

The Death of Film in Architecture: Two Recent Cinemas

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A cinema (when I say cinema I mean a projection room) has the sole function of bringing the filmed message from the author to the beholder with a minimum of loss... I gave this concept of cinema the name "invisible cinema" to underline the fact that an ideal cinema should not at all be felt, should not lead its own life, it should practically not be there.¹

Peter Kubelka, "The Invisible Cinema"

The history of cinema bears witness in part to a free and aggressive transformation of architectural space for the ends of cinematic space. Cinema, in its protean capacity for representation, can't help but contain architecture within its view. Consequent to this representation, architecture is subject to the fragmentation inherent in the film frame and subsequently to the synthesis of film editing. Walter Benjamin likens this to the work of a surgeon in contrast to the more hands off approach of the painter: "Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web."² Thus as architecture becomes cinematic space, there is an inherent conflict with the architectural "original"; this conflict is tantamount to a game of rock paper scissors, only in this instance the rock (architecture) is at the mercy of both paper and scissors (film and editing).

In the opposite direction, the prospects for architecture engaging in a plastic manipulation of cinema are not nearly as convincing. Architecture's scenographic role is indeed compelling, but always enveloped and

subservient to the developing cinematic space. The only situation in which architecture could be said to contain film, the movie theater tends more and more towards an absence of the qualities of architectural space. Unlike the early cinemas of "elegant surface splendor" theorized by Siegfried Kracauer as a way "to rivet the audience's attention to the peripheral so that they will not sink into the abyss"³ of the film image, contemporary cinemas go more and more towards a non-architectural situation. As film becomes more and more insistent on its own medium specificity, the movie theater allows less and less architecture.

In her article "A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition," Rosalind Krauss associates Anthology Film Archives and the filmmakers who screened there in the late 60s and early 70s with a resurgence of medium specificity in film. On the eve of video's emergence, these filmmakers understood the medium to be

...neither the celluloid strip of images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before its eyes.⁴

No wonder then that Anthology was the venue of Kubelka's "Invisible Cinema". By the paradoxical fragility of projection – the necessity to cut out the peripheral and strengthen the foveal on the way through the

apparatus back to the lens – the cinema consistently blots out the architecture it inhabits.

Within architectural practice, this lopsided relationship between cinema and architecture has prompted an evasion as response. The notion of translation, of making a “cinematic” architecture, has displaced the possibility of confrontation and replaced it with the pursuit of mimesis. Unlike the modern painters who responded to the photograph with an open abnegation of the realism it entailed, architects in the age of film have consistently sought inspiration in the greater synthetic powers of their cinematic rival. From Le Corbusier’s *promenade architecturale*, to Bernard Tschumi’s *Manhattan Transcripts*, and recently Steven Holl’s *Linked Hybrid*, the persistence of the cinematic analogy in architecture is to a certain extent more important than its success or failure as a premise. Whether or not the moving camera can in a satisfactory way be equated to an ambulatory sequence through a building, or if an elevator’s trip through disparate programs in section could be likened to a “jump cut” is immaterial when faced with the resulting building.

The persistence of this cinematic metaphor in architecture constitutes the basis for this paper. That the medium of cinema is in the process of transitioning from film to video complicates this metaphor and in turn the architectural product. If video is the new cinematic medium and if, in Krauss’ words, video occupies a “discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence”,⁵ then how does this new “post-medium” change its architectural translation? By looking at two recent cinemas that conceptually straddle the “death of film” (Steven Holl’s *Linked Hybrid Cinémathèque* and Thomas Leeser’s *Museum of the Moving Image*) this paper will attempt to clarify how the cinematic metaphor works in relation to both media. That both buildings are movie theaters and as such have performative responsibilities towards cinema complicates the issue in compelling ways.

