

(AUDIO)VISUAL LABYRINTHS NON-LINEAR DISCOURSES IN LINEAR MEDIA

Ryszard W. Kluszczyński

I

Let us begin our discussion by describing the area of our interest, as well as establishing the meanings of the concepts to be used throughout the analysis that follows.

Our study concerns artistic visual and audio-visual phenomena that either employ time-structure (time-based arts), or use (audio)visual temporal forms as the elements of a complex structure of spatial arrangement (e.g. video installation, environment, multimedia event). The time structure of these phenomena is linear, which is a direct result of the substance of the medium.

Linearity bears the features of the substance of the medium, meaning that it cannot be characterised by any stylistic, genre-related choice; instead, it constitutes an essential attribute ascribed to a certain field. Once we are capable of understanding that quality, we will embrace cinema and video art, which is perceived by some theoreticians (e.g. Gene Youngblood, 1970) as an expansion or extension of the film medium. The structure of the video tape is temporal, whereas installations are organised spatially and include visual or audio-visual temporal forms.

The limitation of the analytic scope to visual and audio-visual media eliminates, despite their linear character, purely audible (sonic) media. Non-visual sonic structures might appear in the field of our analysis solely as the elements of complex, spatial audio-visual structures.

II

In order to define the meaning of the notion of “linearity”, let us say that the term applies to every dynamic process structure in which.

1. The arrangement of the elements is successive, while temporal perspective dominates the spatial architecture. The direction of this perspective, being

defined a priori, demarcates the temporal span of every work. The process structure gains linear character only when its components get connected in the compact wholeness. In film, this arrangement is usually controlled by the structure of the narrative discourse that endows the work with a certain cohesion.

2. The structure of the work dominates the structure of reception, which means that the unidirectional sequentiality of the work is projected onto the experience of reception.

The dichotomy of linearity is the main cause behind the double nature of its abandonment which can be realised through:

1. The distortion of a work's sequentiality. Since the sequentiality is usually controlled by narrative structure, the discourse of the narrative is the first factor to be distorted. The successive sequence could also be deconstructed by manipulative means that, while preserving the general outline of narrative horizon, enlarge the whole structure to such an extent that the linearity of reception is loosened.
2. Undermining of the domination of the work's structure over the structure of reception. Thus, the structure of the work surrenders sharpness, definiteness and durability and, as a result, opens an extended field of possible types of reception and interpretation, or a creative space of interaction.

III.

Strategies of film art that effect the transgression of linearity could be divided into three groups. The purposes of all these groups are: disturbing the narrative order, undermining the domination of storytelling over the remaining elements of film structure and releasing the image, restoring and granting its autonomy. The image treated in this way could be handled in different ways, which is the reason (and the criterion) for isolating those three groups of strategies mentioned.

Subsequently, one group arranges the images in poetic structures, linking them together either with metaphoric relationships based on associations and antitheses (semantic links), or references to symbolic, mythical and archetypal meanings. The poetic film has been developing since the twenties (e.g. dadaist and surrealist-oneiric cinema), assuming always newer forms.

The second group substitutes syntactical connections linking particular film components (phases) by means of rhythmic relations, for rejected narrative relationships, employing parameters of time, dynamics and direction. This kind of approach is present in various kinds of what is widely understood as abstract cinema. "visual symphonies", kinetic films and cinema pur.

The third group of strategies creates films that break down and abandon the narrative structures, focusing the audience's reaction on ontological representation of the cinema, analysing film as a medium. The processes take place against the background of conceptual art. The phenomenon described was called "structural cinema".

IV.

Strategies that - contrary to the previous ones - aim at undermining the domination of the work's structure over the structure of the reception not only represent a mere attempt to destroy the narrative order or the plot structure, but also tend towards the abandonment of the objectivity of the film work. In miscellaneous forms of expanded cinema, the process is carried out by removing attributes of stability from a film work and replacing them with numerous forms of happening and performance activities, or by multiplying some concepts or elements (poly-vision, image division etc.) that, in consequence, lead to dissociation and partial avoidance of permanent control. The structure of the work can also be minimalized and set beyond the borderlines of the minimum of organisational structure that would have been capable of managing the process of reception.

A further stage of linear transformation of cinema into a non-linear medium was stimulated mainly by the application of computer technologies that constituted prospects for interactive cinema. The transformation reaches its final stage in replacing the textual structure typical for linear cinema with hypertext, being a basis of non-linear interactive cinema.

