

Through the dark room – an approximation between the movie theatre and VJing spaces

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Historical records suggest that movie exhibition was a very autonomous practice in the first years of Cinema. The simple fact that film reels were sold to the exhibitors, instead of rented (Machado 2002: 91), implies that the industry had a very different organization in the beginning of the last century. The act of moviegoing was constituted more as *going to the movies* than as *going to see a movie* – partly because the 'movie' itself only existed during its screening, as pure cinematographic experience. The owner of an exhibition venue had a great editorial control over its programme (Musser 2002: 17). The projectionist, in turn, could either use tricks of lighting or adjust the speed of the projector, in order to give or correct the meaning of the images (Richardson 2002: 75). The score, played in synchronicity with the film, was not truly part of the work, being just applied along its process of consumption (Aumont 2005: 45). Therefore, in as much as a movie could be replayed, it was never watched in the same way twice.

In 1963, Stan Brackage still referred to projection as *performance* – that is, a creative practice (1983: 350). Nevertheless, the development of the industry has undermined this possibility by establishing a commoditised dynamics of consumption, as technical and semiotic standards became increasingly necessary to guarantee the penetration of different works in different exhibition venues (and, nowadays, their circulation over a wide media ecology). Throughout this process, the once collateral *movie* became the nervous axis and economic pivot of the cinematographic institution. The *tableaux vivants* and the *travelogues* gave place to the millionaire *blockbuster*. Concurrently, the procedure of movie screening became gradually more *transparent*, so that as few interferences as possible affected film consumption as it was originally planned. As a result, the noisy *nickelodeon* and the opulent *movie palace* were replaced with the *shopping mall multiplex* – an excellence place of consumption, whose Spartan architecture favours an uninterrupted flow of public and products. As it is hard to separate causes from consequences in this complex history, we can but declare its outcome: that cinema's governing dynamics of consumption – the articulation

between exhibition venues and the moviegoing practice – has become a hyper-determined, crystallised operation.

This situation is called into question by the intrusion of the purported new media technologies into the traditional cinematographic structures. As its mechanisms of distribution and exhibition are fully translated into computational processes, cinema is about to become an eminently digital medium, as are many others. However, the established industry seems ready to oppose this transformation, and has chosen movie theatres as its last trench. Contrary to what is overly claimed,¹ this resistance is not based on pure aesthetical motives. The projection consultant Luiz de Luca states that digital projectors capable of rendering sufficiently high image quality, comparable to 35mm film, have existed for some time (2005: 21). Therefore, it seems that the main reasons why the industry has not adopted these technologies right away, dispensing film prints and saving distribution costs, are *operational*. To be commercially effective, the system needs uniform specifications, which the industry is actively engaged in defining since 2002. This process is headed by *Digital Cinema Initiatives* (DCI) a joint venture consisting of the seven biggest Hollywood studios (Ibid: 204). The DCI embodies the struggle of the industry to not lose control over the places around which cinematographic economy turns – the instances from which this economy can be defined: its dynamics of consumption. They do so by setting standards, which have the value of protocols of access to the circuit.

These regulating agents are mainly interested in maintaining their privileged position in the market. The digitization of the cinematographic circuit represents a serious threat to such configuration, since it would result in the large disposal of the present technological infrastructure, replacing it with a more open, dynamic and flexible framework. Digitised, a movie is just a pool of data, a high-quality matrix ready to leak from the authorised channels to informal ones. The digital screening room, for its part, is not logically different from a home theatre connected to the Internet. Therefore, these technologies place exhibition under the audience control, in the same manner DV camcorders and video editing software did with movie production.

Above and beyond the unrestrained proliferation of unreleased films, what seems to worry the cinematographic industry are the effects that such vulgarization of exhibition technologies might cause to moviegoing. For a long time, moviegoing has

¹ The aesthetical resistance to digital projection can be seen in news reports such as “Digital Projection Displeases Specialists,” published in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper in 29 Dec 2005.

been the unique dynamics of cinematographic consumption. Nowadays, although it coexists with many others forms – as films can be broadcasted through television, rented in DVDs and downloaded from the Internet, etc –, moviegoing retains a paramount significance. Because of its strategic position, the movie theatre still constitutes 'the first and most important retail venue' of the industry (ibid: 95). On the other hand, home video and image rights currently represent a higher profit to the producers than box office shares (ibid: 151) – in the same way that exhibitors earn more by selling concessions (popcorn and beverages) than tickets (ibid: 126). The result of this odd combination is that the architecture that fosters cinematographic experience becomes a hostage of its own ancillary economy. Film screening is turned into a publicity stunt to a series of accessory markets, and the theatre becomes something of a shop display (Friedberg 1994: 95), in relation to which all other channels are localised according to the system of *windows*.²

In this highly intertwined circuit, the particular potentials of each dynamics of consumption are nullified. Since a film must be managed through several media with as few adaptations as possible and not lose its commercial appeal, it cannot really adopt specific characteristics of any medium. Thus, with the standardization of moviegoing, all forms of cinematographic consumption are restricted – including moviegoing itself. By keeping strict control over the movie theatres, the industry is able to determine economic and aesthetical aspects of film consumption, as well as cinematographic production and language in general.