STEVEN HOLL’S LINKED HYBRID CINÉMATHÈQUE

Steven Holl Architect’s *Linked Hybrid* is a 650 unit apartment complex in the north east corner of Beijing’s 2nd ring road. There are 8 towers, grouped in a ring around a central courtyard pond. Other programs on the ground level include a kindergarten, a hotel, a restaurant, various landscape elements and a cinémathèque. Yet the distinguishing feature of the project is its sequence of bridges that connect the towers from the 12th to the 18th floor. Holl explains the spatial ambitions of the project in the text that accompanies its publication:

Filmic urban public space; around, over and through multifaceted spatial layers, as well as the many passages through the project, make the *Linked Hybrid* an “open city within a city”. The entire complex is a three-dimensional urban space in which buildings on the ground, under the ground and over the ground are fused together. The elevator displaces like a “jump cut” to another series of passages on a higher level. From the 12th to the 18th floor a multi-functional series of skybridges... connects the eight residential towers and the hotel tower, and offers spectacular views over the unfolding city.⁶

At the center of this sequence of “filmic urban space” is the cinémathèque, in a sense the formal complement to the looping faceted path of the bridges. It’s a small theater, modeled on the art house cinemas of New York such as *Anthology Film Archives* and *Film Forum*. Although its structure began as a grouping of inverted pyramids and tetrahedrons, the final form is that of two volumes resting atop a thicket of tilted columns. As the columns push out under the force of the theaters, they are also brought back and braced into triangulation by the frame of the floors and roof above.

The references in Holl’s text to a “filmic” sequence through the project and to the “jump cut” disclose a connection in his thinking to Sergei Eisenstein and Soviet montage as a whole. Eisenstein, son of an architect and friend of Le Corbusier, makes the connection

between film and architecture clear when he compares the walking sequence of the acropolis to a well ordered series of shots, particularly in their “sequential juxtapositions”.⁷ The film camera goes further by first making fragments and then bringing those fragments into conflict in editing. One example in his writing is the diagram of Japanese landscape painting shown in figure 1. Yet although Holl’s language connects him to Eisenstein, I would argue there is a much stronger affinity for one of Eisenstein’s colleagues, Dziga Vertov.

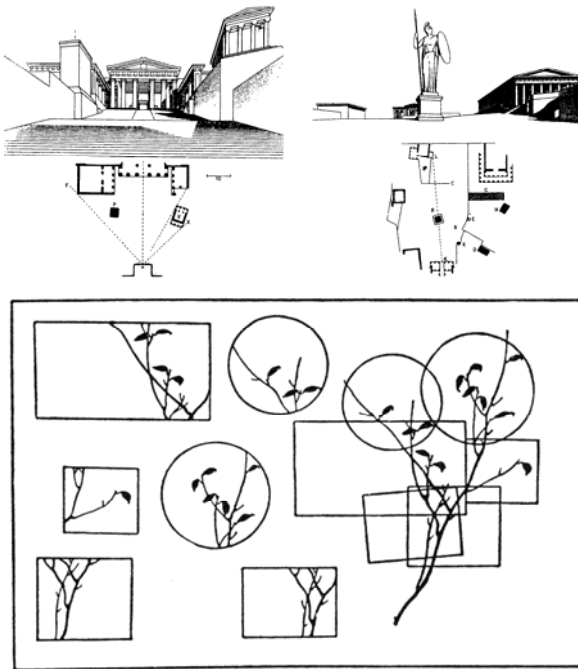


Figure 1: Sergei Eisenstein, Auguste Choisy's Acropolis; Japanese painting technique

Where Eisenstein has the notion of conflict as the driving force for his dialectical montage, Vertov describes the idea of harmony in intervals:

Kinochestvo is the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object... Intervals (the transition from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement,

and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution.⁸

The first film in which Vertov tested the notion of the interval is *Kino Eye*, a propaganda film made entirely with non-actors in diverse locations throughout the countryside and towns of Soviet Russia. Vertov conceived of the film as both a document of life but also a pedagogical tool for instruction in new technologies and means of social organization. Although it is hard to isolate a “scene” within such a thoroughly interwoven film, the following will focus on a series of shots in a section entitled “The tin shop helps the villagers”. In this sequence the intervals between shots in the scene present us with a series of visual rhymes and subtle contrasts in a steady and lively rhythm.

