FCJ-068 The Aesthetics of the Ambient Video Experience

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What is Ambient Video?

You are enjoying yourself at a cocktail party, engrossed in discussion with a colleague you have just met. He excuses himself to visit the hors d'oeuvres, and you turn your attention to the large flat-panel television display on the wall. Your eye is caught by the beauty of a sublime mountain landscape, and then you are surprised when a waterfall explodes between two of the high peaks and tumbles down to a lake at the bottom of the frame. The splash of the waterfall spreads in circles across the lake, and as it spreads, it gradually transforms the shot into a completely different scene. You gaze is caught by both the magic realist aesthetics of transformation and by the sheer beauty of the visuals themselves (see Figure 1 below) (Bizzocchi, 2004). Then, your companion returns, and you return your attention to the living human and the pleasures of conversation.

That is ambient video, an emergent form of video expression that is supported by the newest video production and display technologies, yet firmly rooted in the history of video art and experimental cinema. The prime characteristic for this type of programming is that it be visually interesting and capable of supporting close viewing at any time. It should change, but not too quickly, and the details of any particular change should not be critical. This is ambient video–the "slow-form" reversal of forty years of intense development of the fast-paced television "short-form".

Some work in this genre will be algorithmic, and closely linked to a screen saver aesthetic. This will include purely graphic abstract designs and geometrics, naturalistic CGI motion graphics such as water and fire, and quasi-narrative artificial life environments. It will certainly include visual creations that are driven by music (such as the light shows built into Apple's iTunes and Microsoft's Windows Media Player).

Other work in this stream will be more cinematic, and this paper will concentrate on this form. This variation will stress rich and compelling visuals, making full use of the size and resolution of the new video screens. Like the purely graphic screen-saver form, the aesthetic imperative for the cinematic version is visual ambience. The size and beauty of the visuals will capture a casual glance at any moment. The resolution and detail of the image will enable the subtle details that can sustain a more concentrated gaze. The incorporation of slow change and metamorphosis will support still longer and closer examination. This form will privilege the use of nature sequences (fire, water, cloud, foliage, geology), slow motion, gradual transitions, visual effects, layered and convoluted imagery and subtly embedded secondary visual artifacts.

The nuance of this direction will be the seduction of visual sensibility. The archetypal situation is a background visual playing on a flat-panel display in the home – another term for this form is

“video painting”. As we go about our domestic business, the beauty of the visual will capture our attention in the whim of the moment, precisely as a painting might. The glance will be compelling, for a moment, or a minute, or several minutes. Then daily life reasserts itself, and we withdraw our attention–until the next pause in our personal flow. When we are again ready, the screen will be there, revealing rich and living imagery at any given moment of our choosing.

The ambient video aesthetic echoes Brian Eno’s phrase about ambient music: “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting” (Eno, 1978). Eno’s own moving image work is part of the history of ambient video. He produced two of the earlier pieces that consciously situate themselves within this genre: Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan[1] [1] , and Thursday Afternoon (Eno, 1984). He wrote then that both cinema and television force a “rigid relationship between viewer and screen – you sit still and it moves” (Eno 2005). Eno called for a video art that was more akin to a painting – you moved around, but the work was waiting for you to view it upon your pleasure.

This concept of ambience breaks with the foregrounded experience of the film theater or the standard concept of the television show, but it is consistent with the conditions of reception for many mediated experiences. Again, Eno’s ambient music is a harbinger for ambient media in general. “Music for Airports” instantiates his vision of extending the lightweight and formulaic Muzak concept into a creative art form with its own aesthetics and dignity (Eno, 2005).

Television and the Home

Anna McCarthy has written about the history of television in public spaces in her book Ambient Television (2001). She describes the use of television in group venues such as taverns, airports, stores, shopping centers, and waiting rooms. However, her detailed account of public video surprisingly misses Eno’s concept of what it means to be “ambient”. In general, she sees the viewer as a consumer who is useful to the purveyors of content (and to McCarthy’s argument) only when they are paying attention to the screen. It is possible to bypass her leaning towards media effects analysis, and consider the role that a truly “ambient video” art form might play in public spaces. At the same time, domestic space is as likely a venue for this new video form as is public space, and this paper will generally concentrate on the consideration of ambient video art in the home. However, the analysis of the form holds true for a range of spaces: domestic, corporate, public, and curatorial.