A certain type of interactive film that is gaining recognition in modern film practice utilises the CD-RDM medium for creating filmic images and games on computer screens. Another, more advanced variant, which is therefore still in its experimental stage, employs another medium -Virtual Reality (VR). VR enables users to experience a full immersion in a virtual interactive environment that provides real-time responses.

In addition to this, the possibility of using the Internet computer network as a creative tool seems to be quite promising. Theoretically, it allows any given number of participants to take part in film events in an active and innovative way. An imaginable, even more advanced form of interactive cinema, employing all basic characteristics of cyberculture-real-time multimedia interactivity, globalism, interconnectivity -would inevitably lead to networked visual reality.

Interactive cinema in all its manifestations goes beyond the main scope of our present discussion. We shall thus not be dealing with its detailed analysis. By

means of computer technology, the linear film medium became non-linear. The art of filmmaking gained the status of interactive art. However, it is impossible to determine (and I shall not be doing it here) whether it should still be called film art. Let us discuss instead the three afore mentioned groups of filmic strategies, i.e. ones that strive to transcend the limitations of linearity without fully discarding the linear media. At the end of the text. we shall try to analyse the non-linear aspects of video art.

V.

The paradigm of avant-garde film, shaped in the 1920's, was a direct consequence of experiments in visual arts, poetry and music. It was strongly opposed to the notion of narrative cinema, which was developed in the previous decade by film makers like David Wark Griffith. Narrative cinema, with its fast progress and inner stability, determined standards of linearity marked, among other things, by the logic or causal relationships, the coherence or represented world, psychology of characters etc. Avant-garde cinema rejected or broke down the principles or linear narrative discourse, replacing them with the aforementioned (see part III of this article) semantic and syntactic rules.

If the structures of representational discourse and the world represented were distinguished from one another, we would be able to prove that, inasmuch as the breakdown of the former is possible within a very limited and incomplete range, decomposition and delinearisation of the latter could be much more advanced in comparison. The representational discourse, especially in formal cinema (poetic and abstract), does not have the ability to overcome the unidirectionality of progress; after successful (primary) decomposition of narrative structure, the structure of intraelemental relations inevitably attains another, different form of durability and structural finiteness. In this dimension, non-linearity is principally more an intent (desire) than a realizable goal.

On the level of the structure of the world represented we can observe a remarkable slackness of relations (which, of course, is an effect of the strategies of representational discourse adopted; ultimately, both levels are closely connected). The world represented can become (from the point of view of narrative logic) open, unmarked, full of internal ambiguities, inconsistencies or even contradictions which enable the receiver (or force her/him to perform the act of free interpretation and arbitrary substantiation. These are so-called poetic films.

There are numerous examples of such structures. Let us consider, for example, "Un Chien andalou" (1928) by Louis Bunuel and Salvador Dali. Various sequences of "Un Chien andalou" are very loosely associated with each other. The first part of the picture is largely detached from the following parts; the whole prologue has

been described as a meta-discursive comment upon the new model of cinema, developed in the film (Williams, 1981). Parts that follow, although not fulfilling meta-discursive functions directly, are similarly linked in a very unconstrained way.

The most important qualities of the film world, which was created by means of the strategies used, include:

- Ontological instability; its components are activated and disappear without any specific reasons.
- Fluid identity of separate components; they mutate and interlace each other, creating heterogeneous, or hybrid entities.
- Suspension of causal functions in relation to situations and events.
- Undermining of logical laws, associations and motivations (the term logic applies to the Aristotelian, dualistic system). Instead of the above mentioned elements, the work utilises free associative patterns, relations based on analogies, contradictions or contiguities.

Distortion of temporal and spatial relationships. Weakening of their individual parameters.

Forming of spatio-temporal sets characterised by variability of forms and internal relations.

- Film reality as a universe ruled by paradoxical logic versus freedom of imagination as an underlying principle.
- Construction of filmic meanings (enigmatic and multidimensional) that penetrate deep layers of psyche and actualize mythical and archetypal patterns. (Kluszczyński, 1990)

There are many films that assume the structural shape of "Un Chien andalou". Some of them like "Meshes of the Afternoon" (1943) by Maya Deren. replicate the modal quite precisely. Other films, like "Przygoda człowieka poczciwego" (Adventure of Good Citizen, 1937) by Franciska and Stefan Themerson, behave more arbitrarily. Their variety comprises the whole spectrum of poetic cinema.

