The cynic in me sees digital gaming as training for the unpaid labour that was informally organised in the TV era. Already back then, as Dallas Smythe noted in the 1950s, all non-working, non-sleeping time was being colonised by another form of work, which he called the production of attention-value. When broadcasters sell audiences to advertisers, they obviously don't enslave them body and soul. What is changing hands is the attention of viewers. And how are the viewers paid for their attention? I suppose you could answer that they receive some kind of gratification from the endless repetition of adverts and jingles, but it seems a paltry recompense when compared with the billion-dollar trade in eyeballs. The same has to be said of content-producing internet users, with bells on.

There is no longer any reason to believe the internet is intrinsically democratic, or intrinsically anything. The network is the network, in the same way air is air. Air is of course intensely democratic, but then we thought the same about water, and look how that has become a user-pays industry, and a weapon of war. This doesn't mean we should withdraw from drinking and washing; and it doesn't mean we should refrain from struggling for a viable ecology. Ditto the internet: we can no longer live as if it did not exist. To abandon it to NewsCorp would be unthinkable. Historically, the net, the web, and almost every working application has been thrown together by creatives, whether for fun or profit. Almost nothing has been produced by corporations. Clearly corporate structures, however they benefit from network communications, are inadequate to the cultural innovations that users produce. And yet they have the inherited wealth that allows them to buy, one by one, every new tool and toy. I admire Wikimedia for holding out as long as they have, and longer. Linux likewise. These are the models: pirate enclaves, temporary autonomous zones. The reason we keep our smiles, as the greedy, incompetent commercial sector mops up our devotion to the internet gift economy, is that they manifest with every purchase their inability to originate, and in that admission, their incapacity for the global rule to which they lay claim.

Perhaps Iâ€™m wrong in thinking that democracy is commercialised in web 2.0 formats. Perhaps instead commercialism is being democratised. Certainly the nature of both is changing. Some of me is conservative enough to resent and regret the changes. The rehash of PR handouts by journalists, and the rehash of journalism by bloggers, isnâ€™t the journalism I praise â€“ the journalism represented by Robert Fisk at the London Independent. Some of me still believes that freedom of speech is important to democracy, and resents its loss in corporate media, and its confusion with mere opinion in the blogosphere. I have more than enough opinions of my own. What I need is journalism. This is the sound of an older democracy complaining about its own demise, and painting an already nostalgic and inaccurate picture of its actually smutty and corrupt past. Some basic media ethics need to be introduced at school level â€“ driverâ€™s ed for the web generation. A recent scandal here â€“ a sexual assault posted on YouTube by working-class schoolboys â€“ suggests the alternative. (Of course I do not want to argue that a veneer of irony makes this permissible to a different class of people â€“ if I or anyone never saw Clockwork Orange again, the world would not be a worse place).

Nonetheless, the network is the only platform weâ€™ve got, and weâ€™d be idiots to give it up

SM: I recall reading an interview with some computing luminary in Wired in the 90â€™s who said that he would rather his children learnt Java or C++ than foreign languages. As an academic I wonder what skills youâ€™d recommend teaching to today's students?

SC: Iâ€™ve mentioned media ethics, and Iâ€™d add media literacy â€“ an extension of literacy teaching to include audiovisual literacy. We would never allow teachers to teach reading without equipping their students with pens. To debar school students from knowledge of the elementary grammars of audiovisual media is to keep them ignorant of the way the world works, and to perpetuate the professionalised centre-out aristocracy of communications we have inherited from the priests.

At the heart of it all is communication, and the actuality of communication is mediation: the fact that all communication is mediated, takes a shape in matter and energy, space and time, and now in entropy and emergence. Communication is not just a human quality. It is a property of the physical universe, just as much as the electromagnetic spectrum or the space-time continuum. Humans are specialists in communication, along with a handful of other species we know about. We arenâ€™t actually very good at much otherwise. That is the only difference between us and our neighbours on the planet, whales and insects and trees and rocks, all of whom have found wonderful things to occupy themselves with over their lives of days or epochs. To that extent, our best employment is to take up guardianship of the communicative world.

To some extent that is what we have started to do as technologists. Homo faber, the toolmaking ape, has added to the stock of the world a huge suite of tools through which the green world can speak back to us, even as we rip a living from it. Our best tools, from the Hubble telescope to the internet, PET-scanners to CERNâ€™s supercollider, are more than just channels through which the world can speak to us. They are communicating agents, engaged in a dialogue with the physical world and, if we would only listen, potential partners in dialogue with us.

Marx observed that machinery is dead labour: the accumulated, abstracted form of skills gathered from the dead and ossified in factory engines. For his factory workers, the machines were the enemy; but for us maybe no longer so. If not, and if we can engage at last in dialogue with them, we might just hear the voices of the ancestors whose skills have been cemented into place in every machine we have, and most of all perhaps in this planet-spanning machinery of the internet.

Several recent legal decisions have reiterated the principle that a tribe is not a legal person. Aleuts, Inuit and Maori have all borne the brunt of this decision. A corporation, on the other hand, can be a legal person. Go figure. I say, the internet is a person, a tribe and a person. In its wires and its very material ecological footprint, the internet is ready to talk to us, to teach us strange ways of inhabiting the world, to show us the strangeness of our own way of inhabiting.

Ecomedia - book cover  
Students of the 21st century need to understand their universe ecologically. Their ecology is less and less first nature, more and more technology as second nature; and perhaps only then the social and political and economic human world as third nature. An understanding that potential derives from power, just the actual is derived from act. Humans gathered together into polities because they needed witnesses to their acts. The moment they did so, they created power out of the differences between themselves, and in creating power they created the potential for greater acts. Each act made the world actually different, and each actuality became the step on which they next potential difference could be acted out, in a rippling wave of intercatating potentials and interpotentiating actualities that goes on to this day. Every act has a consequence. Every act depends on what went before and what accompanies. These fundamental laws of systems apply equally to the polis, and to our interactions with the green world and the mechanical. In this way we learn ethics.

Perhaps the students will eventually come to see that corporations are not and cannot be persons in the way that a forest or a network can be, not because the corporation is only a cyborg, but because it is incapable of learning ethics.

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