

Greyscale Video and the Shift to Colour

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As Paul Simon once sang, "Everything looks worse in black and white".

Metaphorically, at least, I have to agree. When we begin the process of working through a significant artistic change like the movement between greyscale and colour in artists' video works, there is an over-ambitious temptation to speak in terms of the relations between technology, art practice, institutional policies and critical discourse for a period of more than a decade. There, in black and white, is the problem. There is simply too much data. We also believe that the significant change was the move from analog to digital video cameras and editing. But just as MacLuhan skips over the shift from codex to volumen in the rush to printing, so media arts historians risk missing an essential step in the race to computer-generated imaging. The solution in black and white: monochrome, and the arrival of colour.

The emergence of the Filmmaker's Coop and London Video Arts from the old Drury Lane Arts Lab marks England's only 20th century avant-garde. Other contenders – Bloomsbury, the Pop variations of Peter Blake, RB Kitaj and David Hockney, or Art and Language – struggled for their slice of an unaltered institutional pie. What was remarkable about the film and video underground from the late 1960s through the 1980s and beyond was its ability to gather, and hold, makers who had precious little chance of earning a living from what they made. Who ignored the art institutions. Who could have made a living making fashionable art and didn't. Probably the only significant modernist art movement in the United Kingdom not centrally concerned with nationalism.

The video scene was thus a poor world. It was also, by modern standards, in some respects a rather insular one. Though there were networks of experimental film makers and fans across Europe and North America, video was the younger, cheaper and more schizophrenic sister. Much video work was driven by an aesthetic of alternative television, thoroughly politicised, albeit generally from an anarchistic rather than an organised Marxist platform, and devoted to giving people back their voices. The earliest catalogue of British Video I have, published by Sue Hall and

Hoppy Hopkins at Fantasy Factory in 1975, lists street parties, rent strikes, squatters' campaigns and rock against racism far more than formal experiment. Yet the formal experiment was there. Other artists had undermined both the commodity status of the artwork and the Cartesian authority of the artist as author by the use of chance. Among the pioneers of community video, the same ends were pursued by handing over control over the means of production. For many this engagement with training and access was as central a platform of vanguard art practices as, for example, the Artists Placement Forum, in which at least two significant video artists were involved, Ian Breakwell and David Hall.

Unfortunately the British Film Institute – whose core had always been the national Film and Television Archive – was understandably reluctant to take on the unstable magnetic media and often ad hoc installations of the film and video arts sector. The archive's parent organisation was therefore all the less likely to support even the Coop avant-garde, let alone the video sector. Scarce production funding supported some remarkable experiments, especially in the post-Godard documentary, and some exceptional work in regional and national cinemas. But the work of the video sector especially, and much of the film sector, was marginal at best. In 1985, when I was a member of the Grierson Award panel, responsible for the BFI's prize for best documentary, rumour had it that the then director of the Institute roared through the building demanding a recount when we selected a project created by regional video workshops, *The Miners' Campaign Tapes*, against competition which included Attenborough's *Life on Earth* among many fine works from film and television. It was I'm sure partly out of anxiety that Thatcher's minions would use this or any excuse to cut cultural funding. But some of me still believes it wasn't even the politics: it was the medium that was under par. The next year, during a big festival of French video art, one of the most respected of the BFI's cultural advisors asked me why I wasted so much time writing about video.

The national collections, in the form of the Tate, purchased Susan Hiller's *Belshazzar's Feast* in the early 1970s. From there on in until the 1990s, no acquisitions from the video arts scene were made by the national collections of art, with the sole exception of the British Council. The first artists to break that barrier and receive major retrospectives in the United Kingdom were white, male and

American with rock-solid reputations built in the very different climate of North American gallery art – Bill Viola at the Riverside, Gary Hill at the Tate Liverpool: a gradual approach towards the summits of Millbank and the Tate Modern. The exception was Nam June Paik at the Hayward, an artist whose Korean origins were however overwhelmed by his credentials earned in Fluxus and later in New York. Individual curators had an interest in at least some of the art being made. But the struggle to get it into the institution – again against the tide of Callaghan's and then Thatcher's governments and their readiness to cut cultural spend – was not worth the sacrifice of careers and other causes.

