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RE-writing the History of Media Art: How Hypermedia Change our Vision of the Past (from personal cinema to artistic collaboration)*.

1.

The transformation of modern communication technologies and transformation of linear text structures characteristic until yesterday for film work (along with all time-based arts) into interactive multimedia structures, not only transformed the presence of art film, but it also made us look differently into the past of film, made us understand it, categorise and value in a different way. Once again turned out that history is by no means a final version of the past, defined once and forever. History is rather a manifestation of our perception and understanding of the past through the present; it is a product of changing philosophical and methodological approaches, cultural strategies, and a result of de-constructive and re-constructive strategies. History is continuously written from the scratch. In his theoretical writing Sergey Eisenstein analysed Pusckin and Dickens' literary work with the aim of presentation of his own film editing and film construction ideas and by the way giving his own reading of the work of both artists. With this procedure he followed the Russian Formal School, whose representatives eagerly displayed new methods of analysis of literary work, which they worked out on studying avant-garde poetry, referring futurism and constructivism to literature canon and sugesting new readings, incomparable with the previous.

The above practices ought not to be mixed up with the kind of interest of the past defined as archaeology of a given discipline. The archaeology of media and multimedia art is looking for roots of contemporary practices, analysis of pioneer phenomena, i.e. apparatus, techniques, concepts or poetics, which helped to shape the recent appearances. Archaeology is in fact an action aimed at better understanding of the present; it is the analysis of its bases and genesis. It is also a manifestation of a desire to discover in the world past the structures and processes, which remain a significant factor of the world of today despite the fact that they often defy our observation and identification. Studies of archaeology, in their various aspects, serve the present. Nonetheless, the unavoidable though nor necessarily desired side-product of archaeological perspective is also the transformation of the past itself, through new interpretations, emphasises of different things. And although general frames of perception of past events and structures not always change, the same events and structures often take new shapes and senses. This happens even more so if we intend to understand the past armoured with the knowledge, conventions and beliefs of today, immersed in modern attitudes and approaches, full of desires stirred by the recent events and processes.

To make the character of the above study strategies visible let us have a closer look at the chosen phenomena of the history of film avant-garde in a manner determined by a present state of multimedia art marked by the development of concepts and practices of interactive cinema. Structural film seems to be an extremely interesting case for our purposes.

2.

Describing structural film from the perspective of the 70s one should say that the artistic and art theory context of structural film where it is

completely along with the tendencies of contemporary art, is co-created by three movements: abstract expressionism, minimal art and conceptualism. The first due to emphasising the material dimension of the art work and revealing the creation processes (while anti-subjectivism should be a differentiating element); the second because of resignation of construction complexity in favour of ascetic simplicity; the third - for the maximally analytic approach to creative possibilities implied by the artistic medium, and due to the attempt to transform art into its own consciousness.

From the perspective of the 90s, and seen through the hypermedia, structural film takes a slightly different form. It does intensify extremely important and far-fetched processes.

Film experiments undertaken in the classic avant-garde period did not undermine two dogmas, two rules: the rule of permanence and formal stability and the rule of subjective character of the work. Films created at that time had formal structure which was permanent, awarded by their author, based on, true – only relatively permanent material base, but as the base may be easily re-produced, its life could be continuously and endlessly prolonged. Structural permanence and durability of the film work allowed for its multiple presentation in the same, unchanged form, as well as made collecting films possible. The works remained expression of their authors' philosophy of art (and sometimes of life), and had qualities of their individual poetics.

Both above features – previous artistic dogmas, as well as other attributes and rules of film creativity connected to them were questioned and subsequently left behind by the artists forming the structural tendency with their art, whose beginning can be traced back to the turn of the 50s and 60s, and whose real development took place during the two following

decades (see: Sitney, 1969). Phenomena creating that movement shattered continuity, which until then united into one the history of avant-garde film. Thanks to them a new attitude in the artists' film has been shaped which was anticipation and a direct conceptual background for the interactive, multimedia cyberculture art and in its scope – interactive cinema as well.

Structural film, similarly to expanded cinema (Youngblood, 1970) questioned former conditioning of art, undermined the axiomatics accepted hitherto, transcended the existing limitations, in various ways formulated questions concerning nature of film as art and film as a medium, in order to finally turn all those questions toward the recipient-participant of the art events and in such a way to make him/her an extremely important, even indispensable artist's partner. It is because of this attribute of the phenomena in the area of structural film and expanded cinema and their tendency to transgress all the borders, I combine them under the umbrella term of transgressive cinema.