Maya Deren, mentioned above, juxtaposed the vertical structure of the poetic film with the horizontal structure of narrative cinema. Vertical structures expand. both formally and semantically, particular distinguishable elements of the whole structure and their relationships, breaking up the well-kept linearity of the filmic discourse. Vertical cinema that overcomes the linear convention should be considered as Deren's own version of poetic cinema.

In this context. we should also mention film theory and practice as formulated by Stan Brakhage, who once confessed: "like Jean Cocteau. I was a poet who also made films" (Brakhage, 1982: 113). In his mature period (starting with "Anticipation of the Night. 1958), Brakhage attempted to unite three spheres associated with the filmic process: the world of pro-film phenomena, the sphere of cinematic technology and the artist's psycho-physical subjectivity. Aided by

conceptual supporters like Charles Olson with his notion of "objectism", Brakhage tried to conquer the claims of the Self, intending to confront the subjective Self and Nature (James, 1989: 40-44). In this way, Brakhage wanted to liberate the medium, depriving it of every possible convention perceived and rejected by him as a form of the mind's (self's) control over filmic expression. He eliminated not only narrative discourse, but also other principles, anchoring the perception of the work to the objectivised language of cinema. Thus, in a certain way, the element of linear sequentiality also became redundant. Out of necessity, film as a medium tended to be a linear, ordered and fixed series of images. However, the perception itself was devoid of order and organisation. The temporal progress of film was the only element that enforced the direction of the reception. Brakhage's concept of "untutored eye" demanded that the spectator should, using imagination and sensibility, structuralise the personal experience of the film.

VI.

Another group of strategies intended to deprive the film of its traditional linearity was the active force behind the abstract film. Contrary to poetic film, with its dominating semantic constructions, the abstract film emphasises the presence of syntactic elements.

In abstract films, cohesion is the common product of organised material-film substance and the rules of construction (structuring of substance). In all described processes, movement is one of the more important factors: movement within image (properties of substance), movement of image (function of camera) and movement of images (function of editing). The dynamic structure of the film, with its musical organisation of themes, their transmutations and reprises, sets in motion (and refers to) non-narrative mechanisms of reception. In the case of such films, retention and protention processes, important components of perception, have decidedly structural functions; that means that the recipient memorises (or anticipates) rhythmic structures, choruses and quasi-melodic transformations, not narrative plots, characters, histories or any transformations of the represented world.

References to musical structures are probably very important for delinearization processes in abstract film. Even though, as in poetic films, the structure of abstract film discourse gains a finiteness and durability of shape that the recipient is bound to perceive, the character of the work gives the perception sui generis non-linear character. Sequentiality is accompanied by the necessity for retrograde (retentive) references and the grasping of simultaneous visual (or audio-visual). The complexity of this perception is so substantial that it ceases to be purely linear. In the area of filmic-musical references, several notions were pushing the process of delinearization much further than abstract cinema was. One such idea was

formulated in 1942 by the Polish musician and composer Onufry Bronisław Kopczyński. Writing on abstract film, he advised a change in the methods of its presentation. According to Kopczyński, the completed film print should be treated as the “score”, and the film itself should be “performed”, and not merely shown or screened. Thus, Kopczyński effectively extended the field of creative film work. The stage of artistic treatment involves not only the processes of realisation (shooting, editing etc.), but also the presentation of the work. In this method, the film's screening becomes its interpretation, the film projector gains the status of a creative instrument, the operator turns into an artist (basically, it means that an artist takes over and transforms the projectionist's function). Interpretative performance of the film deprives its structure of durability and finiteness, in a certain sense calling its linearity into question, and drawing it closer to interactive cinema. Accordingly, every presentation is unique. Still, an artist's function is active in this process, contrary to the function of the recipient. The notion of film score interpreted by an artist using a projector/instrument formulated by Kopczyński, foretells expanded cinema's later developments (Kluszczyński, 1993a).

VII.

