

Narrative structures for live cinema

SOLU is a Finnish media artist and live cinema performer, who describes herself as ‘a visual agitator’ and a ‘cultural activist’. Living and working in Barcelona, she functions as the driving force behind the local version of the global electronic art platform dorkbot.org.

Although her experimental videos are enjoying exposure in festivals worldwide, she is most widely known for her intense live performances – performances that are characterised by a dark universe of pixels.

SOLU has been involved with the development of the NATO software as well as being active in organising workshops on audio-visual and hacker culture. Something she values highly, since the concept of sharing technical knowledge is paramount to experimental artists. She strives for creative instances with a collective nature, in which she sees a distinctive parallel with existing cultural forms such as jazz music.

SOLU: Jazz can be seen as ‘freedom through structure’. The key element is liberation and improvisation, a union of different kinds of energy. Take for instance the idea of ‘continuous jamming’ that takes place in jazz. Musicians understand this.

They literally have an ear for listening; they instinctively sense their part in the harmonic structure of the music, of the band. The very moment steps out of that structure and for instance starts playing too loudly, the harmony breaks down.

This is something visual artists haven’t grasped yet. In performances I have done with other people, I have found that mixing images works in the same way. Sometimes it’s just better not to, in order not to disturb the harmonic balance the images construct.

That balance is very much an elusive concept, because you need to be able to sense the actions and intentions of the other artist perfectly. If one of the people in the performance stops being an inspiration to the other, the whole thing collapses. I think visually oriented artists should try to acknowledge this. That is often the fun part of the workshops I organise: people learn to adapt to each other. Musicians have always known the value of cooperation, and I believe visual artists should also learn to conform to this concept. Instead of wanting to be the big honcho and show off, they should learn to make concessions in order to benefit the performance as a whole.

They have to think in terms of the bigger picture, the overall harmony of the process. It would be very interesting indeed to change that attitude...

In her videos and performances she has collaborated with experimental musicians such as Richard Devine and Jason Forrest (Donna Summer). Here, the synthesis between auditory and visual elements becomes almost symbiotic: SOLU’s images are abstract, or made unrecognisable through videoprocessing, which liberates the relationship between sound and image from any anecdotal arbitrariness.

SOLU: I prefer to work with musicians I know, in order to facilitate true cooperation. I want to work together with an artist to make an audiovisual performance that is more than the sum of its parts.

In that respect it is easier to work with people you are already familiar with, because that way you can anticipate on the other person’s actions much more.

That gives you more freedom to express yourself. And I am not talking about ‘content’, but more about a history, a feeling, whatever...

When you perform as an artist what you are effectively doing is creating or constructing a film in real time. It's an organic process, an experience. You have to look at it like that, otherwise you would risk repeating yourself. So, when your performance takes three hours, you are actually creating a three-hour long film – sometimes you can take up to six hours.

You can understand it is very difficult to accumulate that much usable material. In fact, it can take years! Unless your name is Andy Warhol, of course... (laughs). For the sake of convenience, I would call myself a 'video processor'. I would say that term most adequately reflects what I enjoy doing most.

Most of the time I am busy accumulating material for my performances: images shot with a camcorder or photo camera, pictures, text, whatever. Once I have gathered material, I start playing around with it. Sometimes I turn it into a Quicktime VR, and then I read it with NATO or JITTER or something along those lines, and then I start processing it.

Then there is this whole process of re-process, save, record, reopen...until I end up with a plethora of material.

That material is then subsequently set loose on the viewer, often in the shape of a dark delirium of images. In one of SOLU's videos, a silhouette can be seen, walking against a white background or plane that is interspersed with black lines. As the silhouette shape is moved from one side of the plane to the other at a high pace and at irregular intervals, the black lines continue to grow thicker, more chaotic, gaining an almost mathematical element to their appearance and form. Their presence on the plane starts to slowly overpower that of the silhouette, causing it to occasionally disappear from sight completely in the growing density of accumulating lines. Varying textures are beginning to develop in a spectacle that seems to be constructed at a continuing rate by mere darkness alone...What is left is a structure and a realisation that 'something is about to happen', without the immediate presence of a clear narrative element.

SOLU: I have tried many times to create a 'normal' video production, with nice colours and nice quality and things like that, but I have to say I don't like it. That is why my own work is quite abstract. Abstraction is a natural consequence that comes with the tools I use. When you have a lot of figurative material, often the production tends to get the characteristics of VJ-stuff, there are too many loops. I don't like that. It's too delicate. My material has quite a synthetic feel, really because of the 'rough handling', the way it's been processed.

At this time I try to walk new ways, but I usually end up with black and white, something very minimalist. You could say that I process the images until 'nothing' is left; I strip them to their most basic form. I'm always looking for some sort of narrative structure, but in my case that is something distinctly different than your normal narrative. I would call it 'narrative structures for the new live cinema movement'. After MTV everything changed, it was much more fragmented; images were read very differently than before. From that the idea emerged in my head that there are other ways to bring images together that break away from traditional cinema. My eye was drawn more and more to Russian editing techniques, and to experimental and abstract film makers such as New Zealand's Len Lye.