The processes in the scope of transgressive cinema leading to configuration of contemporary interactive multimedia art were manifested through deconstruction, problematizing, transformation, transgression and negation of the two above mentioned rules, that is: permanence and durability of the work and its subjective character. Questioning the above two principal rules opened the recipient the road to the status of co-author of the work; and to the work itself gave the possibility to be transformed into the context of creative receptive interactions, and ensuing dispersal in the field of complex, multidirectional communication processes. Presently, artistic creativity transforms into such processes. Both issues are of essential importance for interactive multimedia art, and the whole of

cyberculture.

Deconstruction of the prevailing character of work, including its expressiveness, permanence and durability took various shapes in the 60s and 70s. Between these practices a resignation of filming as a basic method of producing a film work may be reminded. It was replaced by direct work on celluloid or using other people's ready material for one's work (*found-footage* film).

Another deconstructive method was shaping new projection strategies: projecting the film (or more than one film) on more than one screen simultaneously, using the loop, introducing performance actions into the structure of film screening by combining it with slide projections, music concerts, dance spectacles, etc. (see: Renan, 1967). Such actions led to effective erosion of the hitherto obligatory frames and boundaries of film work, and in the latter case they also deprived it of authorship relationship characteristic of avant-garde cinema.

Introduction into the scope of film work of elements omitted until now in the artistic practice turned out one of no less effective way of deconstructing the work. In other words, activating unexploited aspects hidden in the space behind frame and cadre, i.e. introducing frame borders, perforations, or, generally speaking all the features of celluloid film arising from its materiality, into the scope of vision (as artistically valuable elements of screen phenomenon).

Artistic character of a film work, its durability, and a status of a work of art were undergoing a kind of de-montage through introducing elements of amateur cinema, both as equipment – the unsophisticated cameras (8 and Super 8 mm film), and as methods of work characteristic for amateur film:

editing in the camera, lack of sound and special effects and through subjects undertaken (private, family life).

Two methods proved especially effective in depriving the film work of its durability and stability.

Allowing for random choices, introduction of lottery methods in all the existential film aspects, i.e. during its production process, in the final film structure as well as in the period of presentation does clearly make visible both relative character of all work's elements and aspects and emphasizes and underlines the open nature of its form. The author of the film at its every presentation could make different decisions regarding the time span of the work, the number of projectors used, the speed of projection, the character of the filters, the positioning of the projectors etc.

The actions aiming at questioning the subjective permanence of the film as celluloid material print took us even further in the deconstruction process of the film work. A number of art strategies of that time transformed the film into the object of frequent, or even permanent transformations, so that following presentations of the film were in fact presentations of a different, new film each time. This could be achieved in the simplest of ways – through editing and taking out or adding of the material. At times subduing the film to the atmospheric conditions, or modifying it with various bacterial and chemical processes initiated by the artists did it. The most interesting of the experiments took form of specific filmic installations or performances. In the scope of the installations, films were looped and subdued to chemical substances, acids or liquids extracting silver from the film emulsion. In consequence of those activities hitherto subjectively approached film (celluloid) gained fluid state, became a process, where images shown at the beginning of the projections were gradually

disintegrating.

Many of the methods which deprived the film work of its durability and structural permanence, and which deprived it of its subjective form, weakened at the same time or in many cases even destroyed also its objective character, subduing it to deconstruction realized in various different ways. Random choices, chemical or bacterial processes transformed the film into a relatively autonomous, self-presenting object and process. For its form (or structure) the personality of the artist became merely one of multiple contexts (or even an initiating factor only). In such a way the avant-garde film entered a period where the author's link to his/her product were challenged. It happened that the above process of this depersonalizing of artistic strategies and resulting films paradoxically gained a highly subjective features – univocally identified with the author's name, as it is the case with Stan Brakhage's films.

His art is especially interesting object for analysis of the processes of depersonalizing of film work, because Brakhage is widely and accurately perceived the main if not the most important representative of personalistic, poetic or rather lyrical cinema. In this case it is even more challenging to show how the processes of making the work less definite and more depersonalized find their place also in that area which logically seems completely irrelevant.

Brakhage art, which for obvious reasons was hailed the quintessence of lyric and formal film, anticipated structural cinema through pointing out to the material aspect of film – direct work on the print, and through subordination of the representation to the technical tricks (such as filters, anamorphic lenses, deforming the image; overlaying the images by multiple exposure; slow-motion etc.). As a result, many of Brakhage's film

became acts of “pure” (subjectless) vision. Experiments with direct shaping the print (non-camera work), the practice of releasing the camera from any human control, quite often even from the control of the eye appear no less important from our perspective. The camera, in constant motion, characterized by a great dynamics and passing unexpected paths expressed both the artist’s temper and the vitality of the medium.

