Screening the Figural in Film and New Art Media

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The title of this paper is a rather poor play with words. What's hiding behind the word screening is primarily that I will use a loose limitation to art that you look at on a screen, and most importantly video and computer screens — which is what some might call new media art. A more appropriate word than screening, to match the content of the paper, would perhaps be testing, because that is what I will do. I will test some ideas regarding the figural as an aesthetic concept and do a reading of the concept in relation to moving images and new media art. I will do this from a theoretically film-oriented perspective, but as you might know the figural is a concept initially used when talking about static pictures, paintings, but nevertheless of some kind of process or dynamic event in the images. Something that triggers interpretation.

My intention with this paper is to develop the figural in three short steps. First some general remarks on the concept, its contemporary versions, and different methodological aspects, secondly I will try to establish some connections with the film theories of Jean Epstein and the figural in relation to moving images, and thirdly I will hint at some possible connections with digital media.

I think it's fair to locate some kind of origin in the use of the concept to Jean-François Lyotard and his dissertation *Discours, figure*. For Lyotard the figural is an inherent dynamics in images, but something that is not primarily representation. Lyotard opposes the reduction of art to linguistic units and he tries to position himself against some linguistic theories that have been very influential and were so indeed when Lyotard wrote this book, that is in 1971. In the introducing chapter he calls his book a protest against the idea of text. A painting is not something you read, or understand, he argues, and writes for example: "Sitting at a table you identify and

recognize linguistic units, but standing inside the representation you seek plastic and libidinal events."[1]

To narrow this down you could say that the figural is an aesthetic concept I use to discuss dynamic fields in images where the focus of the aesthetic experience is connected to the materiality or plasticity of the images. It may also be related to a breaking up of the relationship between the plastic and the linguistic, a blurring of the categories of text and image. This is of course an extreme simplification, but necessary here, and I think of it as an operational one that might facilitate a meeting between images and concepts. I will not go into any conceptual history of the word figural, or figure which is a word with many interesting meanings and uses. The most obvious one is the Latin origin in *fingere*, which connotes for example modelling, but a more thorough history of the word would be a completely different discussion.[2] Lyotard also draws attention to movement and rhythmical aspects of the figural, that you can see as a step towards the figural in a context of moving images.

In both cinema studies and art theory the concept of the figural has gone through a small revival the last five or ten years. Mostly in Europe with film scholars like Jacques Aumont, Philippe Dubois and Nicole Brenez and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, and last year D.N. Rodowick published his book *Reading the figural or philosophy after new media*.[3] Rodowick's book is a good introduction to the figural, and in it he develops, also from Lyotard, more political and social aspects of the

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[1] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, 1971, (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 2002), 10. "Assis à la table, on identifie, on reconnaît des unités linguistiques ; debout dans la représentation, on recherche des événements plastiques, libidinaux."

[2] Erich Auerbach has written an interesting genealogy of the word and its biblical context in his short book, called *Figura*. I'm not familiar with any English translation, but there is a quite recent one in French, Erich Auberach, *Figura*, 1944, (Paris: Éditions Belin 1993).

[3] Se for example: Jacques Aumont, *À quoi pensent les films* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Séguier 1996), Nicole Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier* (Paris: De Boeck 1998), Philippe Dubois, "La tempête et la matière-temps, ou le sublime et le figural dans l'œuvre de Jean Epstein", in *Jean Epstein – cinéaste, poète, philosophe*, ed., Jacques Aumont (Paris: Cinémathèque française 1998), D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham & London: Duke Univ. Press 2001). There is also a recent anthology on the varied uses of the concept: François Aubral and Dominique Chateau, eds., *Figure, figural* (Paris: L'Harmattan 1999).

concept — an interesting discussion, but not really relevant for the reading I'm doing here.

I said revival because I think that these different figural approaches are mostly about a rearticulation and a re-evaluation of certain aesthetic and philosophical aspects that have been with us in different forms throughout most of the history of art and philosophy. I think there are different reasons why the figural is put forward today, but one common denominator is a desire to focus on the image as image (and not firsthand an image of something) and what might be some neglected dynamic fields in these images (that is for example a central issue in Didi-Huberman's analyses of the paintings of Fra Angelico[4]).