The third group of strategies is interlinked, creating the model of structural film. Works that represent this direction do not focus our attention on formal order; rather, they emphasize the nature of the medium. Structural cinema uncovers the ontological structure of film; the meshwork of basic relationships which guarantee the existence and shape of every single film phenomenon. During the projection, the structure of the filmic medium assumes the shape of an intellectual correlate of the presented film, the final product of the abstraction process, reduction uncovering the ontological fundamentals of the film phenomenon. In structural film, time and space become destabilised. The tricks employed do not allow them to develop fully and permanently, utilising constant parameters. Fragmentary pieces of narration or single events, atomised beyond the narrative systems, appear in structural film as a spatial function only. Loops - continuous returns of certain images - turn the linear successivity into multidimensional penetration and manifold exploration of known places. "Tom, Tom the Piper's Son. (1969) by Ken Jacobs is an exquisite example of the spiral construction in structural film, a never-ending and looped peregrination through the space of a film by Bill Bitzer (1905). The travel takes place in a completely different dimension, as if moving into the depths of the filmic matter. Structural film is deprived of all dimensions of the linear element to a greater extent than formal cinema (poetic and abstract).

In principle, expanded cinema is very close to structural film. Breaking the conventional framework of the classical cinema, it undermines its medial determinants. Often it assumes the shape of a happening or performance ("Zen for

Film. by Nam June Paik or "Film #4" by Takehisa Kosugi), letting the audience navigate freely through the spatial, real dimensions of the work. In some cases its form is more traditional, e.g. multi-screen projection.

Zbigniew Rybczyński is one of the artists deserving highest merit for delinearization of the cinema. His film "Nowa książka" ("New Book"), awarded prizes at several festivals, is another important stage in the development of non-linear film poetics. The image in "New Book" has been divided into nine parts. The film's action takes place simultaneously in all the sections (in each one of them one can see the results of additional interference, e.g. manipulation of the speed, fluency and direction of motion), while the events are so linked in time and space that, as the action goes on, they move from one portion of the image to another. Thus, the spectator has to watch at once all the parts of the screen and the relationships between them simultaneously and collaterally, that is to say, he has to observe the successiveness of the transformations. This device results in the extreme spatialisation of time and simultaneously a temporalisation of space, all within the same process. In his earlier films Rybczyński already liked to manipulate time and space (a multiple exposure, frame for frame shooting). This time, however, he applied a new device which, apart from making the film's structure coherent through the retention of the numerous complicated motives, was very effective in breaking up linear narrative discourse. "Tango" - the most famous of all films by Rybczyński - infringes the linear rules of the film medium in another way. While in "New Book" we are faced with a segmentation of the image, in "Tango" all characters are put together in the same time space, but separated. Crowned with an Oscar, this legendary film has been extensively described. It consisted of twenty-two shots of people engaged in various activities (duration of 12 to 36 seconds). Each of these shots is edited into a loop, which means that the characters repeatedly perform the same acts. As time goes on, the number of people simultaneously present in the frame grows. At the culmination, all of them are there. Then the screen gradually empties, to return at the end to the opening state.

In order to realise his concept Rybczyński had to shoot all the characters successively (the lines drawn up on the floor made it possible for them not to screen one another), to reduce the fluency of motion to some selected phases, to make about six thousand masks, to shoot the background separately to produce counter-masks and by means of them one more overall mask, this time as long as the whole film itself, and to trace an outline of the action and the succession of the final, while using the optical printer and the prepared film material to create a synthesis, a materialisation of his vision (till then only existing in his imagination).

In the film "Take Five" (1972) the characters broke up linearity of the medium by simultaneous appearance owing to the overlapping images. In the "New Book" the simultaneity of the numerous motives was achieved by the partition of the image (screen) into sections and the parallel presentation of these. In "Tango" the characters appeared again in the same time-space and the same picture, but, being

separated, were deprived of any contact to one another. The distance (and differences) between these films demonstrates not only the evolution of Rybczyński's art as it goes from familiar techniques to dazzling innovations; it also shows the process of departing from cinema and approaching video. The image in "Tango" seems no longer to look like the image in film with the latter's texture, light values and references to the outside world of matter. Instead, it gets increasingly closer to the world of video, formed by the blue box and the techniques of digital processing of the image. According to Rybczyński, there is nothing more to be discovered in the cinema (Kluszczyński, 1993).

VIII.

Video art seems to deepen the process of delinearisation of (audio)visual structure to a greater extent than the cinema does.

