

How to Walk Without Watching Your Step: Spontaneous Cinema as Design Practice

by Rachel Strickland . 8 July 2003

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A movie may be regarded as an intention to register something that is fleeting—elements of a process, for example, a response to prevailing conditions; or to reveal something that is otherwise invisible—drifts of a wind, the relationships that impart structure to an environment. Employing a perspective that corresponds to our bodily experience of the physical world, the movie also manifests an ordinary development of awareness—such as the flights and fixations of its cinematographer’s attention, or someone’s mental construction of a sense of place.

When referring to moviemaking as a method of design research, I am not considering instances when the camera is treated essentially as a mechanical apparatus for data-gathering or record-keeping. Like footage from surveillance cameras, such evidence may be intended for nobody’s review except in the unlikely event of a bank robbery. Sometimes hapless summer interns are put to work transcribing the dialogue.

One evidentiary application of motion photography in service of design that nonetheless begs mention is the time-lapse studies of New York sidewalks and plazas that were produced by sociologist William Whyte’s Street Life Project. For some 16 years beginning in 1969, Whyte and his research assistants employed interval recording techniques with super 8 film to track the meanders of New York pedestrians. By accelerating gradual and intermittent developments to a threshold of perceptibility, these time-lapse film sequences yielded provocative data about a category of human nature that had never been systematically examined. In keeping with Whyte’s hypothesis that the main thing which attracts people is other people, his work demonstrated a method of predicting and measuring physical characteristics of places that attract many people to one place or another [Whyte 1988].

Neither do I regard as design research those declarative movies that are produced for the sake of illustrating a concept, or for presenting what the moviemaker, or the moviemaker’s employer, already knows. Rather the purpose of my meditation in this writing is to reflect on the sense in which cinema may be pursued as exploration—articulating a language of direct physical experience with space and things and people, bringing all one’s faculties to bear in an effort to become incorporated in a situation that is unfolding. It is a matter of using your eyes and ears to respond to emerging patterns and developments in the situation, and of moving the point of view to account for some several forces beginning to be examined from one instant to the next. Such an exploration extends not only to the subject of observation and the process of observing, but to cinematic aesthetics as well. It exercises sensory-motor and narrative systems of intelligence simultaneously.

Observational cinema has a particular affinity with design thinking in the ways that it complies with humans' innate aptitude for inferring continuity, for discerning relationships among phenomena and imparting structures to experience, for dwelling in the alternating currents of ambiguity, for making sense through association, combinatorial play, and projective construction.

DISCLOSURE

Although a drawing or photograph may contain a great deal of information about a place, it does not begin to describe how the place works—the comings and goings and dwellings of people there, or how events take place, or how an environment responds to weather and seasons and times of day. Because motion picture media offered a way to explore and represent the dynamic and ephemeral dimensions of architectural space, I began making films while I was a student in architectural design. My thesis project employed super 8 film to observe an outdoor market in Rome's Campo dei Fiori. The life of the market unfolded in a setting whose territorial demarcations and circulation zones were re-created and dismantled on a daily basis. The film experimented with mapping architectural definitions of space to cinematic structure.

I might also mention that I have never written a film script. My filmmaking was rooted from the beginning in *cinéma vérité*--a method of documentary filmmaking that emerged in the 1960's, which favored spontaneous observation of everyday life over the reenactment of events. From the perspective of the audience, *cinéma vérité* was striving to be a kind of motion picture that would be self-revealing and permit discovery on the part of viewers. And because I was interested in using cinematic media to communicate about places, I have spent many years pursuing a way of making movies whose construction would be more like architecture than narrative.

"But isn't a place just a container for stories?" is the question a television writer asks me. If you know any place in particular, if you ever got lost somewhere, perhaps you would be willing to consider with me that it has several other dimensions. When you look at a building, what anyone can see is the walls and the roof and the windows and doors. It is difficult for some people (including architects) to see that the subject of architectural design is not these walls and windows and doors, but rather space—which is the thing that you neither see nor bump into.

"It is not easy to orient yourself in a whole which is made up of parts belonging to different dimensions, and nature is such a whole, just like art, its transformed reflection," observed Paul Klee. "It is hard to gain an overall view of such totality, whether it be nature or art, and it is still harder to communicate the view to others" [Klee 1924]. The trouble with our thinking is that we are tempted to orient ourselves within a closed system that would have a finite number of known dimensions. Yet experience does eventually project anyone, kicking and screaming, into those others. Wanting to capture and articulate a kind of experience that belongs to many different dimensions was the motive that attracted me from the outset of my career toward polylinear potentials inherent in computer-based interactive cinema.