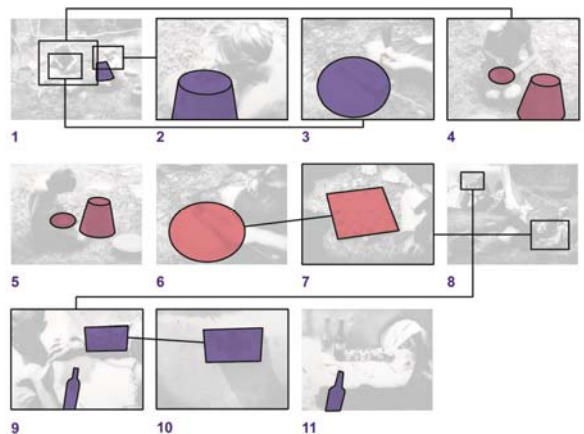
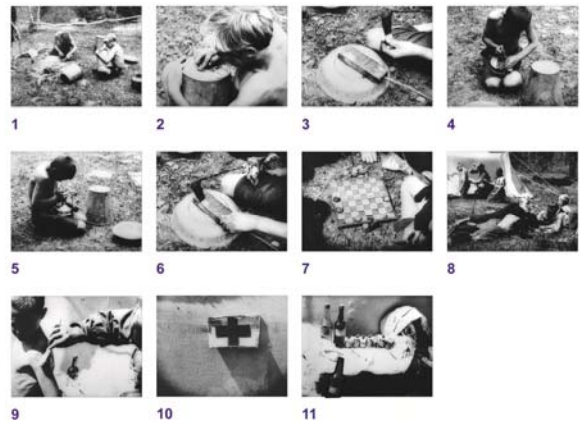


Figure 2: Dziga Vertov, *Kino Eye*

This analysis refers to figure 2. The point of entry in the first shot is the concentration on the object at the center of the frame, an inverted bucket that one of the young pioneers is cleaning. From this first interval, the next maintains the circular shape at the center of the frame, but cuts to an inverted frying pan instead, still in close up. The next shot is yet another round tin object at the center of the frame, but this time shown in the lap of a boy working on it. As if the wider shot were too stable, the next interval cuts to a 90 degree rotation, almost mimicking an architectural analysis of the worker's movement. Back into the inverted frying pan, and the following cut holds the close-up, but introduces a new motif into the intervals by the conflict inherent in cutting from a round modeled shape to a square graphic one. The transition from the tin works to the campers at the first aid tent occurs over the interval of these two close-up three-quarter shots. From this interval, Vertov takes up the square graphic shape as a new motif, rhyming the chess board with the strong graphic of the red cross on the side of the tent. Finally, he goes as far as to show a match cut of a bottle across the double interval of three shots.

While the film is not wholly concerned with delineating or measuring any kind of space, there is but one kind of space that allows for this rhythmic synthesis of images and movement. The camera in this instance exists at all points already of a pure Cartesian field. Within this field, the disembodied camera is free to take any fragmentary image from any angle. To illustrate the freedom of this camera in the spatial field, Vertov makes use of an architectural illustration:

I am eye. I am builder. I implanted you in a most remarkable chamber which did not exist until I created it today. In this chamber there are twelve walls, photographed by me in various parts of the world. Manipulating shots of walls and details, I have succeeded in arranging them in an order that pleases you and in constructing correctly a cinematic phrase, which is the room.⁹

Vertov's notion of a twelve walled chamber brings to mind not simply a square, cubic space but a crystalline one. Each wall/facet of the space constitutes a picture plane; each picture plane in turn points back to its picturing device, a film camera whose position in space would seem to be more a function of the crystalline structure of the space it occupies rather than any cinematographic agency. In *Kino-Eye*, it would appear that this matrix of potential viewpoints already exists in the world, at the camp of the young pioneers, at the marketplace, at the cooperative, a vast skein of lines and points, constantly recording and synthesizing a new-formed country.