Peter Sainsbury and later Ian Christie fought manfully to retain a place for artists' film in the context of the British Film Institute, but video remained entirely marginal to the Institute's platform. Left holding the fractious baby of media arts was the Arts Council, specifically in the person of Dave Curtis. Other colleagues will be able to supply a richer history of the Arts Council's work in film and video: reclaiming this history is art of major linked projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council involving the Universities of Luton and Dundee, Central St Martin's School of Art and Design and Birkbeck College of the University of London. The Arts Council is in one sense the core of the survival, against all odds, of the media arts in Britain. Without it the only other source of funding, from regional arts boards, would have dried up far more swiftly.

The lack of personalities would always be a brake on art magazine and curatorial recognition, The myth of the artist as lone creator would withstand not only these aggravations, but even the deliberate removal of themselves from the art process of people like Lewitt, Kieffer and Koons. Indeed, the hands-clean direction of artisans responsible for the realisation of the work became integral to the art of Lewitt, and banal in the productions signed by Koons. Between them, Kieffer made a living as the new expressionist who, ironically, produced his larger works in near-factory conditions. In retrospect, we find similar relations to the materiality of artmaking in the practices of Warhol and Beuys. The difference is that their signatures remained the commodifiable quantity in each work. The shift towards conceptualism, whatever its other virtues, led towards a diminution of artisanship as a criterion of critical judgement. Meanwhile, the more craft was deleted from the dominant paradigms of

modernist and postmodernist gallery art, the more vulnerable it became to the "my child of five could do that" criticism in the popular press, and the more its defense rested on the art concept to distinguish one random scribble from another. The concept became the last and determining quality through which the artwork could be defended against philistinism, and in the process, ironically, the profession of artistoc intent became the crucial gesture in which an art practice that began in rejection of the commodity form resealed its pact with individualism.

But when, as in video art, the concept included the removal not just of the artist's hand but their signature as well from the tradable quantity, there was nothing left for the gallery world to latch onto. This, far more than either the ephemerality of the medium or its replicability, made video uncollectable. Even performance artists could make a living, but quasi-anonymous ad hoc groups of activists with cameras broke the rule of professionalised art. Beuys could invite participation in tree-planting, but the concept remained his. Once a video workshop handed responsibility for the concept to the unwashed, who had never set foot inside an art school, the guilt fell off the ginger bread, not just for workshop practice, but for the whole tainted medium.

There was however something equally unappetising about video's proximity to television. Not that broadcasters were queuing up for video art or workshop content – Gorilla Tapes' *Video* series, eventually broadcast in the mid 1980s, was initially knocked back because the work didn't meet broadcast engineering standards, and later because of the copyright infringements Jon Dovey (FN1) wrote about in a significant early essay in *Screen*. It was more a case of the lack of any clear specificity to the medium of video.

Clement Greenberg was still in the driving seat, in a more doctrinaire manner than was, in all conscience, consonant with his own tastes and practice. Painting had to do painting jobs with paint. Sculpture had to do sculptural things with sculpting. Film was in general able to respond by doing filmic things using duration, projection and screens. The practice was if anything driven further, and articulated with a rich political aesthetic, by Peter Gidal, whose earlier essays and thinking were brought to a fine point in perhaps the single most significant writing of the period, his 1989 book on materialist film (FN2). Video also had a history of materialist reflection on the

nature of the medium, but the embarrassing truth was already clear: that video was a medium without an essence. Originating as a tool for recording shows for broadcast (Bing Crosby was a substantial early investor), and simultaneously as a real-time surveillance technology, video was neither essentially live nor essentially recorded. Nor was it, despite polemics to the contrary, essentially cheap, reliable or easy to use. Where a film camera could bounce around in the back of a truck for thirty years and still shoot standard format, video cameras, despite or because of their cheap unit cost, constantly broke and were subject to frequent format changes. Nonetheless, features did emerge that seemed common, notably the concept of video as signal, a discovery which sparked pioneering work by Peter Donnebauer and Dan Sandin in analog computing. Indeed formalist interest in video frequently led not inward to some putative hypostasis, but outward to areas like the emerging computer arts scene, or towards TV, or along paths broken in the 1930s by workers' film vans. Parallels to Richard Serra's *China Girl* were rare enough in the UK video scene, though some early works by Tamara Krikorian, Chris Meigh-Andrews and Mike Leggatt shared some of the concerns of contemporary art institutions with formal experiment.