Many analyses of television have overlooked the ambient nature of much of home television experience. Raymond Williams correctly identified “flow” as a powerful concept for the analysis and understanding of television (Williams, 1974), but Spigel’s introduction to the 1992 edition of Williams’s seminal work points out that the flow of programming is often interrupted or overridden by the flow of domestic life. “[Williams's methodology] didn’t at all account for more everyday viewing procedures. It didn’t account for someone preparing a sandwich, answering a phone, putting a child to bed–in short the flow of human activities that interact with the flow of television programs” (Spigel, 1974: xxvi). John Ellis points out that the flow of television experience is made up of “segments” – which he cites as the basic organizing principle of television content. Ellis sees the segment as the appropriate content strategy based on his

analysis of the average viewer: “someone who has the TV set switched on, but is giving it very little attention…” (Ellis, 1992: 162).

Television experience may be pleasurable precisely because it can be a casual activity. Fowles sees selective attention as a basic characteristic of home television viewing that adds to the enjoyment of the experience. He cites a study of actual television usage which showed that 20% of the time when the television was on, there was no one in the room, and another 20% of the time, potential viewers were in the room, but not paying attention to the screen. (C.L. Allen, qtd. in Fowles, 1992). Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi found consistent results in their survey of actual viewing practices. In that study, 63.5 % of the time that the television was being viewed, people were also doing something else. 28,3 % of the time, the television viewing was the secondary activity, not the primary one (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 74-76). A robust understanding of the range of possible options for video creation should take into account the variable attention actually paid to domestic television.

It is not surprising that the home television set has been used as an ambient visual device. It often shares the living room space with two other ambient devices: the fireplace and the picture window. Spigel connects the post-WW2 introduction of the picture window with the parallel conception of the television as a domestic “window on the world” (Spigel, 1992). The fireplace is the classic archetype for ambient visual entertainment. Along with its predecessor, the campfire, it is probably programmed into the genetics of our cultural heritage. A trope increasingly seen in the photo layouts of the “Home” sections of newspapers is the living room’s “visual triple”: the fireplace, the picture window and the large-size flat-panel video display unit. Given the implications of Fowles’ analysis, it seems that this marketing ploy taps into the comfort and the functionality of three readily available sources of domestic visual ambient pleasure. This also helps to explain the durability of the classic example of ambient video: the video log. Since its inception at WPIX New York in 1966, the televised yule log has developed into a well-established cultural phenomenon. Different examples of the log have been distributed for decades on various formats: VHS, DVD, computer file, and now HD. Last Christmas Eve, our local cable service had five different yule logs merrily burning at the same time on different channels of my hundred-station-universe.

Video Ambience Defined

What does the video yule log share with Brian Eno’s and other artist’s ambient video works? A video piece should meet the following four criteria to qualify as a truly ambient work:

- it should be visually engaging the first time you view it
- it shouldn’t require your attention at any time
- it should renew its engagement at whatever moment you choose to return to viewing
- it should sustain visual pleasure over a great number of repeated viewings

The video log, along with its domestic cousin the video aquarium, remains popular precisely because – like their real world originals – they share these four characteristics. Ambient video artists extend this sensibility – and the satisfaction of these same criteria – beyond the yule log’s kitsch limitations into a form of moving image art. Later in this paper, we will consider in more

detail the provenance and the current state of ambient video as an art form. Before we do that, however, let's turn to the relationship of ambient experience with other forms of mediated experience.

The starting point for the understanding of media ambience is to consider the relationship of foreground mediated experience to background experience. Foregrounded media experience commands our attention. This is the paradigm of the cinema, the dominant media form of the last century, and our current benchmark for immersion and deep mediated attention. The cinema has its own dedicated location, a darkened room where the magic images play on the wall in front of us in a representation that is literally bigger than life. We are seduced into a state of deep attention. If that is not enough, we are explicitly reminded not to talk, in order to respect the sanctity of the mediated state we are expected to share. The cinema is a shrine to immersion and Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief".

