Re:Interview #003:
Live Cinema — Language and Elements | Mia Makela

What is Live Cinema? Depending on how you set the boundaries, Live Cinema could be anything — from the visuals of the VJ in the club last night to sophisticated realtime performances based on complex interaction between musicians and visual artists at renowned festivals like Sónar in Barcelona. Generally it may be defined as "a recently coined term for realtime audiovisual performances". But there is one difference: "VJing can be used to design video wallpapers, for fun or as a technical hobby amongst other possibilities. Besides the traditional VJing practice, which takes place in clubs and at parties, there are also creators whose approach to visuals is artistic and who work in the realm of Live Cinema." (download pdf) Live Cinema has a long history. Maybe even the first shadow plays in ancient times could be seen as predecessors of this art form: there is a projector — the sun — and something that creates a shadow.

This is enough to produce a live projection you can use e.g. to tell a story. Technically refined, these principles led to inventions like the Magic Lantern and later the Cinematograph. But especially the last one is missing the live element – which, though, has been a point of interest, too. Although less known there have been inventions like the Colour Organ: a synaesthetic organ with keys that not only trigger tones but also change the colour of (candle) lights. All those ideas, combined with the notion that a film does not necessarily have to be narratic to make sense and the experiments in early Video Art led to today's Live Cinema.

Solu (a.k.a. Mia Makela) — an active Live Cinema performer — wrote a thesis investigating the principles of this genre. She distincts between "elements" and "language", thus to define parameters to work with, when it comes to issues of Live Cinema — both in the state of analyzing or doing a live cinematic performance. At the moment she is working on a Live Cinema DVD collection for the Mediateca of CaixaForum in Barcelona, which will be published next year in September 2007 with an accompanying event, dedicated to the discussion about this issue. The Mediateca is also creating a website with a database of Live Cinema creators.

To me, Live Cinema is a quite new experience. I saw the coming up of VJs and visuals in the clubs of the late nineties, but I didn't follow the developments since then. Now, you sometimes separate this VJ-culture from Live Cinema in your thesis. Do you think there is a gap between those two, comparable to the gap between "high" and "low" arts?

Actually, Live Cinema has a long trajectory if we understand it as audiovisual realtime performance, it just lacks a comprehensive written theory and history. So I don't understand Live Cinema as something that has developed from VJing even though the tools for both practices were the same. Many Live Cinema works continue the long tradition of Visual Music which is closer to realtime visual composition than realtime visual montage. I think that VJing and Live Cinema practices mainly differ in their goals as VJing is attached to club culture and Live Cinema is not. Still, VJs can do Live Cinema and vice versa, as well as DJs can make music and musicians can be DJs. To answer your question, I don't think VJing and Live Cinema practices can be divided in high and low arts, as this separation could be outdated anyway. If the creators' goals are artistic i.e. the content has thought and personal expression, then the output could be called art, even though it would be presented in a night club. It's just a matter of context. On the other hand, the question of what is art seems to be time — based as nowadays we don't ask ourselves if photography is art, as it was questioned some 30 years ago.

In your thesis you are writing about "elements" and "language" of Live Cinema. Thinking of a live performance, do you believe you are using a language with fixed grammar and rules?

Maybe not fixed grammar and rules. Anyway, I would like to know what the grammar might be … Imagine the grammar of dreams: how do you know you're "just" dreaming and not awake? I guess we know that the dream language is a bit different from the "real life" language so that we don't get confused … at least every day … but what is that language based on?

If we think of cinema, it has certain basic rules, like the 180 degrees rule, which has been developed in order to make the movie more comprehensible for the audience. For example, if the cinema maker

wants the audience to understand that two persons are having a conversation, facing each other, this rules comes handy. Actually it could be understood also as a tool rather than a rule.

So I would like to imagine this kind of "toolbox" also for Live Cinema artists: if you want the audience to get excited, what kind of rhythmic composition you could use, how fast the image sequences should change and how long, what colors make people react the way you would like them to, would zoom — in create that kind of emotional feedback you're looking for? … etc. … this kind of "tools" would not affect the content, rather they would act like grammar in language, like questionmarks and dots do in order for us to understand the context.

Even effects in cinema have their meanings, like blur effect tells us that a dream/memory sequence is starting, etc. … the question is: do Live Cinema works use these kind of meanings? Or is everything done for purely aesthetic reasons? Another question is: is there any narration?

Most of visual rules are based on human perception, and Live Cinema is very much created for live human audience. I guess the biggest challenge for Live Cinema is to be stimulating for its audience, be that mentally, emotionally, physically, metaphysically, etc. … to make the audience go home, feeling like they have catched something during the performance.