Video then had a tendency, despite this early formalism, articulated and later historicised by Stuart Marshall (FN 3), to undertake to do broadcast things without broadcasting, filmic things without film, to do documentary, to be confessional (as Rosalind Krauss rather demeaningly and narrowly defined it in the very first issue of *October* [FN 4]), to tell stories, to play with illusions . . . in short to be catholic, eclectic, inauthentic (even when confessing) and degraded. Most of all, it broke these rules without wearing on its sleeve the Greenbergian concepts it was supposedly breaking with, and so severed itself from that boundary-marking attitude common to neo-conceptualism and tom cats.

To place this moment in the history of aesthetics properly, recall for a moment the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition at the ICA in 1968.

This was the year the BBC first broadcast in colour.

Though video still struggles to achieve the density of image of a 35mm frame (let alone that of large-format photography), it shared, during its monochrome phase, something of black-and-white photography's realism. It was as if the machinery of video seemed too simple, too direct, to be capable of lying, or only capable of lying badly like a child trying to act a part, and like the child, monochrome was very self-conscious – a quality thoroughly exploited in William Wegman's *Selected Works*.

What is (or what was) monochrome as a TV format? Now it is obsolete as a broadcast medium we can ask, what were its virtues? What precisely was its materiality, for those decades when monochrome was television? Maybe it's too soon, or more likely it's already too late to quiz the black and white image, and maybe it always was painted in the colours of imagination. But then again, describing those earlier images as 'black and white' is a polite fiction. There was no video black at all back then (and many argue there still is not), but a palette of soft and softer grays. Such was the palette Wegman used so deftly in the 'talking torso' episode of the *Selected Works*, where the low resolution is the necessary condition for the illusion that the torso is a face with nipples for eyes and navel for a mouth, a joke as childlike as putting the empty eggshell back upside down in the eggcup.

Consider the specificity of David Hall's *Vidicon Inscriptions* of 1974 and 1975. Chip cameras no longer give us comet tails, and the burn of a flare of light on the old tube cameras is now an historic artefact. But here preserved (FN 5) are the poignant traces of ghostings in documentation of the installation, where the mugging of participants has at once the presence of improvisation and yet is already caught in a moment, simultaneously, of capture and decay. The work is about the materiality of the screen technologies of the day, for sure. It is also, especially in retrospect, an elegy for the passing of time - the time of the gesture as it fades from the screen, the time of technologies that have their moment and pass away. These records promise ephemerality. Their conception of the moving image is always and necessarily on the brink of death – of becoming *nature morte*, the oxymoronic 'still life'. For Hall, in these pieces, the moving image and the kind of technologically latent 'pause' effected in their inscriptions seize life indeed, but drain it too.

Like most of Hall's installations, this is a theatrical piece in the sense established in the art critic Michael Fried's 1967 attack on minimalism (FN 6). For Fried art that set up the artwork as an object, as sculptors like Donald Judd were doing, was theatrical because it addressed a spectator in a particular situation, because it subordinated the art to the audience. Most of all, unlike the abstract painters he admired, it was because for Fried the experience of minimalist objects persisted in time. Fried is not wrong in his description, only in his evaluation. He liked an art of instantaneousness and shape – a timeless art, and one addicted to space. Hall, without abandoning space, is never therefore ready to abandon duration. In this he differs from Bruce Nauman, whose *Video Corridor* trapped its participants in an absurdist pursuit of the uncatchable image of themselves, in a chase as cruel and pointless as his later *Clown Torture* series. For Hall, the pleasure derives from handing over the completion of the piece to his users, who paint their own vanishing gestures in the flash of light that inscribes them on the camera tube.