My credentials as a research videographer and my sense of the job description have acquired definition during 15 some years in the service of Silicon Valley research labs, including Atari, Apple, Paramount Communications, and Interval Research Corporation. I need not enumerate the various duties of a research videographer's job, but merely mention two kinds of research activity that have often been intertwined in my experience: The first one you might call fieldwork—using video to observe and capture aspects of the everyday life of people outside the research lab as a way of informing design projects undertaken by the lab. The second takes the form of new media prototyping, which is to say exploring and modeling future ways that people might interact with cinematic media.

Portable Effects is one example of a project that has pursued both these lines of research simultaneously.

WHO IS DESIGNING WHAT FOR WHOM? (OBSERVING DESIGN PRACTICE IN EVERYDAY LIFE)



Portable Effects: A Survey of Nomadic Design Practice. Video frames.

Portable Effects is an interactive video exploration that examines people's portable architecture—the collections of things that individuals carry everyday, and how they carry these things. "Portable

architecture” is a phrase for expressing the miniature, mobile piece of our environment that we take with us from place to place. This phenomenon was rendered salient to me during a sojourn in Kyoto in 1984, through encounters with a culture that is enormously sophisticated in the ways of folding, stacking, rolling, nesting, carrying, miniaturizing, and transforming things. Several years later when Apple was developing the Newton, and other manufacturers were tinkering with similar visions of handheld computing devices, I began to videotape scenes of people and the things they carry, as a way of learning about design strategies of ordinary people in everyday life [Strickland et al 2000].

Between setting forth in the morning and returning home at night, each person lives nomadically for several hours a day. You can’t take everything with you—neither in your backpack nor in your head. Identifying essentials, and figuring out how to contain, arrange and keep track of them as you go, are instances of design thinking.

A collection of more than 100 of these nomadic portraits that I videotaped over the course of several years formed the basis for the experimental cinema project I subsequently directed at Interval Research Corporation. A portrait (like a place) is another kind of structure that is not a story. Look at images in the studio photographer’s window to see what I mean, or consider any other rendition of a character whose development does not revolve around a plot. As we accumulated these video portraits, it became increasingly obvious that they were not going to add up to a feature length documentary with a beginning and a middle and an end. The richness of the video material has a great deal to do with the range and diversity of the people who are its subjects. But how could we give viewers access to this richness without making them watch portrait after portrait for hours on end? How could we enable product inventors, for example, to pursue the threads of their own interest and to discover patterns among the various collections and design strategies?

Because computers do not know how to make sense of video content, an annotation language is required for imparting an underlying structure to the data. This structure might never be visible to a viewer, but it enables noteworthy connections in the material to surface when the viewer happens to be noticing. The Portable Effects annotation language is a special dialect of Media Streams—a system that was developed by Marc Davis for his PhD. at the MIT Media Lab, in collaboration with Brian Williams and Golan Levin [Davis 1995]. Our ontology of portable design has evolved on the basis of evidence we observe in the videos. Grammatically speaking, the annotations are constructed very much like sentences, with subjects and verbs and objects. Using annotations in the database to automate retrieval, our explorations in video form developed a series of polylinear cinema prototypes for interactive viewing, experimenting with cinematic linkages among scenes through invisible annotation hierarchies and “Seamless Expansions.” A Seamless Expansion employs the syntax of cinematic construction, or montage, to sustain perceptual continuity while a viewer modifies the flow of an audiovisual stream [Gould and Strickland 2002].

Thelma Gehry
 Los Angeles, CA
 20 October 1989

Thelma Gehry was a girl when she left Poland. Years later she married, raised two children, moved from Toronto to Los Angeles, and worked as an interior decorator. At the age of 85 she is never far from her handbag, even though excursions outside the apartment have become less frequent. She customarily packs part of a sandwich in the event of hunger, and she never travels without candy.

One visual strategy for retrieving video clips on the fly is exemplified by the BAGviewer, which uses annotations in the database to dynamically compute a graphical diagram of the subject's portable architecture. This diagram lets you see the bag structure inside out, revealing nested relationships among containers, compartments, and objects.



