

Pneumatic Video

by Frances Dyson

'All dressed up with nowhere to go....' might be the lament of video art. And a doubly tragic lament too, given that the favoured modes of image viewing in the West, that of TV and cinema, coincide with culturally over-determined viewing spaces entree to which video art is denied. Excluded both from the domestic scene (or screen) of TV, from that site which both establishes and continually simulates the real, and from the *mise-en-scene* of cinema; that architectural and imaginary space which envelopes the viewer within the culturally proscribed excess of its sensuous embrace, video art not only lacks an outlet, it lacks access to the very outlets which construct and determine notions of visual pleasure. Having been, for so long, left out in the cold, and indeed regarded as a cold, thin and insubstantial medium, some recent video art seems to have developed techniques for accessing the *warm* of cinema and the *real* of TV. Not (primarily) through entering the domain of either, but by re-inscribing the two-dimensional screen with the three-dimensionality (the scene) of both - a technique specific to video, and one which, whether intended or otherwise, appropriates and transforms their seductive appeal. Because this appeal directly engages the senses, and is directed towards privileged representations of the substantial; the body/ the real, and their various metaphors, video art must similarly address the body/ the real in order to *get warm*.

This it does through the technology and techniques of video editing, which substitute for the dimension and sensuality of cinema, the extension and refinement of (imaged) bodily movement and gesture, and by so doing, present an *essence* (or *eidos*) of the body which is potentially more affective than the larger than life close-ups of cinema. Similarly, in the mixing and layering of images a spatiality is constructed which acts as a metaphor, but is also a metamorphosis of the darkened and enveloping space of the cinema. That space becomes a presence on the screen - paradoxical and abstract, it constitutes one means by which video art *gets warm*.

And also gets even. For within the video mix there is always the suggestion (for Western epistemology, the threat) of the liquidation of concrete reality, the vaporisation of its architectural, perspectival and ontological modes of representation into the phenomenological moment - that moment where nothing is precisely. In a culture where seeing is believing, the intertextuality of the mix, because visually based, radically dislodges notions of knowability and credibility.

And within this shift, which is also (necessarily) a departure from the concrete, the physical, a conflation and synthesis occurs which seems almost to absorb the (represented) spatio-temporal reality of discrete images, and to inscribe a three dimensional thickness upon the two dimensional screen.

This thickness, being simulated, reveals itself to be more of a teleological/ technological *process* than an actuality. And this process is itself paradoxical - as images are re-contextualised through mixing, their content (content which casts a gaze always to *reality*) is shed; the assimilation of reference gives way to the imitation of its form: dimensionality, depth and all that is implied by the notion of *being*. Through this process of addition and subtraction (abstraction), a timbre or texture is added to the surface, and a *presence* suggested which is no longer fettered by identity nor chained to the material.

Two works by video artist John Gillies seem to instance the above: *I Need You* and *Hymn*. The former develops the idea of a movement into the screen, creating a depth within the surface, while the latter extends and repeats the momentary gestures of three bodies to simulate, in the artist's words, the experience of breathing. Through the techniques of editing, mixing and repetition, the content of *Hymn*, (which is the image of three gesturing bodies), comes to represent a sort of universal respiration, the corporeality of the imaged bodies being eclipsed by the idea of corporeality's essence - breath, that which animates the body, which unites spirit with matter, which gives life. Rather than projecting the body as object to be viewed - an object of sensory and imaginary arousal, *Hymn* unfolds the embodiment of an idea which is also a moment/movement of ideation, realised less through the sensory, than through the pneumatic.

Indeed the concept of *pnuema* - breath - seems to be a particularly descriptive metaphor for certain aspects of the video mix. Firstly, because the pneumatic, relating as it does to air, upsets the solidity of objects, the often rigid formations of the material world and claustrophobic homogeneity of epistemic strictures, just as the video mix vaporises the (ontological and material) grounding of images which reference the real. Secondly, because *breath* immediately locates this agent of dissolution within the body just as (for instance) *Hymn* locates the (simulated) body and its movements within a representation (technologically effected), of breathing.

But far from mystical, this technologically mediated abstraction (corporeality as breath) and simulation (of presence as a rhythmic breathing), reflects and absorbs what might be called the post-modern spin towards the eclipse of the physical and differentiated, located in space, by the abstract and simultaneous, located in time. And a common spin-off of this ascent seems to be the re-presentation of signs of the physical, and especially the corporeal, which contain, almost as supplement to their artificiality, a mythologised, and for reason seductive, *idea* (eidos) of physical/corporeal essence.

published in *Scan+* 1, 1988, pp.10-11

Frances Dyson is the author of *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*, Berkeley and was formerly Associate Professor of Technological Studies at the University of California, Davis.