Fried is critical of any work of art that does not contain in itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise, whose reasons subsist to some extent outside itself, in the way it manifests in space and, especially, in time. In a distant echo of Kant's definition of technology as an ensemble whose purpose, unlike that of the living creature, is external to it, Fried seeks to restore to the artwork an organic teleology, a life lived for its own sake. David Hall's *Television Interruptions* of 1971 required television as the place in which they were installed, the television receiver as the place where they were witnessed, and the television institution as the site of its irruption and its purpose. A photograph, even a video of the installations are merely instantaneous documents: the works themselves are interruptions of the empty homogenous time of televisual flow, the empty homogenous space of the television screen, interruptions in the time of viewing, art as interruptions of art.

While some early video work – that associated with the journal *Radical Software* for example – was anti-television, Hall was part of a longer and deeper involvement with broadcast. This practice of involving the viewer in acts and moments – situations – runs through the interactions of *Videcon Inscriptions* and *Progressive Recession*, in which CCTV cameras directed viewers not to the screen in front of them but to another, displaced, from which they would be referred to another and another. Again, unlike

Nauman's *Corridor*, the phenomenological upshot was not the impossibility of self-reflection but the necessity of being visible for another viewer. To return to Fried, the purpose of such actions is not to engage the viewer in contemplation of a closed object whose meaning and sensation are already completed within the work. On the contrary, it is to suggest that there are other situations inside or alongside television where television can be otherwise – and that to travel there is more exciting for the audience because each individual work is only ever the beginning of another vector away from broadcast.

The lessons of minimalism that Fried described so accurately, even if he valued them wrongly, moved, with Hall's video work, towards questions as rich with ambiguities as Duchamp's *Fountain*, beyond the intentionality of conceptualism and neo-conspetualism, into a questioning of the practices and functions of both video and television.

The question of being – of how things are, in what ways they exist for themselves and for us - is one of the two great questions at the core of philosophy West and East. The other is, what is the good life: what is virtue, how should we live together, what are our responsibilities, how can we live well? Mostly the two questions are kept apart. But in Hall's works the problems of being and perception, their endless paradoxes, their endless renewals of possibility are themselves the form of the good life. A life is good that's spent contemplating these things. But even more so, investigating being and illusion, absence, disappearance, forgetting, erasure and traces, is a way of understanding that this real life is not the only life, and that a better or at least a different one lies alongside it, the depth of the screen away.

The thought moves through that iconic tape *This Is A Television Receiver*. In many instances it will have been seen on a video display unit rather than a TV, as a recording rather than as broadcast, casting an assertion that has the partial validity of a historical document; true at the time, in the way that it was once possible to say 'television is black and white'. But what is the 'this' of the title? And how does it manage to speak in the present tense and in the positive, where Magritte was constrained to use the negative? Not once, but three times, as the image is

rerecorded from an oblique angle, the 'this' changes, from a hard close up, rather closer than usual on British TV of the time, to a visibly distorted view which nonetheless brings out the curvature of the screen. Finally it changes to a distortion reminiscent of some of the Vasulka's electronic manipulations, though achieved entirely by analogue means. The final 'this' is perhaps the one that most effectively suggests that 'this' is the machine on which you are watching. It loops back to the initial intervention, with the well-known broadcaster and his voice, so closely associated with the authoritative version of the news from the BBC, in the colours that had been available for a mere eight years, and that only to a minority of early adopters. In this work, colour too shifts out of the red, green and blue towards a patchwork of white highlights, near-black shadows, and a narrow range of browns. The decay suggests the clumsiness of TV's native colour palette, incapable of capturing real light (true 'blue' for example is too close to the edge of human sight, and so too dim to work on TV screens) but all too readily accepted as accurate.