The scope of innovations introduced by video is considerably larger when we reflect on the process of reception than when we consider the issues of structure and poetics of film and video work. The invention of the video tape has made it possible for films to be perceived in private surroundings, at home, in circumstances quite different from classical cinema reception and from standard television watching (a film as part of a television program). The cinema show (a spectacle) has been replaced by a process which I would like to call film reading (lecture). The situation of the spectator in a cinema has been compared to the condition of a daydreaming person. It is from this, among other things, that the significance of reflection on identification-projection processes, characteristic of cinema - originated. In home surroundings they have been replaced by reception in a state of diffused attention, which has already been described by Walter Benjamin. Such a reception was also facilitated by the replacement of screen projection of complete static pictures, characteristic of a cinematic show (pictures superimposed upon one another and activated in the process of perception) by light emission, typical of television and video, where the appearance of a picture is conditioned by the successive occurrence of its constituent points (pixels). As a result, the awareness of a spectator watching a film on a television screen is much less dominated by the film structure, the world of film and the magic of the participation in this world than is the case in cinema.

The fact that video-taped film can be manipulated in various ways, such as by pausing, fast forwarding, slow motion and reversing, helps to free the spectator from the power of the film structure. The viewer is in a position to influence the course of his/her experience of a film. Thus the structure of the film being watched on the video tape loses its ultimate and intact nature (although the ultimate nature of the structure given to the film is inherent in its concept). This feature of video is perhaps the most important difference between video and cinema. From this

perspective, video art turns out to be another stage in the process of transformation leading towards non-linear interactive culture. Film reception, as I have already mentioned, has been transformed - thanks to video - into film reading, a linear, yet manipulable, multifunctional process of perceiving, comprehending and experiencing. Video installations effectively remove the linear elements from video art. They enable the recipient to navigate in real space, something which applies also to particular manifestations of expanded cinema. Thus, they create one of the ways in which linear media culture can turn into non-linear interactive cyberculture.

Non-linearity, which in video appeared in a "rudimentary" form (or as just the announcement of the coming of actual interactivity) only as a possibility for receptive behavior motivated not by the structure of the work, but by the needs of the viewer, can assume a fully-fledged form in an interactive computer art. This means that non-linearity and interactivity are becoming the internal principles of the work, and that the viewer - if he/she wishes to substantiate it - has to start a game which will result in the shaping of the object of his/her perception. Non-linear interactivity is becoming one of the most important features of contemporary civilisation and culture (Kluszczyński, 1995)

Bibliography:

- Brakhage, S 119821 Scrapbook Collected Writings 1964-80, New Paltz, New York
- James, D.E.119891 Allegories of Cinema. American Film in the Sixties, Princeton University Press, Princeton. New Jersey.
- Kluszczyński, RW (1990) Film -sztuka Wielkiej Awangardy (Film. The Art of the Great Avant-Garde, PWN. Łódź-Warsaw.
- Kluszczyński, R.W. (1993) Absolute Against Casualty Zbigniew Rybczyński's Cinema 11972-19801. "Exit. New Art in Poland", Quarterly No.3115).
- Kluszczyński, R.W.11993a) Film. Music, language. "Exit New Art in Poland". Quarterly No.4(16).
- Kluszczyński, R.W.119951 Audio-Visual Culture in the Face of the Interactive Challenge in. Media Art Festival WRD 95 Catalogue, ed. P. Krajewski, D. Celejewska, Wrocław
- Williams, L. (1981) Figures of Desire. A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film, Illinois
- Youngblood, G (1970). Expanded Cinema, New York.

RYSZARD W. KLUSZCZYŃSKI

Media art scholar, critic and curator

Studied literature, aesthetics, theatre and film at the University of Łódź. MA in 1976. Postgraduate studies in French 11982-841 and English 119871. PhD. in 1987; Since 1987 Professor at the University of Łódź, Film and Media Department:

Since 1990 Media Art Curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art -Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw; Since 1993 Professor at the Institute for European Studies, Łódź; Since 1993 Contributing Editor (Media art section). Quarterly "Art Magazine"; Since 1995 Professor at the University of Łódź, History of Art Department: published and edited about ten books on theory and history of the avant-garde, especially film, video and multimedia and more than 150 articles on media art and experimental artistic culture; lectures and participation in international symposiums and panels. In 1988 he founded the Polish Video Art Data Bank (now: Media Nomad), a private non profit organisation for media culture.