By reducing the representation of people's bags to iconic forms, the schematics of BAGviewer emphasize differences of structure over differences of surface appearance, and thereby afford investigations into, and comparisons of, the subjects' strategies for designing and managing their portable architecture. *The BAGviewer was implemented by Golan Levin, Yin Yin Wong, Baldo Faieta, and Jonathan Cohen.*

As designers operating in corporate culture, we are bound in our education and practice to accede to the tenets of capitalism. We serve an economic regime that relies on exploitation of people and resources. No matter how benign or excellent the design, there is always an element of inducing people to have needs, persuading them to consume, dispose, and consume again.

Both Apple and Interval, who sponsored the Portable Effects project, regarded it as research in the service of design. And yet the staff designers who were inventing and prototyping wearable devices—the very colleagues who I regarded as my accomplices—seemed to apprehend something paradoxical and potentially hazardous about attempting to reconcile design insights gleaned from non-professionals with any prescription for how to build the ultimate electronic handbag. For underlying Portable Effects is an understanding of culture which assumes that design is not limited to the province of specialists who have

formal training in such disciplines as architecture, graphics, and industrial design. Rather, design behavior is a fundamental element of our species adaptation—key to humans’ survival strategies.

CAN CINEMA BE CONSTRUED AS RESEARCH? (ACTUALITIES, SPONTANEITIES, AND DIGITALS)

Reluctant to pick at a sore, the writer is nonetheless obliged to acknowledge that the status of motion pictures as a tool of scientific recording—as a method for gathering evidence—has been profoundly disturbed, along with our faith in representation, during the hundred years or so since cinema asserted itself as the bold new media technology.

Once upon a time lens-based recordings of reality were deemed irrefutable in their evidentiary authority, and the movie camera was heralded as the latest instrument for scientific data acquisition, joining the ranks of thermometer, telescope, and microscope [Winston 1995, 127-129]. Even in the realm of entertainment, “actualities” was the name that was given to short single-scene snippets of everyday life that were filmed outside the studio in actual locations. Mounted by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1895, the first public cinema programs featured a selection of field recordings that depicted workers departing from a factory, the baby’s lunch, a rowboat leaving the harbor. Predating all the moral pretensions and epistemological complications that have encumbered the development of documentary film since then, this term “actualities” restores to imagination one early and unspoiled idea of cinema that may reserve curious potential for the new digital media of our own day.

Filmmaker Dai Vaughan has suggested that what astonished and delighted the Lumière audiences was not the staggering technological feat of motion photography, but rather the ability of this apparatus to portray spontaneities that could not occur in the theater. More remarkable than the movements of living people—whom early moviegoers perceived as performers, was the participation of inanimate phenomena—such as rustling leaves, locomotive steam, or the dust of a demolished brick wall—in making their own inscriptions. As representations of events, actuality films were engaged in the unpredictability of the events themselves—such as a sudden swell of waves that takes the oarsmen, camera operator, and viewers by surprise. This interjection of the spontaneous into media arts defied that premise of willful and precisely controlled communication which had previously been taken for granted [Vaughan 1999, 3-6].

For purposes of entertainment, the sensational novelty that attracted audiences to these primitive experiments in observational cinema was soon eclipsed by the allure of fiction, and the documentary form became relegated thereafter to a grim life in public education and news reportage. Hollywood studios proceeded to apply industrial manufacturing techniques to the mass fabrication of fantasy. The introduction of editing, which depended on multiple camera setups, and the subsequent addition of sound, which required bulky camera blimps and cumbersome audio gear for location recording, tended to annihilate any glimmer of spontaneity. Explorations in the grammar of observation by early avant-garde

filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov notwithstanding, the evolution of cinematic construction has been dominated for the rest of its history by models of realist fiction.