In the 1980s, British video practice would become virulently polychrome with works like Stakker's *Techno*, Jez Welsh's *i/o/d*, 9 Attrition Magic's *Saboten Boi* and George Barber's *Yes Frank No Smoke*. The artifice of electronic light would be core to its aesthetic, RGB analogues to the cones, cubes and cylinders of late Cézanne. There was a before, which all those practitioners were aware of, but which did not attract them. As Eddie Shanken notes in the introduction to his collection of Roy Ascott's writings (FN 7), postmodernism as an artworld phenomenon was unkind to artists' writings, uninterested in any but its own pursuits. In the remnant monochrome aesthetic that still informed some 80s artists, the preciousness of colour is, however, not the only outcome, nor the manipulability of images. Something instead remains of the traverse of light, its abeyance as electronic signal and magnetic store, that explains at once its fading reference, its ephemerality and its situatedness in a world in which there is always another viewer, always another channel. These early explorations, for which here David Hall's work stands as exemplary, are the entry to any future understanding of electronic light. Art has been too interested in concepts, film in representations. Video and digital imaging are, as they were in these first instances, grounded in their materials, in the multiple energetic states of light, stripped back to monochrome as if in a laboratory; a sense of wonder that the image remains when the world moves on; and the analogue to both these things – that

light, and the image made of light, has always the nature of another world next door to this. The sacrifice of authority – and with it of institutional guarantees – goes hand in hand with the situated work and its refusal of Fried's Greenbergian purities.

There was already a sense among videomakers of the late 1970s that the key issue was not, as it remained for filmmakers, the work of representation. This motif was the object of influential analyses of Mulvey and Wollen's films, notably *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Representation grounded itself in the losses and absences generated in the production of illusion through the automated apparatus of perspective, as seen through the filter of Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (FN 8) and the apparatus theory which made its way from *Cahiers du Cinéma* to *Screen* in translations of Commolli and Narboni, Dayan and Oudart, to be formalised in work by Stephen Heath (FN 9) and others. In place of the Lacanian-Althusserian propositions concerning the construction of the subject of ideology through mechanisms of fascination and depiction, videomakers began to read in systems and information theory. Perhaps due to their deeper affiliation with the art schools, videomakers were more prone to seize on the graphic qualities of video, its ability not so much to recapture an illusion of the fleeting moment, but to render in graphical form the datastreams comprising reality. It is here, perhaps, that monochrome had its strongest influence. Lacking a true black, or even an approximation to cinema black, video images would always be restricted to a kind of statistical sampling, and a rendition of its quotations from the world that was always distinguished from it by its lack of illusionistic power. That the early cameras also required powerful illumination, which had the effect of flattening depth by reducing shadow and chiaroscuro, only added to the two-dimensional, graphic quality of the video image.

In those years before video or data projection, the scale of the image was always restrained to what might be accomplished on a small screen. The language of television, and especially of black-and-white, remained the central voice in which the world could be described. But video description did not have the problem of illusionism, since the screens' low resolution and lack of definitive palette reduced the density of images way below the threshold of illusion, and far closer to the sampling typical not of perspectival art but of statistical presentations, in short of

graphs. The quantum of information, and the constant awareness of the transitions through which it had to pass, in which there intervened no 'whole' image as in the case of the analogue filmstrip, made clear to video artists that their work was framed by the size, responsiveness, luminance and limited number of the electro-sensitive phosphor molecules on the video screens available. Clearly such low-resolution and low-luminance vehicles could not pretend to replicate the world. Instead, they became of interest in that they accounted for the world in other ways, as for example in the slow decay of phosphor luminescence after the causative event was already over. Likewise the capacity of video for live transmission opened the gates for a near-immediate comparison with the events of which its gave some kind of record. That the two were clearly not the same removed the ideological compulsion to pretend that the represented, as in film, could be in some way more whole than the actual. Monochrome video's virtuality saved it from ideology, at least on the crude model of narrative cinema.