My intention is not about finding some kind of figural essence or specificity in new screen media, but simply to make some connections that could help develop a more aesthetically oriented discussion on new media art. Many artists and scholars say that what matters with digital technology, from an artistic point of view, is that manipulation, experimentation and access has become easier, more free, and varied.[5] I think that it's just these possibilities of manipulation and modelling of moving images that makes the figural an interesting concept when discussing new media aesthetics. I would also like to see this approach as a counterbalance to a lot of the theoretical writings on new media that have been focusing on aspects of textuality, narration, or to speak with Lev Manovich: language.[6] There are also quite a lot of writings on the interrelationship between art, information and science, for example Stephen Wilson's book about what he calls "information arts".[7] Yet another category of writings might

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[4] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico – Dissemblance et figuration*, 1990 (Paris: Flammarion 1995).

[5] Just to mention one significant example, this is the case with Malcolm Le Grice who has been working with video and digital media since the 1960s and more recently has been writing quite a lot about the relationship between film and new technologies. Through his essays he repeats almost like a mantra that what matters with digital technology, from an artistic point of view, is that manipulation, experimentation and access has become easier, more free, and varied. See Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: BFI 2001).

[6] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2001).

[7] Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2001).

[8] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1999).

be the interrelationship between different media, intermediality, most known is perhaps Bolter's and Grusin's book *Remediation*.[8] But in these writings, and others, I have a feeling that the question of information tends to spill over into, and even contaminate, the aesthetic discussion. I think that there are still quite few serious and interesting aesthetic approaches, and I would like to propose the figural as one possible way to take.

Despite the many faces of the figural in contemporary theory, it's quite easy to identify some fairly clear methodological aspects that keep coming back. There is one basic starting point in the idea that the figural comes from the images, and not from something the analyst brings to them. The analysis starts from the images, which tends to get the status of subjects (not only objects). For example the French theoreticians that I am largely inspired by write about images that think, images that create problems and ask questions. Jacques Aumont writes for example in his book *À quoi pensent les films* (What films think about), which is the book where he develops the figural, that: "The object of film analysis [. . .] is the problems that the films create".[9] He also argues for that the "...meaning of a work should as much as possible be sought in the work itself".[10] Nicole Brenez seeks a similar film analysis "with a starting point from the questions that they create", she writes.[11] And Philippe Dubois writes that the figural operates "by the associative, open and multiple modes that exist in the visual matter itself".[12]

Nicole Brenez starts her discussion of the figural by saying that there is no method for figural analysis. In a strict sense she is of course right, these aspects are perhaps too vague and too ambiguous to be called a method, but that, I would say, is a

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[9] Aumont, *À quoi pensent les films*, "[L]'objet de l'analyse de films /.../ ce sont *les problèmes que créent les films*.", 150.

[10] Ibid., 88. "...le sens d'une œuvre d'image soit dégagé, le plus possible, à partir de l'œuvre elle-même."

[11] Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier* "...du point de vue des questions qu'elles [les œuvres] posent, *du point de vue des questions qu'elles créent*.", 11.

[12] Dubois, "La tempête et la matière-temps, ou le sublime et le figural dans l'œuvre de Jean Epstein", in *Jean Epstein – cinéaste, poète, philosophe*, "... selon les modes associatifs ouverts et multiples de *la matière visuelle en elle-même*", 270.

methodological standpoint, and I think that she in her text, by establishing some principles for analysis is creating a method for figural analysis. Maybe it's more appropriate to call it simply a figural approach. Without any further development you can say that this approach shares many ideas with contemporary version of phenomenology (for example through the attentiveness to the images and the bracketing of knowledge when looking at them).

There are many aspects of Jean Epstein's writings and films that could be mentioned in relation to the figural. What I'm looking for here is perhaps most evident in his second last movie, *Le Tempestaire* (The Storm Healer) from 1947, where he draws his ideas on temporality and speed variations to their extreme. The film is the most obvious example of what Epstein calls a "temporal perspective". In the film the sea outside Bretagne is continually filmed in slow motion and the sound is equally manipulated. Epstein writes for example: "Between water and ice, between the liquid and the solid, a new matter is created, an ocean of viscous movements…"[13]

Philippe Dubois argues that the use of slow motion here is a way to work the figural aspects of the film medium.[14] The speed variations of the filmstrip become a way to visualize the film matter, to visualize time. Epstein's temporal perspective is precisely about different effects of temporal elasticity. Simply put it's an elasticity of space and time that physiology is incapable of. For Epstein film is not primarily a way to reproduce movement, but to create a new movement through variations of the image matter.