Although some theoreticians (see: Sitney, 1969; 1969a) believe that the above characteristic suffice to proclaim Brakhage one of the pioneers (or even protagonists) of structural film, I tend to maintain that the main reason for the such a evaluation of his art is by no means in the repertoire of strategies used, however interesting they are. The principal justification for relating Brakhage to the mentioned tendency is his adapting to film the concept of the American poet, Charles Olson, the concept known as *objectism*. Olson (see: 1966), and subsequently Brakhage while rejecting imagination in favor of direct perception, aimed at reintegration of man and external reality (see: Field, 1979; James, 1989). In Brakhage’s opinion film was the perfect medium for the psychological and the physical elements to meet. The above-mentioned idea of the so-called untutored eye was also subordinated to this objective. In his mature work, Brakhage consistently tried to reject any participation of his consciousness in the processes of creation of his work and left out the conventional methods of portrayal of space by the illusion of perspective, as well as abandoned the rules of image ordering through cause-effect logic and composition rules. His ensuing films sprung up out of versatile empirical experiences much more than in the author’s imagination or intellect. Isolating three spheres participating in a film event; that is the phenomenological world, the optic apparatus (both biological and mechanical) and the psychical universe

(brain – memory – imagination – visions of a closed eye – dream, etc) Brakhage attempted at uniting them in one (see: James, 1989). Brakhage's perspective means at the same time that unification is not a single entity – the artist's work. It appears at all the times when the film is subjected to the recipient's perception. The unification – one may argue – the particular syntheses of the individual, the world and the optic interface connecting them becomes therefore the perceptive and creative experience of each viewer.

Stan Brakhage and his art maintain a very exceptional rank in contemporary art and avant-garde film history. This is because, remaining in conflict with the character and frames of the medium, it builds a bridge between the modernist art of the Author and the post-modernist art of the Recipient, the art of co-created reception. It is one of the most interesting examples of artistic inventiveness in the scope of visual arts in the 20th century while remaining the proof of the process of liberation of the art work both from conventional artistic and perceptive conditioning and from the influence of the artists ego, his knowledge, his philosophy of life, etc. From today's point of view, Brakhage's film art appears as a still imperfect but nonetheless extremely important endeavour of creating the possibility of experiencing other people's artwork in the extremely subjective way as an assay of providing the viewer the material for individual and creative experience of visual perception.

Another interesting example here is Zbigniew Rybczy_ski's art and particularly his *New Book* (1975), where the image and screen had been divided into nine sections. The action takes place simultaneously in all those sections, while due to their spatio-temporal correlation the events are transformed from one part of the screen to another as the action

develops. It might seem that the viewer should follow both all the parts of the screen simultaneously and the relations between them, or in other words to observe the complete gradual nature of transformations. This is how a classic reception of linear textual structures – film among them – looks like. Practical impossibility of such a perception makes us aware that Rybczy_ski's work conceptually belongs already to the impending era of hypermedia. An interactive CD-ROM by Christopher Hales entitled *Bliss* (1998), repeating in the interactive formula Rybczy_ski's concept is a convincing proof.

The comparison of the past and present interpretations of the described film phenomena shows how our attitude towards avant-garde film changes under the influence of art and hypermedia culture development. We can therefore declare that the process of writing of the hypermedia history of 20th art century has begun.

3.

Collaboration, participation, community are currently becoming the central categories in the reflection on art, culture and social organization. With the rapid development of interactive art, virtual social spaces, cyberculture and the network society, the notions of individualism, subjectivity and individual identity seem to have ceased to be sufficient for describing adequately the tendencies which define the nature of contemporary art; they seem to no longer harmonize with the rhythms of the present.

These transformations of cognitive paradigm are predominantly visible in media, multimedia and hypermedia art which foregrounds the issues of communication, simultaneously locating them in the context of network order. The notion of collective intelligence described by Pierre Lévy, or the

concept of a networked cyborg (a network of distributed technocorporeality) presented by Stelarc, may exemplify theories, which lay the foundations for the paradigm of the immensely diverse contemporary media and multimedia artistic practices. It is in this field, above all, that the notions of artistic communities and collaborative artistic practices are noticeable and assume particularly intriguing and valuable forms.

To get closer to the character of contemporary collaborative artistic practices, let us, for example, consider two works, which were awarded during the last, 2005 Ars Electronica festival in Linz (the list of other possible examples is theoretically endless if we assume that each digital product is open to modification, see Schäfer, 2004).

In the category of Net Vision, the main award – Golden Nica – was given to a work entitled *Processing*, the awarded authors of which – Ben Fry and Casey Reas – pointed to the numerous of its network users as co-authors, considering themselves just initiators.