However, immersion is a complex mediated phenomenon, worthy of a closer look in the context of this argument. Cinema, in particular the classic Hollywood narrative cinema, is an archetype for what Bolter and Grusin (1999) term a state of immediacy. We forget where we are, "look through" the window of the screen, and become lost within the mediated story world. This state of seamless immersion is the goal of decades of finely-honed mainstream cinematic craft and convention. There are, however, other traditions of mediated immersion. The oldest cinematic tradition is not the Hollywood "cinema of narrative", but rather the earlier "cinema of attractions" (Gunning, 1986). This form, consistent with the aesthetic of the vaudeville, the circus, and the theme park, leads to a different type of immersive experience: the immersion of astonishment and spectacle. In Bolter and Grusin's (1999) model, this is a phenomenon distinct from immediacy, one which they term hypermediation. In the hypermediated state, we are aware of the mediation that is occurring, and we stare "at the screen" in attention. In the early days of cinema, simple acts such as the arrival of a train or the demolition of a wall were innovative and exciting enough to "attract" and engage our rapt attention. The cinema of attractions expanded to include such diverse spectacles as a sneeze, the onscreen kiss, the arrival of a train, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and the electrocution of an elephant. The cinema of attractions eventually lost out in marketplace competition to the now-dominant cinema of narrative, but Gunning points out that it has never disappeared. Pure spectacle, visual effects, and visceral shock remain as ongoing subthemes within the hegemony of the narrative cinematic mainstream. Further, despite a recent turn to mainstream narrative features, the spirit of the hypermediated cinema of attractions has long dominated the largest of cinematic screens – the Imax theaters.

Ambient video is fundamentally inconsistent with the cinema of narrative. Narrative commands attention – we are drawn to story, we have a need to see how the story plays out, and we will continue to want to watch until the end. However, ambient video is in many ways consistent with a cinema of attraction – if the attraction is carefully modulated. Astonishment and awe are not conducive to ambience, so the visual pleasures should be seductive, not demanding. We should want to look at them, but we should not feel compelled to do so.

Ambience can therefore be situated within this complex of immersion, immediacy and hypermediation. An ambient video piece can offer a state of enjoyable immediacy, where the visuals seem natural, and we look through the screen at a well-composed and pleasurable scene.

Conversely, it could offer to us a state of enjoyable hypermediation, where the hand of the artist has manipulated the visuals in such a way that we both recognize and appreciate the creative manipulation. The tricky part is that an ambient piece, whether meant to be immediate or hypermediated in flavor, cannot require that we become immersed. It must always provide the opportunity, but never the imperative, for immersion.

The patterns of domestic television consumption are consistent with this dynamic for the presentation of ambient experience. As the high-culture saying goes: "Theater is life. Cinema is art. Television is an appliance."[2] [2] We have seen that, as an appliance, the television must compete for our attention with the other appliances and vicissitudes of everyday life. Cinema, on the other hand, is relentlessly immersive, whether it involves the immediate pleasure of story and suspension of disbelief, or the hypermediated pleasure of spectacle, effects and cinematic attractions. Television remains a perceptual chameleon, sometimes commanding our attention, sometimes fading into the background of our lives, but always there. Ambient video can build upon this foundation a distinct form of artistic expression and viewer pleasure.

The Role of Technology

This new form is intricately tied to the ongoing development of new video technologies for production, post-production, distribution and display. Consider the changes we have seen in the last five years alone. First, HD cameras at all levels (broadcast, prosumer, consumer) are much cheaper and therefore more wide-spread. Second, we have increased ability to manipulate these images in post-production. Every Macintosh now comes equipped with base software to edit and post in HD. Serious videographers can go much further with medium-level consumer workstations and powerful packages such as Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premier, and After-effects. Third, we have an increasing array of options for the distribution of the moving image: cable, satellite, tape, video files, and disc. All of them now include a certain amount of HD material, and this will increase as technological capabilities become more and more robust. MIT's Technology Review argues for the continuation of Moore's Law, and ongoing parallel extensions in the equally important related technologies. The journal predicts continuing "multiples in storage capacity, sequencing speed, and wireless range and bandwidth" (Technology Review, 2004). Finally, the size and resolution of domestic video display technology has reached unparalleled levels of quality. The box in the corner with the small fuzzy screen has been replaced by an elegant frame on the wall, with a large-scale high-definition image that supports a level of visual beauty never seen in the domestic moving image. The cumulative effect of all these changes is to increase tremendously our cultural capacity to capture, manipulate, distribute and display high-quality video imagery.