Although the spontaneous motive in cinema had asserted itself at the very outset, it did not resurface until many years later, with the introduction of lightweight cameras and synchronous audio recorders in the 1960's. Vaughan notes that this technological development happened to coincide with a time in history when artists in many fields were incorporating chance and improvisation in their work—"seeking to overthrow established grammars which had begun to seem complicit with political oppression" [Vaughan, 206]. The new observational technology provided the basis for a rebellion against the codes of Hollywood, as well as against a regime of non-fiction films that amounted to illustrated lectures about general themes, in favor of a more personal and direct approach that embodied the perspectives of actual observers. "In place of a camera that resembled an omniscient, floating eye which could at any moment be anywhere in the room (with a close-up, an over-the-shoulder shot, a reverse angle), there was to be a camera clearly tied to the person of an individual filmmaker" [MacDougall 1998, 86]. Instead of expounding abstract ideas and universal human conditions, practitioners of this new observational approach turned their attention to exploring idiosyncratic particulars of everyday life and the behavior of individuals in specific environments and social situations.

In the waning years of the 20th century, postmodern theory overturned the old idea of a world whose existence is independent of our representations of it, and thereby invalidated that economy of truth and representation which had constituted the very basis of documentary filmmaking. But even before we ceased to believe in reality, the evolution of the actuality strain of cinema had long been troubled by the paradoxical nature of cinema—that it is both at once a record and a language. The difference between film and reality, says Vaughan, is "that film is about something, whereas reality is not." Social scientists' various prescriptions for neutralizing the filmmaker's intervention, such as the elimination of camera movement and the minimization of editing, have approximately the same effect as burying one's head in the sand in hopes of becoming invisible. For minimum of structuring does not yield maximum of truth. "The antithesis of the structured is not the truthful, or even the objective, but quite simply the random" [Vaughan, 57].

Is it science or is it entertainment? MacDougall attributes the resistance of social science to incorporate cinema in its research practice to an incompatibility between the respective modes of description and discourse that belong to writing and moviemaking. "Inevitably, the extraordinary precision of the camera-eye as a descriptive aid has influenced conceptions of the use to which film should be put, with the result that for years anthropologists have considered film pre-eminently a tool for gathering data. And because film deals so overwhelmingly with the specific rather than the abstract, it is often considered incapable of serious intellectual articulation" [MacDougall, 131].

DO YOU MEAN WHAT YOU SEE?

Beneath the many styles in which documentary has historically manifested itself may be discerned a common purpose: to enable the character of film as a record to survive, so far as possible, its metamorphosis into language [Vaughan, 55].

What can we specify about the language of observational cinema? Cinema manifests itself through perspectives of embodied sensory experience that are common to moviemaker and audience, as well as to people (whose perspectives may be represented) in the movie. Vivian Sobchack has observed that the substance of cinematic language consists in acts of seeing being seen, acts of hearing being heard, acts of moving on the part of people and objects, and on the part of the camera in response to people and objects. In the experience of a film, perception and its expression are the same thing [Sobchack 1992]. Cinema is essentially not a verbal language—"neither lexical nor grammatical in a linguistic sense" [MacDougall, 192], although words—both spoken and inscribed as text—are among the objects it records and incorporates in its construction. It is essentially a manner of revealing rather than a language of telling. It reveals relationships of things in time and space. It also employs a uniquely cinematic system of relationships, commonly called montage, for joining shots and for coordinating disparate media types, such as images and sounds. Jean-Luc Godard has said that "the only big problem in cinema seems to me to be where and why to start a shot and where and why to end it" [Godard 1999]. Like oral and written languages, the language of cinema encompasses an enormous range of usages and styles.

As for stylistic indices that have been uniquely identified with documentary—the wobbly camera, poor exposure, temporary lapses of focus, and imperfect continuity—these have most always been dictated by technical and budgetary limitations. Indeed, the observational form of documentary has generally strived to approximate structures of realist fiction, including character development, dramatic conflict and resolution, the logic of cause and effect [Nichols 1991, 6; Vaughan 1999, 64]. It might be said that the language gap between documentary and fiction has narrowed in recent years. Or at least that the advent of small, silent cameras capable of producing crisp images in dim light has enabled far more subtle and intimate approaches to the recording of real people and actual locations, executed with a fluency of camerawork and naturalness of action that rival the most polished of studio productions. By eliminating many of those practical impediments which had heretofore stunted and flawed the grammar of observational cinema, such enhancements in the apparatus of field recording endow research videographers with unprecedented freedom of expression.

If we agree that the "cinema of observation" must proceed to evolve by articulating a language of its own, then what will be the rules of practice, codes of representation, principles of structure, and elements of style?