So, due to its liveness, is Live Cinema closer to theatre than to cinema? Is it more about performance or more about visual impression?

It seems that the term "Live Cinema" refers to making cinema (static) live, like practicing live montage. Live theatre would sound kind of funny, also as many Live Cinema performances are not very performative (physically), although very audiovisual, so in the end, the experience for public may resemble more cinema than theatre. On the other hand more and more Live Cinema artists do collaborate with theatres and some softwares like Isadora have been programmed for dance theatre rather than for clubs. So lets say that Live Cinema can be a mixture of both, theatre and cinema. Using the term "cinema" is also controversial, as it could/should be called also live video performance. Henry Warvick uses the term "performance cinema", so it appears that the word cinema seems to sit tight, probably because cinema still creates magical connotations in our minds and Live Cinema sounds sexier than realtime audiovisual creation. Also it fits nicely as continuation for Expanded Cinema. During the silent movies the orchestras that played in the theatres were sometimes referred to as Live Cinema, this tradition actually continues still, with, for example, the Russian State Symphony Cinema Orchestra. Even Dogma cinema movement has been referred to as Live Cinema.

As far as I know Live Cinema is strongly connected to music. How do you think will this symbiosis develop?

There are facilities like SAT in Montreal who are pushing forward the idea of surround audiovisual environment … this sounds logical as realtime image has been following faithfully in the footsteps of realtime audio … soon we might have visual 5.1 systems.

How important is technology in doing Live Cinema? Do you think it is crucial to have some knowledge of particular tools in order to become a "Live Cinematographer"?

I suppose knowing your tools is important in every art/craft. In realtime visual world knowing what digital video/material is made of forms the basis of the work. I would say that skilfull compression and optimization of the material is essential. Processing video in realtime is one of the most exhausting jobs for the computer so the creator has to know how to optimize the material without "losing quality".

Also there are special softwares for realtime creation like Max/Msp/Jitter, Puredata, Modul8, Isadora and Processing (etc.) Each software has its own interface which also defines what kind of work is possible to create with it. Open Architecture Softwares like Max/Msp/Jitter or Puredata offer the biggest range of options, from interactive installations to creating realtime 3D — spaces, while Modul8 is more VJ — oriented, offering an easy interface in which using layers is the method of working. Actually most "Live Cinematographers" have a wide scope of knowledge: they are movie makers, video artists, editors, camera wo/men, post — producers, video processors, interface designers, programmers, promoters and performers, sometimes all in one person.

How important do you consider theory for doing Live Cinema performances?

MM: I consider talking about the content equally important as talking about technology. Personally I get easily bored talking about the tools all the time. In technologically driven creative fields the creators are often so in love with their tools that the output seems like the scenes from the fairytale "The Emperor's New Clothes". Everything should be cool just because a lot of technology has been used to produced it. So in this kind of environment I find theory and criticism kind of refreshing.

Are there theoretical debates going on about Live Cinema? And if yes — what are the main points of interest?

It is starting to happen. I guess now when the first wave of "[digital] Live Cinema avant — garde" has passed, creators are starting to ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing. Many artists have passed similar thresholds. First they started to do visuals, VJing, played at clubs for the joy of it, then they got tired of it and started to create audiovisual performances with musicians and from thereon searched for their own unique expression. And at this point discussion comes into the picture. One of the main questions, at least for me, are how to unite realtime with a story/narrative of some kind? What are the realtime narratives and mythologies?

During the year 2006 several books on VJing have been published including "The VJbook" edited by Paul Spinrad and "Ve-Ja" edited by Xárene Eskander. Even though VJing has been going on for decades, it seems that this is the first time publications like this are popping up. This might be a turning point for realtime audiovisual culture as more and more creators are getting interested in it. Many visual creators and movie makers start to do realtime performances as they have noticed that this way they can express themselves without the drag of having to find huge budgets for movie production. This may also say a lot about the visual culture production in general.

Talking about space in Live Cinema: Does there exist a perfect "physical space" (as you defined it in your thesis) like for example the white cube is sometimes seen as predestined for art?

I can imagine that a space which allows a spatial set — up of the projections is closer to a perfect space than a place where that is not possible. I just did visuals a couple of days ago in Monkey Town in New York, which had a projection on each wall … it was possible to create an ambient, rather than cinematic screening situation, which worked out fine. I hope that one day we won't need projectors anymore but would have affordable canvases or different kinds of materials which could be directly connected to the computer or imagine 3D projections in air …

Thank you very much for the interview!