This account is not a reversion to a technological determinism that Raymond Williams (1974) correctly derides. It is rather a recognition of the facts about the technological capabilities within the world of the moving image. The actual development of the new video forms will depend on complex and inter-related dialectics of art, commerce, critical discourse and popular culture. However, as Gene Youngblood noted in his seminal work Expanded Cinema, "new tools generate new images" (Youngblood, 1970). It is certain that video artists and students will use these production and post-production tools to push the limits of the moving image in a wide variety of directions – including the exploration of purely visual slow forms of video expression.

Forms of Ambient Video

What is the nature of this form of ambient video? We can start with what it is not. As noted earlier, it is not a fundamentally narrative form. Neither can it include fast-cutting, the staple of the video short form (commercials, series openers, rock videos). It is not the classic cinema of attractions of astounding spectacle, nor its current manifestation of gratuitous violence. All of the forms above command our attention, and are fundamentally inconsistent with the presentation of ambient experience.

Ambient video is, and will be, many things. Some of it will be algorithmic and computational, following the aesthetic of the screen saver. Another variation will be the play of pure graphics, building on a long tradition of non-representational expression in the art of the moving image. This tradition includes the earliest artists such as Fischinger, Eggeling, and Richter (the Rhythmus films), and flowered in the era of Jordan Belson, the Whitney Brothers, and the later hand-drawn works of Stan Brakhage. Related to this will be sound and motion displays, where the cinematic quest for the "color-organ" finds a current instantiation in the musically-driven abstract screen displays that come packaged with iTunes and the Windows Media Player. These and similar developments are consistent with theorist and film historian William Moritz's dictum: "I believe mankind has an innate urge towards Visual Music" (Moritz, 2007). The new form of improvisational VJ visuals draws on this aesthetic, as well as the history of ONCE concerts, "Happenings", and performance video art. Other ambient video works will be personal, photographic, and kitsch: the use of various video displays to exhibit the collection of family photographs.[3] [3] [4] [4] [5] [5] [6] [6]

This paper concentrates on yet another set of options within the family of ambient video experience. The focus here is on work that is representational in form, visual in essence, and non-narrative in content. We have mentioned two of the existing staples of this form: the video log and the video aquarium. Numerous examples of both have been available for decades, first on VHS tapes, now as DVDs and digital files. We have noted that the ambience of these works reflects the ambient visual quality of their referents. However, the natural world is full of deep visual pleasures that we never tire of viewing, ranging from the widest of landscapes to the close-up examination of foliage and fauna. All of these are candidates for ambient video, especially when rendered with the full capability of high-definition video. Particularly strong will be those subjects that move, but do so in a way that the camera can easily capture: water, clouds, and fire being the archetypes. A look at contemporary trends in HD television programming confirms this. Initial HD programming packages all carry dedicated movie channels, dedicated sports channels, and the standard major network television channels (in North America this means ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox). However, they also include the specialty channels that rely on nature documentaries as a staple of their programming: PBS, Discovery and National Geographic. It is not a great leap to combine the ubiquity of this early programming vector with the implications of the Fowles statistic – that 20% of the time, the TV is on, people are in the room, and nobody is actively watching. One can reasonably conjecture that for some, these specialty nature channels are being used at least part of the time as ambient video backgrounds.