One hallmark of observational cinema, and perhaps the essence of its claim to authenticity, is an inexhaustible attention to the minutiae of everyday. Outside the regime of fiction where an economy of signification prevails, the details availed to observation are under no obligation to advance a story or contribute any particular meaning, but simply emerge from the rhythms and textures of everyday life—either of no particular interest or only of interest for their own sake. Because the prevailing sense of time in such a movie clings to the moment of filming, Bill Nichols characterizes it as "a particularly vivid form of present-tense representation" [Nichols, 39-40]. The moviemaker's process of awareness while looking

through a viewfinder is not so much directed at the people who may be regarded as subjects as it is engaged in attending to the environment she shares with them and mutual experience of unfolding events. What is the verb for what one does with a movie camera? Most of the time this camera is not even running. Without a script or shopping list to furnish clues, it is not a matter of aiming and firing, but rather a question of finding and selecting. The personal space-time that is expressed in observational cinema—corresponding to the drift of cameraperson’s attention—is of a different order from the supposed Euclidean space and causal chronology of realist fiction. Whereas narrative cinema has conventionally employed multiple camera positions with dollies and cranes to simulate the perspectives of characters and to synthesize an omniscient view of continuous action in a space re-constituted from fragments, observational films have favored prolonged sequence shots, and camera movements that represent the viewpoint of a lone pedestrian observer looking through the viewfinder with starts and stops. Rather than regard the shot as one of various ingredients in a recipe whose flavor will be imparted by the cumulative effect of single-note ingredients that are introduced in a linear series, the challenge is to achieve fully developed self-contained sequences in continuous takes.

It is a possibility of cinema to call attention to things—through the use of techniques such as framing, focus, and narration. It is equally a possibility of cinema not to call attention to particular things and parts of things, but rather, as film historian Stanley Cavell commented, “to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight” [Cavell 1971, 25]. Practitioners of *cinéma vérité* have shared the latter propensity, wanting to enlist viewers’ participation in the act of selection, discovery, and interpretation. Yet until recently, any film or video experience—regardless of its content, recording approach, or the producer’s intention—needed to be once-and-for-all monolithically constructed for one way linear playback on a single screen. In practice, there was no way that filmmakers could tailor movies to address the curiosities of individual viewers. The encoding of cinematic media in digital form interjects some twists that could transform cinematic construction into a process influenced by the interests and attentions of individual viewers. Today’s technology enables, for example, synchronized polylinear display of multiple video streams in virtual 3D space or on multiple screens distributed in a physical space.

Lev Manovich’s analysis of *The Language of New Media* acknowledged two formative developments that seem particularly relevant to observational cinema. One is the transition from narrative structure as the predominant principle of organization, to that of a collection (or database). “Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence” [Manovich 2001, 218]. I do not mean to signal that the status of storytelling as a cultural form is in any jeopardy. Rather, in Manovich’s words, “narrative becomes just one method of accessing data among many.” A collection is by nature open-ended. The connections between its terms are not limited to cause and effect, and the trajectory of experience is susceptible to a viewer’s input.

The second feature in Manovich’s scheme of digital things that deserves mention here is a new way of conceiving space, whose precedents can be found not only in videogames and motion simulators, but also in interfaces for interaction with any kind of computer data. Asserting “navigable space” as nothing short of a new symbolic form or media type, he also identifies its aesthetic challenge: “Rather than

considering only the topology, geometry and logic of a static space, we need to take into account the new way in which space functions in computer culture—as something traversed by a subject, as a trajectory rather than an area” [Manovich, 279]. A related trend is “spatial montage,” prefigured in the multiple windows of GUI and in object-oriented programming. “The logic of replacement, characteristic of [traditional] cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen. In spatial montage, nothing needs to be forgotten, nothing is erased. . . . In contrast to the cinema’s screen, which primarily functions as a record of perception, here the computer screen functions as a record of memory” [Manovich, 325].

Video editing tools have yet to become useful for shaping media with Seamless Expansions, or for visualizing, aligning, and keeping track of simultaneous streams. So-called nonlinear editing systems are still designed to produce linear results. Meanwhile the Internet has collected our imaginations in a display environment for a movie with many channels. Polylinear construction, enabled by digital technology, holds promise for fulfilling a desire that was only partially expressed in the idiom of *cinéma vérité*—to create a kind of motion picture that lets the world reveal itself and permits discovery on the part of viewers.

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