Generally in Epstein's films and writings, from the 20s and on, there are several other techniques and aspects you can relate to the figural. Kaleidoscopic images, multiple exposures, dissolves, the dissolution and stretching out of movement. The technology is central to Epstein in his writings, but in this context, that is an aesthetic approach based on the figural, I believe the materiality is more important, and even if

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[13] Jean Epstein, "La Féerie réelle", *Spectateur*, 21 January 1947, in *Écrits sur le cinéma 2* (Paris: Seghers 1975), 45. "Entre l'eau et la glace, entre le liquide et le solide, il se crée une matière nouvelle, un océan de mouvements visqueux…".

[14] Philippe Dubois, "La tempête et la matière-temps, ou le sublime et le figural dans l'œuvre de Jean Epstein", 267-323.

there are technological conditions behind for example slow motion, it is the image event itself that relates to the figural. One of Epstein's most famous books is called *The intelligence of a machine*.[15] It is not about thinking machines in the sense of a computer, but more about creating something new with technology, to let machines think and to some extent create their own forms. And this is one reason why Epstein is interesting in relation to new media art.

The figural is perhaps something you primarily describe in terms of a process (not an object). It has to do with something that happens to the image as image. This is linked to the focus on the image as presence, not as form or representation, and as I see it this presence is nothing else than the presence of the material and different effects due to the plasticity and the materiality of moving images. This is only more interesting since moving images often are regarded as immaterial, as a flow that you cannot touch. Light, time and sound are also often thought of as immaterial but through manipulations they move towards a more obvious presence of their material, towards a tactile or haptic dimension. This is of course easily seen in a lot of experimental film and video and one interesting example is the work of Bill Viola, but these aspects also exist most importantly in non-experimental films or art works, and I think that there is often an interesting tension there. Like with Epstein whose films are mostly quite popular narratives or to take a more recent example you could think of the films of Wong Kar-Wai.

To develop the figural in relation to new media art I see at least two major ways to take: the first one is the montage where overlapping and different image-relations becomes more flexible and potentially dynamic. Second the facilitation of working with matter, working with pixels, the radically increased degree of manipulation (especially in relation to moving images). Morphings for example could lead to discussions of time-matter, and it is clear that experimentation and manipulation becomes easier, it becomes easier to model the image. A fact that has, as wee know, influenced the idea on an indexical image of reality. The idea of indexicality has lost a

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[15] Jean Epstein, *L'Intelligence d'une machine* (Paris: Éditions J. Melot 1946).

great deal of its importance and, I think, that the figural could be a mode that, let's say, takes over some of this importance.

Before finishing I'll just hint at one example from new media art that is quite explicitly about materiality and screen plasticity. It comes form the artintact series and aptly titled *The Sub-Division of Electric Light* made by Perry Hoberman in 1996.[16] The work is made up of a series of screens and projections where the stability and the two-dimensionality of the screen are continually manipulated. It's a work that testifies about a need or desire to integrate the projection in a three-dimensional space. And the tool to do it is the subject matter of the screen itself. There are screens as objects (where the projection is made on different objects), screens as rooms (the projection is made on walls in a room) moving screens (the projection is made on moving objects) screens as crease or fold (the projection is made on a creased screen, like an accordion-screen). The different types of screens often go into each other but the interesting thing is that Hoberman is working the figural because he is working with the screens materiality, with plastic aspects. He is actually, in a sense, screening the figural.

I would like to believe that a figural approach could be a way to orient the discourse on new media and new technologies from information to aesthetics. If collage or montage is the basic 20th century technique for artistic expression, as Clement Greenberg puts it, it seems to me that new media is nothing else than a prolongation and reinforcement of these strategies. A higher degree of manipulation and easier experimentation can also bring us closer to the details, to the materials of the media, and here the figural is an aesthetic concept that can provide an interesting parallel discussion and/or development of certain aspects. I have had a tendency to mention examples that work with time and light or the relation text/image as subject matter, but there are other possibilities, for example with colour and sound that would also fit into what you might call aspects of materiality in the digital realm of immateriality. What I've been trying to argue in this paper is simply that the figural could be a concept and an approach that is well suited to discuss aspects of aesthetic displacements related to

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[16] Perry Hoberman, *The Sub-Division of the Electric Light*, from artintact 3, (ZKM/Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe 1996).

experimentation and manipulation of moving images in film and new media art. Even if I have given a very simplified and operational definition of the figural, I don't see this as a way of reducing the concept to one specific meaning, that would be to violate its dynamic and potentiality. Instead I would like to call my approach a free variation to test some conceptual qualities, and most importantly to let the concept meet the images, to confront them in some sense. It's not unproblematic to draw a line from conceptual ambiguity and mobility to complex and ambiguous images, but I do think that it could be one very interesting way to develop the figural as an aesthetic concept in relation to both film and new screen media.