Creativity and Ambience

This does beg a critical question. Elemental imagery of earth, air, fire and water may be beautiful, and it may easily lend itself to ambient visual experience, but how is it art? On first glance, this form could appear to be closer to kitsch than art. One answer to the question is that raw ambient visuals can become a form of video art when they are transformed by the hand of the artist. I believe that there are three junctures where ambient video is particularly amenable to creative intervention: the selection and the quality of the picture, the treatment of time, and the manipulation of the image – in particular the use of visual layers and layered transitions.

The first intervention is that of the cinematographer's hand, or rather, eye. Natural images rendered in high-definition video and displayed on large flat-panel displays are an opportunity for the visual artist, analogous in many ways to the opportunities the large-format view camera offered Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, or the dye-transfer printing process offered Eliot Porter. The relevant aesthetic variables in this photographically-inspired video practice are subject choice, composition, the discovery of patterns and textures, the treatment of color values, and always the play of light and shadow. As a non-narrative and supremely visual form, ambient video requires the highest standards in cinematographic vision and craft.

The second juncture for creative intervention is in the treatment and the manipulation of time. In general, slower subject speed is more consistent with the ambient aesthetic. Water and fire move beautifully, but this beauty is multiplied when their natural motion is slowed down. Clouds, on the other hand, can be sped up several times, and still retain a feeling of slowness and grace. This imperative towards slowness carries over to the basic rhythm of the editing. Fast cutting is not consistent with the ambience aesthetic because it commands attention. Slower editing allows the viewer the luxury of switching their attention away from the screen, and also affords an easy understanding of context whenever attention is switched back.

This orientation towards the slow form of video expression increases the pressure on the cinematographer's skills. In a standard televised nature documentary, what passes for "slow" cutting results in screen times of three to five seconds for a typical shot. In the ambient works that the author has produced each shot remains on the screen for a minimum of 45 seconds. More common screen times are one to two minutes in duration. The cinematographer's art must be of a high level indeed to sustain this length of screen time.

The third juncture for creativity is in the post-production manipulation of imagery, and in particular in the use of visual layers for image fragmentation, recombination, and shot transition. In many ways, collage will replace montage as the fundamental sequencing skill. The new technologies afford the ability to break original images down into discrete components, to arrange them in layers, and then to combine and recombine these components in any number of new combinations. Used in this way, a combination of Photoshop masks with video editing and compositing software such as After-Effects is an opportunity to revisit the aesthetic of Picasso's collage or the Dada Photo-montage artists such as Hannah Hoch or John Heartfield in a time-based medium. An aggressive video use of the new photo-montage aesthetic can do away with the cut entirely, and substitute a series of partial wipes based on visual components that gradually replaces one shot with the next.

Relation of the Ambient Aesthetic to Film and Video Art

These creative interventions – the cinematographer's eye (especially on the landscape), the treatment of filmic time, and the post-production manipulation of image – have deep roots in the history of avant-garde cinema and video art. Underlying all of them is a passionate commitment to the fundamentals of the moving image itself, and an ongoing questioning of both the style and the relevance of narrative-driven mainstream cinema. This perspective reaches back to the pioneers of the art of the moving image. Germaine Dulac (1978) stated that the profound meaning of the cinema resided in image, not story. Maya Deren agreed, arguing that cinema must relinquish the narrative disciplines it has borrowed from literature, and instead develop the vocabulary of filmic images and the syntax of filmic techniques (Deren, 1978).

The landscape is a worthy subject of study for moving image artists who question the standard cinematic paradigms. Landscape is at the same time highly visual and essentially non-narrative. Noted film critic and theoretician Scott MacDonald sees the landscape as a bridge that joins the world of documentary cinema with the avant-garde (Sicinski, 2007). The avant-garde landscape film has been particularly robust in England, where the form has been used by a great number of film artists, including Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, William Raban, and Chris Welsby. The Tate Gallery dedicated a program to the Avant-Garde British Landscape Films, where Deke Dusinberre noted that these artists "assert the illusionism of cinema through the sensuality if a landscape imagery, and simultaneously assert the material nature of the representational process that sustains that illusionism" (Dusinberre, 1975). Chris Welsby has worked in this genre from 1972 to the present, using trees, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, fog, clouds, estuaries, and the sea as his subject and his inspiration. Welsby works from a deep commitment to the relationship the art of the moving image and the study of the landscape. He is interested in "creating work based on the interconnectedness of these systems, where landscape was not secondary to filmmaking process or filmmaking process to landscape, but process and structure, as revealed in both, could carry information and communicate ideas" (Welsby, 2006).