Lye was a part of the 'new cinema movement' in the 1940's. At that time, he used radical techniques, such as directly scratching the pellicule with his own body. The

soundtracks to his films were mostly beats and African music. And he did all this even before the Second World War.

One thing that struck me was the fact that Lye literally drew sound waves on the pellicule. I mean, how much further can you go in approaching 'visual sound' than literally drawing sound itself? There has always been this search for new and exciting techniques and possibilities, and in effect, the idea of a narrative structure is just one of those possibilities. Unfortunately, that is something most people find hard to understand.

People like Lye couldn't get financing for their productions. There has always been resistance towards people working with new forms of narrativity. It's just 'not done'. But when you think about it: why not? It's like it has something to do with politics, like the opposition between left-wing and right-wing... (laughs). Well, I don't know, but it's food for thought, I guess.

Narrative cinema is characterised by a linear succession of images. It is one of the most prevalent audiovisual techniques to illustrate contrast and opposition. Herein lays its strength and use.

Often this contrast is reduced to the contrast between good and evil. Right and wrong. In that sense traditional narrative cinema can be seen as sustaining the ideology that prefers to divide the world into two extremes: the righteous and the perverted.

Through editing, which connects image A to B, C, D, E and so on, a flow is created that makes us forget that we are in fact watching a succession of images, an artefact.

This continuity allows us to identify with a world of projections, but literally and figuratively. In productions such as SOLU's, we don't see an edited succession of images, but rather 'image edits'. The succession, the logical continuation, between A, B, and C is gone; instead what we see becomes more of an accumulation of different layers. In this sense, one sees a layer of images that is linked in real time to a subsequent layer, without the transition resulting in a continuous edit.

The result is a type of narrative structure that has a much closer affiliation with the non-linear structure of a medium such as the Internet, than the linear structure of a classic narrative storyline. Moreover, formerly concrete images are abstracted through video processing to such an extent that the resulting images are reduced to white noise. This leads to a fragmented vision on a complex world in which everything happens in the 'here and now'.

SOLU: At one time, I was using images portraying the faces of kamikaze soldiers. Once I had scanned the original material, I turned them into animations with slow zooms in Director.

Then, I opened the Quicktime Movies in QTPro and exported them into black and white. This created a granular effect which, once projected on a large screen, resulted in an interesting visual effect because of the enlarged size of the pixels. This way, the soldiers' faces obtained a graphical quality, resembling screen prints rather than video material. My intention exactly, because I like video to have texture. In MAX/MSP/JITTER I then mixed this video with itself, one being played front-to-back and one being played back-to-front. A very alienating effect...

There are almost no recognisable images, not when we are talking about the image as a representation of reality. We see a collection of frames on top of each other, structured, and in that picture we start constructing relations between the different elements – often pixels. In this construction, these relations are even more essential

than meaning, because they portray new forms of meaning and new possibilities to create meaning. Perhaps here, we touch upon the essence of the electronic image: an artificial construction, which we assign meaning to through mental processes in which the presence or absence of convention plays a central role.

SOLU: Sometimes I feel like a scientist who prepares psychovisual tests for the audience. For instance, one time I created a stream of visuals where I use extreme zooms. The source of the material I used was comprised of faces of men like Tupac Shakur with Notorious BIG, and images of a group of rapists who had led a double life all their adult years. These rapists occasionally came together to violate women, only to return to their families afterwards. Although you couldn't deduce this information from the images, and the images themselves weren't even recognisable after processing, someone in the audience referred to that part of the performance as 'the war scene'...One way or the other, the violence in those images seems to have a lasting presence, it's conveyed not so much visually, but it can be sensed. It has become a feeling, inkling, a premonition almost.

Solu's work contains references to pioneers in the field of cinema, such as Eisenstein and Vertov.

Eisenstein's work is characterised by the meaning and substance he placed in the editing itself, and Vertov created a cinema of alienation through his discontinuous editing, which was more Brechtian in nature.

SOLU: Yes, I like Eisenstein. In some ways, I think of him as one of the first VJs. The Russian film avantgarde resembled the VJ-approach more closely than the people who succeeded them. Cinema has evolved in a particular way they certainly didn't predict. I like Vertov as well, especially 'The Man with the Movie Camera'. It's a completely distinct take on cinema, the idea of not being immersed. The idea of cinema being an open structure, an open source that can be mixed at will. That gives way to essential, basic questions. In the end, how do we view the world? Is it a kind of narrative system? Do we have a story in our heads?

I don't know...Or do we perhaps rather understand the world in fragments? And when you remember days as fragments, do you build a story around that because you were taught to think in particular story structures? I think that search for a new type of narrative language will always exist. Or maybe we should be looking for the old language, the original way of storytelling. That way, we can move forward from the past

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