**"Strange, I've Seen That Interface Before"**
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Review of Martin Rieser & Andrea Zapp, (eds.) New screen media: cinema/art/narrative

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As with discussions of "new" media, there is a certain repetitive quality about the assessment of the impact of digital technologies on cinema. At first glance this volume appears to be yet another foray into this discourse, as evidenced by the import of the cover blurb: "The advent of new media presents a serious challenge to our understanding of visual representation, of narrative and indeed the whole art of the moving image". To some extent such repetition can be justified as a way of galvanising both critical discourses and public acceptance and understanding of the new. But even in what is still an emergent age of converged or hybrid media, continually trotting out such pronouncements creates the counter-impression that we are still agog with novelty and have not, as yet, done anything about it. We need benchmarks, watersheds and any other metaphors of the built environment that can act as placeholders for the acknowledgment of examples of achievements in new screen media. The virtue of New screen media, then, is that it builds upon and extends the preliminary work done by predecessors, such as Philip Hayward's and Tana Wollen's edited collection Future visions: new technologies of the screen (London: British Film Institute, 1993). This work, in fact, laid the introductory groundwork for many of the key developments that New screen media addresses as givens within the culture of the moving image. In other words, it provides examples of some of the possible changes deemed to be awaiting cinema, as it converges with digital technologies, that were anticipated in Future visions. In focusing on key critical debates to do with the interface between new media and cinema, as well as sampling important work that has been produced from within this interface, New screen media offers a perspective beyond novelty (the newness of new media, the unfamiliarity of hybridity). New screen media is a valuable concentration of the principal theoretical issues and decisive innovative experiments that have grown out of (note the tense) the fusion of cinema and new media.

As an index of this perspective, the book is divided into two indicative thematic sections: "Part One, Orientations: history and theory" examines definitions of the digital that are at stake in the convergence of new media and cinema, such as the spatial and temporal tensions implicit in the idea of interactive cinema, the no less problematic relations of narrative and interactivity and the overall poetics of anti-narrative and fragmentary story-telling at stake in the bringing together of cinematic and digital technologies. As well, this section identifies important precursors of today's hybrid screen media, such as nineteenth century panoramas, multiple screen and alternative projection modes in the materialist film and expanded cinema of the 1960s. "Part Two, Explorations: a new practice", is designed to be a kind of practical exposition of the conceptual and theoretical issues discussed in Part One. Featuring essays/artists'statements by key practitioners such as Jill Scott, Bill Seaman, Malcolm Le Grice, Jeffrey Shaw, Zoe Beloff and Michael Buckley, it is a concrete manifestation of the actual stuff of new screen media, beyond the ossified rhetoric of novelty discussed above. This section brings together recognized artists and their works who have started to define the generic landscape of new screen media, such as virtual or immersive reality installation, digital cinema and video, digital expanded cinema and interactive narrative. As with the essays in Part One, the texts in Part Two are keyed to a handsome DVD-ROM of fifty-five works of art, that brings together a richly diverse body of experimentation and innovation in cinematic and new media fusion. In itself, the DVD is an impressive archive that, as the editors correctly point out, condenses in one location works that have "been mainly accessible through isolated museum exhibitions" (xxiv). To be bluntly mercantile about it, for this reason alone New screen media is an essential purchase. However the integration of the critical and speculative discussions with the art works themselves make the manifold structure of New screen media very attractive indeed as essential reading.

One of the great attributes of this volume, then, is its balance of historical precedent and contemporary innovation. This creates a strong sense of the historical continuity of technological experimentation in the cinema, a continuity in which we must locate new media as a stage in its evolution, rather than a departure from it or a dramatic, unforeseen incursion into it. That is, as Timothy Druckery points out in his Preface, the question concerning technology in/and the cinema is nothing new. However within film theory, he argues, it has been marginalized by the critical discourses of ideology and reception (xxi). Further to this perception, Jeffrey Shaw, in his excellent essay on movies after film, argues that the

history of cinema is a history of technological experiment a history of creative exploration of the uniquely variegated expressive capabilities of this remarkable contemporary medium. Despite cinema's heritage of technological and creative diversity, it is Hollywood that has come to define its dominant forms of production and distribution, its technological apparatus and its narrative forms (268).

While this may seem to be stating the obvious, it is actually, for me, the most pertinent point in the book. The distinction between a dominant Hollywood and a more robust technological "otherness" within the history of cinema, points to the inheritance within new media of a problem that besieged film theory of the 1960s and 1970s in the narrative/anti-narrative opposition. This binary dullness, between two apparently irreconcilable differences, has clouded much of the discussion of new media arts, manifesting itself in the turgid and relentless mantras of linear and non-linear, interactive and non-interactive. Binary dullness, then, is a common feature of experimentation in both film history and new media arts and the most eloquent conclusions drawn in New screen media are creative invocations to think beyond the fearful symmetry of "one or the other", or "either/or".

In an insightful and detailed critique of the role of narrative within new screen media, Sean Cubitt urges us to think beyond the strictures of binarism and, out of this process, invent new forms of narrative:

...narrative/anti-narrative is a binary opposition incapable of producing a new term beyond their polarity. The emergence of alternative media forms, by contrast, demands not dualism but a dialectical understanding capable of producing something new (5-6).

The pursuit of frameworks of understanding beyond binarism is the pursuit of hybridity, the fusion of forms that are irreducible to a singular difference between opposites. Hybridity is for Cubitt the "consciousness of what is Not-Yet", the consciousness of what is "Not-Yet-Conscious" (10). In this respect, the work collected on the DVD-ROM that constitutes an integral component of New screen media is as much an intimation of possible or potential aesthetic forms that are still to come, yet to be fully articulated. It is perhaps fitting to give Canadian artist Luc Courchesne the not-yet-last word on this, in that his work, represented on the DVD, is indicative of the potential of new screen media as a becoming, an emergence beyond binarism that brings together different media in ways that, within binary thinking, are simply not possible. In his aesthetic interest in the

convergence of cinema, interactive games and the panorama, Courchesne suggests that

Like all installation artists involved with computers and networks, the challenge faced at the turn of the twenty-first century is similar to that of the Lumière brothers and Edison a hundred years ago, and of Barker a hundred years before that: a formula that perfectly integrates medium, content and participants has still to be invented and developed (266).

What-is-to-come should be the guiding principle of hybrid media arts criticism. As this fine collection evidences, there is such rich, yet indeterminate potential for fusion within screen based media that what-is-to-come in the name of hybridity is nothing new, but rather the fulfillment of unknowable potential implicit in the continuing history of the screen as a medium. When we encounter such work, there may be an uncanny air of familiarity about it, the vague sensation that we have seen it before, or been prepared for its arrival.