Here what we must confront is not ideology but its shadow, or rather that inverse thing, the shadow's shadow, the positive image. All those games with mirrors that the early video artists played, works like Dan Graham's or Bruce Nauman's installations that deployed live or slightly delayed images of the live space: these are precisely not autobiographies, as Krauss argued, but self-portraits. The self portrayed, however, was not the artist's but the participant's, and the artist once again removed from material presence to be replaced by the concept of the work, so that the work was a portrait then not of the self but of the pure intention of the artist. Hence the ironic vacuity of the selves portrayed, and the Beckettian defence that subjectivity was always already a thin veneer, the outward cast of light, not the expression of an inward being projected into public space. Projection remaining an unlikely addendum, monochrome, single-channel video explored the beginnings of a self without selfhood, self as object of a newly externalised gaze. And it was perhaps this step that most justified the 'theatrical' criticism. What worse could an art form do than set as object of contemplation a subject stripped of interiority? So Richard Baker presenting *This is a Television Receiver* is very clearly not Richard Baker but a play of lighted phosphors on a screen and a voice reduced to the tinny rendition of a tiny speaker; is, in fact, exactly what it says it is. Duration here is not so much the time in which a projected image becomes a self; it is instead the time it takes for

selfhood to leach away from an image which, it becomes clear, does not represent at all but presents a facsimile rather than a representation. Between Skinnerian behaviourism and Batesonian cybernetics, greyscale video marked out a zone of transition between the politicised aesthetics of Marxist semiotics and the medium-specific modernism of the art schools, as it did between the expressive artist and the displacement of creativity to the situation. Stripped even of nostalgia for the old black-and-white movies, monochrome video opened itself to its own dimness, embraced as parody in Wegman's *Selected Works* and as indefinable of a world or its inhabitants in so many others.

The world and its inhabitants appeared here degraded, removed from the pinnacle of existence, manifestly translated into a medium in which their presence to themselves was no longer at issue but only their presence to a restricted and inhuman technology uninterested in the personal. It was the beginning of postmodernism as an artistic movement in the heart of modernism. It was also, more significantly, the first step beyond the postmodern obsession with both the disappearance of the real and the schizophrenic subject, towards an art which is only now beginning to come into its own, in which the distinction between subject and object is of the first importance, and the possibilities of an order beyond them, one which is not the mere indifference of some branches of surrealism, becomes vibrantly possible.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Dovey, Jon (1986), 'Copyright as Censorship - Notes on Death Valley Days' in *Screen*, v.27 n.2, March-April.
2. Gidal, Peter (1989), *Materialist Film*, Routledge, London.
3. See for example Marshall, Stuart (1979), 'Video - Technology and Practice' in *Screen*, v.20 n.1, Spring, 109-19; and Marshall, Stuart (1985), 'Video - From Art to Independence' in *Screen*, v.26 n.2, March-April, 66-71.
4. Krauss, Rosalind E. (1976), 'Video: The Structure of Narcissism' in *October* n.1, Spring.
5. This and other works by David Hall are distributed by Lux; see http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/essays/david_hall/detail1.html
6. Fried, Michael (1992), 'Art and Objecthood' in Harrison and Wood (eds), 822-834; first published in *Artforum*, Spring 1967.

7. Ascott, Roy (2003), Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology and Consciousness, ed and intro Edward A Shanken, University of California Press, Berkeley.
8. Panofsky, Erwin (1991 [1924-5]), Perspective as Symbolic Form, trans Christopher S Wood, Zone Books, New York.
9. Comolli, Jean-Louis and Pierre Narboni (1977), 'Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism' (1) and (2), trans Susan Bennett, in John Ellis (ed), Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics, SEFT, London, 2-11 and 36-46; Comolli, Jean-Louis (1980), 'Machines of the Visible' in Stephen Heath and Theresa de Lauretis (eds) (1980), The Cinematic Apparatus, Macmillan, London, 121-142; Dayan, Daniel (1976), 'The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema' in Bill Nichols (ed), Movies and Methods, Volume One, University of California Press, Berkeley, 438-451 (reprinted from Film Quarterly, Fall 1974); Heath, Stephen (1978/9), 'Notes on Suture' in Screen, v.18 n.4, Winter, 48-76; Heath, Stephen and Theresa de Lauretis (eds) (1980), The Cinematic Apparatus, Macmillan, London; Oudart Jean-Pierre (1977-8)'Cinema and Suture' in Screen v.18 n.4, Winter, 35-47.