Figure 3: Steven Holl, *Linked Hybrid Cinémathèque*, Beijing PRC

It is in the formal expression of this crystalline space that the cinémathèque succeeds in its fleshing out of cinematic space. The notion that a camera pointing out in twelve directions constructs a room with twelve sides has its inverse in the form of the cinema.¹⁰ The cameras in this case are infinite, but could be schematized sectionally; there are the views from the parking garage up through the vents, the view into the water in reflection, the views

at the ground floor, on the lower roof gardens, on the bridges that link the towers and finally from all the windows of the apartment units facing inward. Thus if the cinema is duck-like, it is a very specific kind of duck. It does not maintain a monolithic relationship to its own icon by the arrangement of *pochée* as the duck would, but instead expresses its position at the center of a scopic regime by a formal array of variegated frontalities.

Within this context of a scopic regime, Holl's decision to change the window module of the housing towers to a single window per floor, from the previous MIT module of 3 per floor, becomes clear. At MIT the window was part of a regularized geometry against which the sculptural voids are registered. In the case of *Linked Hybrid*, the window and the room it belongs to are correlated to a framed view, a single view point in the scopic matrix of the overall site plan.

THOMAS LEESER'S MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

It's very easy coming from film to feel snotty about the video image. It is of low resolution. It superimposes that graphic raster on everything. It emanates from a piece of furniture instead of something that is before one in an attentive situation. It sits there by itself and does its thing and is surrounded by fake tulips and other furniture and cheese doodles and TV snacks. It's a whole environment. But there is this to be said for television, and that is, it is seen.

Hollis Frampton¹¹

Film might be seen centuries from now as a really long slow piece of performance art that just took a century and then it was over. That's the last performance.

Ed Halter¹²

In his essay "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses", Hollis Frampton places the obsolescence of film within the larger timeline of the end of the "Age of Machines". In his words, "A machine

was a thing made up of distinguishable parts organized in some function of the human body... Cinema is the Last Machine. It is probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses."¹³ Rosalind Krauss paradoxically establishes the arc of film's demise in the fertile resurgence of medium specificity for the filmmakers at Anthology Film Archives, of which Frampton was a member:

As Benjamin had predicted, nothing brings the promise encoded at the birth of a technological form to light as effectively as the fall into obsolescence of its final stages of development. And the televisual portapak that killed American Independent Cinema was just this declaration of film's obsolescence.¹⁴

Thus insistence on the essence of the apparatus and the formal fecundity of that complex relationship merely signaled the death throes of film as a cinematic medium.

Practically speaking, film is still everywhere, but the clock is ticking. Contemporary studio practices have not excluded it from use but now embrace a process that is almost entirely dependent on the use of digital video platforms. Even in the case that it is shot on 35mm, the film will subsequently only be used as a source for a high resolution scan. All editing and printing thereafter refer only to this digital scan. At this gestational stage, the digital process adds any computer generated effects, but also color correction, format adjustment and text additions. The 35mm projection print is derived entirely from this digital material and the 35mm original never comes back into the process; it is merely archival. Thus the 35mm projection platform is the last vestige of the once all-encompassing apparatus that involved film at every stage. Once the infrastructure is in place for digital distribution, there will be no commercial justification for the use of film. Thus, the end of film could equally be a more final one in the future, when Kodak and other film companies have completely discontinued the production of motion picture stock.

Against the backdrop of the long transition between analog and digital, Thomas Leeser's

renovation of the Museum of the Moving Image makes the case for architecture as an expression of the tectonics of a digital cinema. The renovation to the museum has left the front of the building largely untouched, but the rear addition and added floor have almost doubled the square footage of the galleries and screening facilities. These include a large 267 seat theater, a smaller 68 seat theater and gallery space for the over 14,000 cinematic artifacts from their collection.¹⁵