The creative treatment and manipulation of time is another important variable for ambient video – one that it shares with avant-garde filmmakers and videographers of all eras. For structuralist filmmakers, the exploration of time is a central theme – whether the film's speed is slowed down as Yoko Ono and other fluxus filmmakers did, sped up as with Godfrey Reggio (for the urban scenes in Koyaanisqatsi), or has its duration extended as with Andy Warhol (Sleep, Empire, and Eat) and Michael Snow (Wavelength).

Time has been the theme for a number of moving image exhibitions featuring a variety of artists. Moments in Time: on Narration and Slowness examined the theme of slowness, including works by Bill Viola (The Greeting), Stan Douglas (Nu•tka) and Douglas Gordon (24 Hour Psycho) (Freidel, 2000). In the exhibition catalogue, Matthias Gaertner discusses the three questions around slowness that the videos explicate: slowness and technology, slowness and man, slowness and the eternal. A second exhibition, Making Time: Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Video and Film (Cappellazzo, 2000) was a comprehensive look at a variety of artists who saw time as a central question for the moving image. It included 29 artists, among them Vito Acconci, Stan Douglas, Douglas Gordon, Gary Hill, Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, Steina Vasulka, and Andy Warhol. In the catalogue, Peter Wollen argues that these artists

consider variations on three aspects of time: tense (when things happen), modality (did or will they actually happen), and aspect (the relative temporal status of events – are they beginning, continuing, ending or ended). The curator, Amy Cappellazzo, notes that many of the artists seek to stop time, or at least to suspend it indefinitely. Her observation is instantiated in the number of works that rely either on the extremely long take or the recursive loop as a temporal organizing device. A third exhibition Time Zones: Recent Film and Video took place at the Tate Modern (Time Zones, 2004). This exhibition examined a range of questions, including notions of time across the globe, web-casting and the extension of mediated time, mechanized and industrialized time, and the localized relationship of time to particular spaces. In the context of the core argument in this paper, Peter Osborne raises the question of the relationship of art and distraction, particularly with respect to the gallery or the long-take art film (Osborne, 1989). He sees a dialectic at play here – we go to the gallery or we see the art film in order to find distraction from our lives. However, the act of attending to these works can become demanding in itself, and lead to a wish for other distractions to take us out of the works. This subtle yet active push-pull Osborne describes is in fact a critical aspect of the experience of ambient video works in any context – curatorial, public, or domestic.

The final connection of the ambient aesthetic to the art of the moving image is the creative processing of image. Le Grice argues that a characteristic of all the film artists he considers from the early days (pre WW II) is their "intention to treat film as a plastic medium" (Le Grice, 1977: 74). Film plasticity is often effected through the editing and montage, but it is also amenable through the manipulation of the image itself. This form of cinematic creativity is the art of the magician, and can be traced back to the moving image's first great trickster, George Melies. The trick of double exposure was one of the most delightful of his bag of early cinematic tropes. His self-conscious delight in this visual magic successfully integrated the cinema of attractions and astonishment with the cinema of narrative and story. Later avant-garde filmmakers/tricksters such as Hans Richter (Filmstudie, 1925) and Harry Smith (Heaven and Earth Magic, various versions and dates from 1943 – 1962) used multiple exposures and visual layering to continue this tradition of visual magic. Outdistancing Richter, Smith, and everyone else as a prolific practitioner of the visual art in cinema is Stan Brakhage. Brakhage revels in the heritage of Melies, calling him the "supreme trickster" and "that marvelous man who gave the 'art of film' its beginning in magic" (Brakhage, 1978: 128). Brakhage's own cinematic philosophy stresses a pursuit of knowledge that transcends language and is founded on visual communication. He felt that both the Saint and the Artist see more powerfully because they "allow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception". He labels cinematic realism as either a (flawed) human invention or a myth (Brakhage, 1978). These convictions are instantiated in a voluminous body of work covering a wide range of technique, craft and cinematic art. His vision for post-production and visual layering is perhaps best seen in his epic Dog Star Man (1962-1964), and its even longer version The Art of Vision (1965).