The complete digitization of the circuit threatens the industry because it dilutes this control, by making dynamics of consumption flexible to such extent that they are useless as a filter to production. Every movie could promote forms of exhibition that suited its own specific proposal, and still operate within cinema. We can see hints of this transformation, for example, in the feature films that have been simultaneously released in theatres, on DVD and on the Internet, such as *The Road to Guantanamo* (Michael Winterbottom, 2006). But its effects could be better testified by the *Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2005-) project, which director Peter Greenaway is making, in a concatenated and complimentary way, through different channels. Greenaway, a long-time explorer of multimedia possibilities, has even done some *Tulse Luper* VJ presentations.

² Processes of chronological, gradual authorizations, used to organize the exhibition of movies in different media (De Luca 197).

In that sense, de Luca proposes that digital movie theatres shall adopt a fluid architecture, capable of holding different audiovisual products, such as soccer matches and rock'n'roll concerts (2005: 232-233). However, we should suggest that the transformations provoked by the digitization of cinematographic dynamics of consumption are prone to go far beyond this level. New technologies are able to completely change the power balance between big media enterprises and the general public (Lasica 2005: 2). Networked film distribution could deteriorate release windows, wearing out the blockbuster's appeal of exclusivity. Digital projection could make film screening an ordinary business, at everyone's reach. Moviemakers could not depend on the multiplex structure anymore: they could define their own system of distribution, fitter to each of their works.

Moreover, digital projection modifies the very ontology of the cinematographic apparatus and image. The movie exists in a radically different way: it is no longer the manifestation of indexical records, but the effective creation of sound and image from an executable code, through real time algorithmic processing. As movie screens become interactive (Manovich 2001: 102), movie exhibition is no longer *playback* (reproduction): it turns into *rendering* (interpretation). Only the concurrent activity of the mechanism can translate code into bitmaps; frames; diegesis. In this process, the movie becomes susceptible to other interventions.

Digital projection is, therefore, an eminently *opaque* interface: the contrary of everything the movie theatre has evolved to be. While the projection runs, it calls upon the very moment of exhibition – the same duration that the anti-architecture of the multiplex tries to suppress. For that reason, digital screening also fosters the experience of real space, in spite of diegetic one. Digitised, the movie theatre recovers its dimensions, volumes and distances. What if it took on the full characteristics of new media spaces and became *navigable* (Ibid: 252)? With this hypothesis in mind, we could refer to *VJing spaces*. VJing consists of the exhibition of real time generated, edited or composed visuals, normally in the guise of projection. In VJing performances, images go straight from the editing stations to the screen. Sometimes, a camera feeds the system with scenes of the screening space itself, concentrating the whole chain of audiovisual production in this one event.

Historically related to practices such as *light shows* and *color music*, VJing became popular as a form of complement to musical presentations in nightclubs (Dekker 2005). In these venues, it established its autonomous circuit and operation:

projections that commonly take place in the dance floor of clubs and raves, using the ambient music as a basis for visual montage. According to Alexis, the likely VJ pioneer in Brazil, VJing is the *opposite* of silent cinema: 'we produce images over music'.³ However, there is a big difference to be highlighted in such comparison. While the movie theatre is an architecture dedicated to capture the public attention and direct it to the movie, VJing spaces promote cognitive dispersion: projection is just one among several stimuli.

Negotiating with these conditions, VJing establishes a very unique dynamics of consumption, allowing for a peculiar relation between the public and image. Instead of trying to connect gaze and screen by the means of cinema situation, it leaves them free to find each other by themselves, in a new modality of *cinematographic exploration* (Jaeger 2006: 42). Reality and diegesis – man and machine – are absorbing each other. In VJing, we could state that not only the gaze, but also the mechanism, the space and even the audience are all in a *mobilised and virtual state* (Friedberg 1994: 2).

Since it is not still constrained by a consolidated symbolic system, neither has to conform to the expectations of a rigid market, this new medium seem like the perfect platform to investigate the dormant potentials of digital technologies for cinematographic consumption. In fact, it is precisely such exploration that gives VJing its substance: while the cinema projectionist must *preserve* the continuity of a pre-produced movie during its screening, repeated many times in the course of weeks, the VJ must *create* visual coherence every time anew, gathering disperse fragments. Therefore, it should comes as no surprise that the live audiovisual scene is rooted in all the technological possibilities that the cinematographic industry rejects: digital projection systems, online file sharing networks, generative media, sampling, remixing. For this reasons, it seems that a science of VJing cannot renounce the study of cinematographic projection, in as much as Cinema, the more digitised it becomes, cannot ignore the possibilities of VJing.

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³ Interview to the *Simples* magazine, in May 2003.

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