Figure 4: Thomas Leeser, The Museum of the Moving Image, Queens NY

The most obvious formal nod to the digital is in the paired expression of the exterior of the back of the cinema and the interior acoustic panels of the main theater (Figure 4). Both of these surfaces avail themselves of a triangulated pattern that connotes the wireframes of computer models, a reference that Leeser has indicated in interviews.¹⁶ The tessellation of the wireframe, perhaps the most important scaffold for the virtual space of computer generated effects in cinema, is deployed here in an even pattern of clearly

articulated triangles. In cinematic practice, the grain of tessellation in CGI can be used at any degree of coarse or fine grain. The size of the facets are variable, depending on the time and power allotted to processing changes in geometry and lighting effects over the surface of the object. High budget projects like *Avatar* can have virtual object with up to 1.2 million facets,¹⁷ whereas objects in real-time video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* still have facets visible to the user.

In their deployment at the Museum of the Moving Image however, the facets appear to denote a formal potential rather than the overt use of that potential. On the back façade, this lends a tension to the entire surface, as if it were held back. The moment that unlocks the plastic potential of the architecture occurs in an installation on the third floor of the exhibition space: in the last gallery, the media artists Workspace Unlimited have installed *RealTime UnReal* an interactive 3D environment that, over a series of perspectival views, shows all of the facets of the building in constant exploding motion triggered by the viewer's movements around a two sided screen. Even the poché behind walls and under floors is exposed in a manner similar to so called "wall hacking" or "map glitching," a strategy native to video games in which avatars may access places inside walls left open due to errors in programming.¹⁸ After the long sequence through the stable geometries of the galleries and theaters, this image of the building in a constant state of virtual flux is in some way the lasting impression of it as a whole.

However I would argue that the tessellation of the virtual is not the only case of a digital cinematic metaphor in Leeser's museum. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Leeser explains that the blue color that permeates the exterior as well as the cinema and lobby space: "blue is the color of the digital world".¹⁹ In this instance he echoes a statement from Stan Brakhage in one of his writings from the mid-sixties on television titled "Hypnagogically Seeing America":

The T.V. 'dots,' backed by the light-source and the pale blue-ish [in black-and-white T.V.] tone of it (prime color of closed-eye vision in deep memory process, blue tinting the whole grainy field when the eyes have been closed in a dark room for a long time), do pre-tend the brain of the viewer is IN THE 'SET,' a tendency that soon makes him feel as if what he's watching had always been stored in his own memory banks, as if he ought to act on instructions from T.V. as surely as he would on his own experiences as remembered.²⁰

The formal qualities of the blue lit pixel point to another tessellation, a much older artifact than the triangulation of the virtual surfaces of CGI: the aperture grille. As television technology progressed in the early 60s, the image was still somewhat blurry due to the overlap of adjacent phosphorous material, fired by electrons in sequence. The solution to the blurred areas in between was to eliminate them altogether.²¹ Aperture grilles were thin, black steel masks laid over the screen in order to block out the blurred zones and yield up a single framed color. This framing of the individual position on the screen is the basis for the pixel and the ordered matrix of the computer screen that forms the underlying structure of digital imaging.²² The arrangement of colored light, projecting directly at the eye through a gridded screen is explicitly drawn out in the main theater's curtain by textile designer Cindy Cirko, but can also be seen in the 1,135 blue triangular panels that surround it (Figure 4). These panels, light blue instead of the customary black, pick up the distributed light of the projector as well as that of the exit signs and vestibules to imbue the whole with the impression of glowing cathode rays from all sides. The cinema image appears in the middle of this gridded matrix as one panel in continuity. To that extent, Cirko's trompe l'oeil points to a future in which movie theaters are no longer dependent on projected light for the conveyance of cinematic information.