Video artists have had an easier time with layering, superimposition, and transitions than film artists. The electronic signal through all its eras has provided easier and more direct access to special effects and visual magic. Strong early examples of a layered and transformative video aesthetic include Golden Voyage (1973) by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Newsreel of Dreams (1976) and After Laughter (1981) by Stan VanDerBeek, MercebyMerce (1978) and Lake Placid '80 (1980) by Nam June Paik. A most haunting example is Sunstone (1979) by Ed Emshwiller.

Ongoing advances in sophistication and steady drops in price for digital equipment have made this electronic form of post-production magic accessible to an ever-increasing number of moving image artists. It has also enabled the experienced artists to advance the magic realist flavor of their craft in satisfying ways, as evidenced by the later work of Woody Vasulka (Art of Memory, 1987), Zbig Rybczynski (The Orchestra,1990), Christian Boustani (A Viagem, 1998), and Michael Snow (Corpus Callosum, 2002).

All of this forms a considerable heritage and foundation for the contemporary practice of ambient video art. It draws on a range of art forms and practices: a photographer's eye for landscape, detail, composition, and light; a filmmaker's concern about time and interval; and a video artist's ability to combine moving images into a dynamic collage that flows within the frame. This combination of arts is in the spirit of Higgins's concept of intermedia – emergent but coherent media forms that are situated within and between other existing forms (Higgins, 2001: 49-54). Ambient video sits comfortably within a shared aesthetic space that joins photography, cinema and video. Spielman builds on Higgins's model, and points out that intermedia manifestations in the realm of the digital moving image privilege the spatial, the collage and the morph (Higgins, 2001: 131-148). This is an apt description of the potential strengths of ambient video art.

The Beginnings of a Purely Ambient Form

The various components of a cinematic ambient aesthetic may be well-rooted in the history of photography, avant-garde cinema and video art, but the commitment to a fully ambient form is just beginning to emerge as a distinct and self-conscious artistic practice. Brian Eno is once again producing ambient visual works, although reflecting his interest in electronics and the digital, his latest ambient video (77 Million Paintings by Brian Eno, 2006) is algorithmic and generative rather than cinematic in nature.

Eno's distributor, Microcinema, markets an ambient brand called "Microambience".[7] [7] As of the writing of this paper the brand has thirteen titles, including both of Eno's original cinematic ambient video series (Mistaken Memories of Manhattan and Thursday Afternoon) compiled on a single disk (Brian Eno: 14 Video Paintings, 2005). Of the thirteen titles, it appears that one is generative and algorithmic (Eno's), one is a gallery of still images, and four are made up of abstract motion graphics elements. The remaining seven are cinematic in nature, and include HD versions of both the fireplace and the aquarium. Eno's early video collection consists of two cycles of ambient films, one of urban skylines, and the other of a woman in her apartment. Subjects for the four other cinematic ambient videos include flowers, urban scenes from Baltimore, clouds, and African time-lapsed skies and landscapes.

There are a number of individual ambient video artists with one or two ambient titles to their credit. The most common subject is nature. Artists in this stream exploit the scenic beauty of landscape in a direct manner. They include Simon King (African Skies, 2006 – on the Microambience label above), William Kennedy (Algonquin Autumn, 2005), and Steve Lazur (Time of the Earth: a Desert Dreamtime Journey, 2001). The Souvenirs from the Earth collective, based in Barcelona, Spain, has an ambient DVD titled Souvenirs from the Earth v 1.0 which was produced in 2004 or earlier. Their disc has three pieces entitled "Camping",

“Skating”, and “Beach”. Their visual strategies include the use of soft focus with continual pans of medium shot campers, or overexposed wide shots of skaters or bathers. The results are pleasant, and give a liminal and filtered sense of character – just enough to tease you with the hint of narrative, but not enough to draw you in to any story specifics. Malcolm Daniel has produced a series of ambient videos (Firewater, Spirit of the Ganga, and Foliage are some of his titles). He uses nature imagery, and combines this with the use of stepped slow-motion and soft-focus. The Montreal video collective NomIg works on the borderline of cinematic recognition (O2, O3, Landscape, Ad Infinitum). They heavily process their original footage, and combine extreme slow motion with a blurred visual feel to create an image that is as much a pure color/motion graphic as it is cinematographic. In their words: “Integral to our work is the use of extreme slow motion. Upon a passing glance the work appears to be still – it is only after a returning glance or concentrated awareness that the motion of the piece reveals itself.”