Processing is “a programming language and environment built for the electronic arts community. It was created to teach fundamentals of computer programming within a visual context and to serve as a software sketchbook (...) Processing.org is the online hub for the international community of people using the software”.

The striking quality of this work is the wide scope of its collaborative character, and – more importantly – the obliteration of the difference between traditionally construed artist-authors and recipient-users. On the Open Source project platform, which is where *Processing* can be located, such distinctions are no longer feasible, whereas the rank or hierarchy of authors responsible for particular projects is not primary, but rather

secondary and inadequate – it reflects each author’s contribution to date, which is hence temporary.

Among the works awarded in the category of Interactive Art was the installation entitled *Intimate Transactions (2003-2004)*, authored by Transmute Collective (Keith Armstrong, Lisa O’Neill, Guy Webster). The authorial commentary was as follows:

“*Intimate Transactions* (...) allows two people in separate spaces to interact simultaneously using their bodies (...) This shared experience allows each participant to gradually develop a form of sensory intimacy with the other. As this highly immersive experience evolves, each participant begins to sense their part in a complex web of relations that connect them, and everything else within the work. In this way a subtle, indirect form of COLLABORATION develops via an increasing sense of intimacy between sites” (emphasis mine).

On the one hand, the collaborative dimension indicates the significance that the multimedia character of contemporary art has had on shaping this particular work – the collectivity of the creative process reflects the diversity of artistic practices and their attendant competences (technology, programming, hardware, choreography, music, etc). On the other hand, it demonstrates how art’s interactivity opens a new dimension of creative collaboration. Unlike in the previously discussed case, no identification of authorial sphere with recipient sphere occurs and neither is the difference between the role of the artist and that of the recipient obliterated. Instead, we witness an emergence of a new plane of creation, complementing and expanding the domain of endeavors undertaken by artists – until now the sole creators of art – to include the domain of creative recipients. Interactivity transforms those heretofore restricted to receiving art into co-

authors of artworks: they may become co-creators of software, hardware, or providers the material which is organized into a hypertextual database determining the audiovisual dimension of particular realizations, and they are always designers of their experiences connected with the work.

Both examples, their dissimilarity notwithstanding, can be used to illustrate how the idea of artistic collaboration is currently being transformed, chiefly as a result of interactive digital technologies. The contemporary multimedia collaborative artistic practices, in contrast to traditional forms of creative cooperation, go beyond merely integrating various spheres of art and combining activities traditionally identified as artistic with the area of scientific and technological endeavors (although the rapid increase in the latter process observed at present can be considered *signum temporis*). What differentiates the collaborative artistic practices of today from those undertaken in the past is primarily an increase in the range of their occurrence, connected with questioning traditional models of artistic communication, rejecting the previous system of roles involved in that process, as well as establishing a new community which integrates artists and audience into one collective which participates actively in the processes of creation.

Viewing the history of collaborative artistic practices through such a lens, one cannot but notice how incredibly restricted their scope was in comparison to the contemporary forms. To illustrate this remark, I wish to offer a necessarily brief look at the collaborative character of artistic endeavors undertaken by the twentieth century avant-garde.

I have chosen this example for a reason. After all, one of the defining qualities of the avant-garde, indicated by numerous researchers of this artistic-social formation, is precisely the proclivity for establishing groups

and collective creation. This characteristic has been found in the programs and practices of quite disparate avant-garde groups, such as the German Expressionists, the Futurists, the Dadaists and the Surrealists, as well as in the ranks of the Russian, Czech and Hungarian avant-garde with a decidedly political attitude, such as the Productivists and the Constructivists. Actually, one could safely conclude that artistic avant-garde is a phenomenon constructed on, among others, the notion of artistic collaboration. Nevertheless, once we take a closer look at the forms which this notion assumes in particular avant-garde activities (I am referring mainly to the historical avant-garde from the first part of the twentieth century), we observe that – the most extreme cases excepted – this cooperation was of a strategic-programmatic nature and it did not manifest its presence in the field of actual artistic work. It appears that at the heart of the cooperation lay a desire to form a peculiar shield, which would protect avant-garde artists against the power of traditional institutions of art. In most cases, it meant that avant-garde artists established communities within which they usually worked as individuals. There exist documented cases of avant-garde artistic communities whose members met very rarely, communicating mostly by post. Another reason for creating avant-garde groups was a wish to emphasize the shared program and the proximity of artistic practices while simultaneously opposing and negating traditional concepts of art. This created an opportunity to pinpoint the ethical dimension of artistic collectivism. However, what we would consider the pivotal aspect of creative collaboration, i.e. joint work, appears to be a rare and least significant attribute of avant-garde cooperation.