If it was natural during the last gasp of film's medium specificity at Anthology to introduce the notion of an "invisible cinema" as an essential part of the cinematic apparatus, video exerts a very different set of demands on

architecture. The cinema doesn't need to be entirely "invisible" when it gathers itself around a video image. What is intuited in Brakhage's notion of television, and of video more generally is that the apparatus for video, the video cinema, doesn't essentially exist. It always presents a vector from behind the raster (root: *rastrum*, "rake") directly at the viewer's retina (root: *rete*, "net").²³ In the absence of projection/reflection, video makes itself available for a formless deployment. In Krauss's words, television and video "seem Hydra-headed, existing in endlessly diverse forms, spaces and temporalities, for which no single instance seems to provide a formal unity for the whole."²⁴ The bulky arrangement of Plato's cave and the metaphysical issues that go along with it need no longer exist in digital cinema.



Figure 5: Workspace Unlimited, *RealTime Unreal*

For Brakhage this opens up a colonization of the ontology of memory, for Krauss it not only suggests video as a "post-medium condition", but that "the medium of video is narcissism".²⁵ The axis of video, directly in and out of the subject in real time enacts a situation in which "consciousness of temporality and of

separation between subject and object are simultaneously evacuated."²⁶ Leiser's Museum of the Moving Image suggests that the tectonics of both video and the digital allow for the infiltration of the cinematic metaphor into the confines of the movie theater itself. Far

¹ Peter Kubelka "The Invisible Cinema" *Design Quarterly* No. 93, Film Spaces (1974), p. 32

² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* Fifth Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 744

³ Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces" trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 323-328

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999) pp. 24-25

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31

⁶ Steven Holl, www.stevenholl.com

⁷ Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture (ca. 1938)" *Assemblage* 10, December 1989, p. 113

⁸ Dziga Vertov "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* ed. Annette Michaelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) p. 8

⁹ Dziga Vertov "Selected Writings" in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987) p. 4

¹⁰ The pattern for the panels on the building is another instance of this notion of individual facets. The pattern was laid flat over the unfolded form as an expedient way to standardize the size of the panels. The result is that each facet has its own unique angle of panels.

¹¹ Hollis Frampton, "Talking About Magellan: An Interview," *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, Ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009) p. 236

¹² Ed Halter, "Interview with Ed Halter and P. Adams Sitney by M M Serra" *Art on Air*, Monday, June 25th, 2007

¹³ Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, pp. 135-136

from the concept of "invisible cinema" across the East River at Anthology, Leiser's cinematic architecture intimates a tessellated surface of potentially endless screens, a kind of pixelated narcissism. Architecture, the rock, disguised as crumpled cinematic paper.

¹⁴ Krauss, *Voyage*, p. 45

¹⁵ Julie V. Iovine, "Designed to Evoke the Future of Filmmaking" *Wall Street Journal*, New York, January 13, 2011

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ <http://www.cgsociety.org/index.php/CGSFeatures/CGSFeatureSpecial/avatar>

¹⁸ <http://www.brighthub.com/video-games/pc/articles/45923.aspx>

¹⁹ Iovine, "Designed to Evoke the Future"

²⁰ Stan Brakhage, "Hypnagogically Seeing America." *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964-1980*. Edited by Robert A. Haller. New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982, p. 105.

²¹ Sean Cubitt, "Making Space" *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 57, December 20, 2010 (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/making-space/>)

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The great irony of the digital in this respect is that the grain of the virtual in films keeps getting smaller in a quest for verisimilitude, only to be crushed and extruded at a later date through another tessellated surface, the arbitrary raster resolution of the display screen. Furthermore, the image is subject to and even worse extrusion through bandwidth over the internet and compression onto digital media such as DVDs. The "codec", the algorithm responsible for this extrusion, accomplishes the reduction in data by mimicking the human retina. Whereas in the retina the perceived absence of changes in the amount of light will stop the retina from sending information to the brain, the codec similarly seeks out parts of the image that are changing along a vector and leaves all pixels in other parts of the frame the way they are. If it happens over a second or more, this can give the parts of the image that aren't moving a patchy quality that is uncannily familiar. (Sean Cubitt, "Making Space" and Alfred L. Yarbus, *Eye Movements and Vision*, trans. Basil Haigh (New York: Plenum, 1967) *passim*.)

²⁴ Krauss, *Voyage*, p. 31

²⁵ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010) p. 4

²⁶ Ibid. p. 13