The author is a practicing ambient video artist. My own works (Rockface, 2002; Streaming Video, 2005; Winterscape, 2007; and Cycle – currently in post-production) are inspired by and based in the Canadian Rockies and British Columbia’s Coast Mountains. The work reflects the visual beauty of natural landscapes and details, combined with a magic-realist post-production technique of layered visual transitions. I work closely with my collaborators Glen Crawford (D.O.P.) and Christopher Bizzocchi (post-production and effects specialist) in the creation of my ambient video art.

Other Directions

This paper is a relatively focused view on one aspect of the broader phenomenon of ambient video. It has concentrated on the visual and the cinematographic aspects of ambient video art. As mentioned earlier, other directions in Ambient Video are worthy of similar attention: the exploraration of purely graphic visuals, live improvisational ambient video performance, and the incorporation of generative and interactive models.

The role of sound in all aspects of ambient video experience is an overarching domain of enquiry that will reward further creative and scholarly work. There are two aspects to consider in this regard. First, a case could be made that to be truly ambient, these videos should be able to work without sound. This position is supported by a connection to the concept of “video painting” and a continuity with the tradition of painting and fine art photography. A further practical difficulty is that a gallery, or even an affluent home (Bill Gates being the most well known example), may have several ambient videos playing at the same time in close proximity. The addition of sound would either lead to an unanticipated cacophony (which admittedly may not be a problem for some audio theorists), or to the privileging of one video’s sound track at the expense of the others. However, despite these logistical considerations, it is difficult to maintain a serious opposition to the role sound can play in the pleasure of ambient video experience. On the contrary, it is probable that there are a wide range of sound styles and specific tracks that would add to the ambient experience of any given video. Options consistent with ambience could include a variety of music genres such as electronic (Brian Eno comes to mind), classical (such as Eric Satie), jazz (Brubeck), fusion (Jarre), or many others. Both representational and impressionistic sound effects tracks and soundscapes would also work with many ambient pieces. Clearly there is a great deal of work to be done in this critical area.

Author's Biography

Jim Bizzocchi is an Assistant Professor of Interactive Arts at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He is a filmmaker who has taught media production and analysis for over thirty years. His current research interests include the emergent production poetics privileged by large-scale high-resolution video display technology, the aesthetics of interactive multimedia experience design, and the role of New Media within innovative teaching/learning environments. He is active in educational technology, and is the Past-president of the Canadian Association for Distance Education. Bizzocchi did his graduate work in MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program.

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Notes

[1] "Video Painting" is the name of the form preferred by the Montreal video collective NomIg http://www.videopainting.ca [8]
[back] [9]

[2] A variation on this is attributed by Anna McCarthy to Mark Fowler, the Reagan-appointed commissioner of the US FCC, the regulator of American television: "Television is just another appliance. It is a toaster with pictures" (McCarthy, 2001: 117).
[back] [10]

[3] There are a variety of such devices, ranging from self-contained digital desktop "photo-cubes" and "electronic picture frames", to the built-in ability of the Macintosh and Windows OS to display and cycle through digital images from dedicated folders.
[back] [11]

http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20060428/eagle_eggs060428?s_name=&no_ads= [12]
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http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3360063.st [14]
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http://www.horizonzero.ca [16]
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http://www.microcinemadvd.com/microambience/ [18]
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[8] http://www.videopainting.ca: **http://www.videopainting.ca**
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[18] http://www.microcinemadvd.com/microambience/: **http://www.microcinemadvd.com/microambience/**
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