The situation will be seen in a slightly different light if we shift our focus to

avant-garde media art, particularly the classic avant-garde films produced in the same period (mostly between 1910 and 1935). Here, examples of motion pictures resulting from real cooperation between multiple artists abound. Undoubtedly, the principally collective character of cinematic endeavors plays an important role here, but we ought to bear in mind that it was precisely the avant-garde film artists who subsequently championed the type of work with the moving picture in which creative individualism was considered a central characteristic.

Nonetheless, even the instances of actual collective avant-garde work in the field of cinema indicate its limitations. Lev Kuleshov, one of the foremost creators of the 1920's Russian cinematic avant-garde, set forth the following principles which were to guide the creative work on the 1924 film entitled *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of Bolsheviks* (it is worthwhile to note that among the artist's works this film is the most oriented towards creative collectivism):

“In working on *West*, we developed a very interesting semi-rehearsal method (...) I went to the shooting set and rehearsals of *West* as the ‘chief observer’ or ‘chief-in-command’ while Pudovkin, Khokhlova, Obolensky, Komarov and Podobed created sets with various decorations. Each of them separately rehearsed in the course of a day or two their assigned part of a scene or an entire scene. I went from one set to another in the studio and observed how these rehearsals progressed, and directed the work. To their most minute detail, all the scenes were staged in this manner by various people, various co-directors, various assistants, but solely under my direction. In this fashion, already with *Mr. West*, the rehearsal method was applied, but the entire work was not rehearsed in advance – rather, individual scenes were”. (Christie and Gillett, 1987, p. 43)

The circumstances of the film *The Death Ray* (1925) were similar. Kuleshov described its production strategy in the following way:

„(...) during the period of the Death Ray we had continued to work this way in a directorial collective. I was the head director, while Pudovkin, Komarov, Obolensky, Khokhlova were the director-assistants or co-directors. They prepared scenes according to my instructions”. (Christie and Gillett, 1987, p. 47)

Kuleshov's concept of joint creative work based on the opposition between head director and director-assistants or co-directors inclines one to accept now the proposition of distinguishing between so far treated here as synonymic the notions of 'cooperation' and 'collaboration' (Dillenbourg, Baker et al., 1995). In cooperation the task is split hierarchically into independent subtasks, whereas in collaboration the cognitive process may be heterarchically divided into intertwined layers. In cooperation, coordination is only required when assembling partial results, while collaboration is “a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem”.

The type of artistic teamwork that Kuleshov imposed on his group may be termed as the hierarchically organized cooperation, within the confines of which we can additionally notice certain restrictions with regard to the subtasks' independence.

It appears that the opposition between cooperation and collaboration can also be employed for the general purposes of describing types of artistic teamwork in the environment of the twentieth century avant-garde. Three types of joint artistic activity can be discerned there, while their emergence,

development and shifting hierarchy reflects the evolution of artistic attitudes and the new types of artworks, which result from this evolution.

The first type limits the scope of joint artistic endeavors to general program issues, using it to construct strategies of acting in the hostile environment of traditional art institutions. It can be perceived in the group practices of classic avant-garde from the second and third decade of the previous century.

The second type assumes the form of artistic cooperation. In this case we are dealing with actual teamwork, which manifests itself in coordinated individual actions, which are organized hierarchically and subjected to an individual supervision or an individual notion. Possible examples include many avant-garde motion pictures from the 1910's and 1920's, such as the aforementioned films by Kuleshov, René Clair's *Entracte* (1924) or Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1923), as well as numerous happenings of the sixties or multimedia projects, including Internet works, such as e.g. Antonio Muntadas' Internet realization *File Room* (1994).

Finally, there is the third type – artistic collaboration – which develops and gains prominence with the evolution of digital media, especially interactive ones. In one of its two basic varieties, it is primarily the effect of collaboration between artists, still traditionally defined, who – as is the case with the aforementioned installation *Intimate Transactions* – offer the recipients only a limited participation (albeit one that produces the illusion of autonomy) on the plane of (also restricted) interaction. As for the second variety, exemplified by the previously discussed *Processing*, this type becomes the most elaborate model of joint creativity, in which a group of participants of unlimited number and undefined quality works on non-hierarchically linked elements or aspects of the work, sometimes even on

its entirety. Thus, the work becomes an open, processual, joint product, or acquires the status of a particular, individualized version. This model seems most suitable to represent the contemporary shape of collaborative artistic practices in digital media.

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* This paper was presented at the REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center september 29-october 4 2005 and co sponsored by the Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.