Betancourt, M., Postcinema, *AM Journal*, No. 15, 2018, 202-208.

http://dx.doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i15.242

Michael Betancourt
Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia, USA

Postcinema, Motion Perception and Glitch Movies

Assuming that the motion images displaced on screen are stable, discrete units – both the particular shots and the individual frames that form them – is a constant, even axiomatic, belief about motion pictures; works that challenge these beliefs are *postcinema*. This seeming immobile foundation comes into doubt with the development of digital technology, especially in the possibilities for direct manipulation of the digital files in themselves in those protocols collectively labeled 'glitch' that alter the encoded data of 'movie files' to eliminate the differentiation between individual frames (for example, by 'datamoshing'). These structural changes to the encoded data still offer the possibility for motion imagery, but do so in a way that opens up new potentials in a convergence of historical painterly techniques for rendering motion and those developed with kinematography in the 19th century. This recognition informs the movies I make: *apparent motion* originates in the audience's cognitive engagement with multiple, fragmentary views of figures/spaces that become recognizable and unitary figures, coherent-in-motion, even through when viewed as stills these 'frames' often do *not* contain or present single coherent figures but clearly fragmentary and incomplete parts juxtaposed in a disorderly fashion. Human consciousness fits these pieces together to produce both the appearance of stable figuration and their animated motion.

On a technological level, these disparactions are derived in part from the operation of the digital computer, demonstrating unrecognized potentials for digital motion pictures. Compressed video is entirely unlike the individual sample-photographs of historical film or the interlaced recordings of NTSC video. By encoding motion as a separate vector from the identity of pixels themselves, compression systems have enabled a new kind of moving image, one where the high resolution imagery can be separated from its transformation over time. The results of that division render the movies as potentially without a specific resolution or duration, able to the extended in duration, expanded in scale, and exposed in approach as generative productions where any frames we see are an artificial product of their exhibition, rather than an inherent component of motion pictures. This revelation has several implications for 'experimental media' that rapidly move away from its historical foundations in film and analogue video: my movies work to eliminate distinctions between frames, thus rendering traditional systems of editing inapplicable.

In place of the 'cut' is the continuous transformation of the image, a

*Author contact information: michael@michaelbetancourt.com; michaelbetancourt.com

metamorphosis that impacts the field of vision, an approach distinct from the various types of animorph familiar from cartoons and other animation, creating a metastable image whose 'identity' – the denoted contents – makes the role of the audience central to its comprehension. This role plays out in a variety of ways, most apparent in the identification of the contents and the recognition of movement. Individual frames in my movies suggest movement in ways that still images do not: in looking at them, there is a definite kinetic component entirely different from the implied or assumed stasis-that-becomes-motion of the still photograph. These frames are kinetic, so that when we do see a more traditionally organized image, the results have an affect of stasis; these effects are most recognizable when looking at figurative images, as with the footage of actress Mae Murray in *The Kodak Moment.* The fragmentation apparent in the stills appears as motion understood in the change of shot (CU, MS), but created without editing. The two distinct views, as well as their assembly mimics and relates to traditional continuity cutting, but replaces 'continuity' with shifting bands of pixelated image so that both views appear simultaneously; the glitch processing creates their interpenetrations and elides the 'jumps' created by cutting within the pseudo-independent 'bands'. Not simply overlapped or superimposed, each 'change-in-shot' happens over time, a distributed emerging in this shifting composition of image-blocks against a black background. The different camera positions interpenetrating and merging on screen into a continuous sequence without distinctions created by cutting, but still able to retain the separate identity of the two 'shots' (CU, MS).

By replacing the editing and sampled sequence of historical media with a continuous datastream only available to digital imaging, the results necessarily take on a blocky appearance without a definite resolution: in place of the sharply resolved details of optically-derived imagery, these pictures are clearly composed of pixels whose organization forms clumps of different sizes whose edges retain a consistent sharpness at whatever scale they have within the image. Unlike the superficially continuous tones of digital photo-real images that supports a realist reading, the continuity of tones between adjoined pixels is clearly only one option among many. These individual picture elements retain their distinctness even when they combine at one level of interpretation to form aggregates that combine again at another level to form something different. The shifting levels of structure in *the Dark Rift* makes these changes in recognition for the 'denotive' contents immediately obvious. There is a constant interplay between different levels of pixilation, giving the progression of imagery (moon-eye-hole) a meta-stable affect where the image is neither fully resolved nor entirely ambiguous.

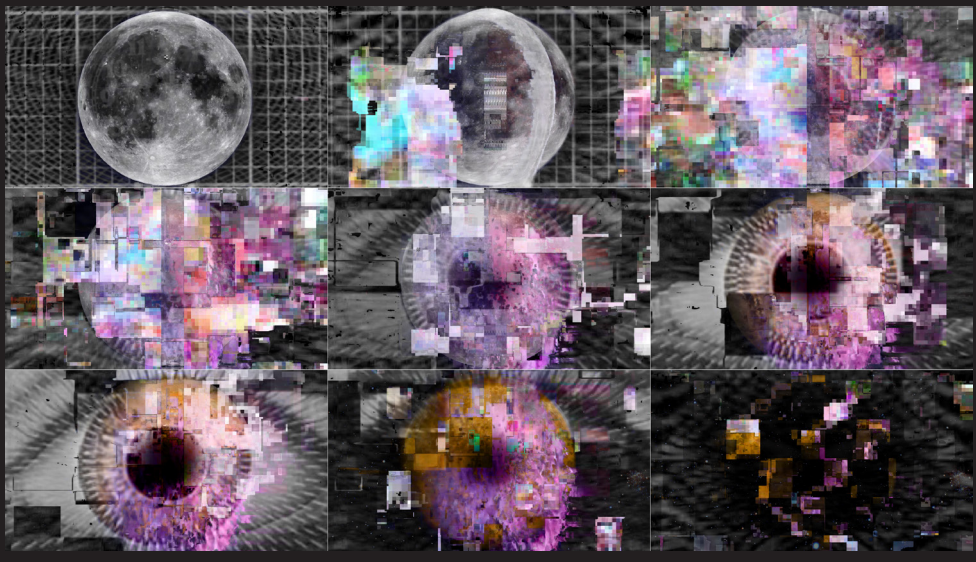
This tension between recognizable, resolved imagery and its decay into geometric patterns and abstraction is a constant part of these movies. In removing the 'image' from the compressed datastream in the video file, what remains is the data about the motion vectors and their transformation over time: in place of carefully resolved images, what appears instead is a 'echo' of the data that has been erased. There are suggestions of what the 'original' imagery was, but without fine details. This elision makes the cognitive element of audience recognitions in understanding

and identifying the imagery more obvious: to organize the fragmentary collection of pixels and image fragments into a coherent, recognizable subject is an emergent understanding of the displaced parts present in any particular frame; the complete subject is in motion, its recognition scattered across several frames rather than contained as an immanent photograph that arrests motion when viewed as a still. Instead, no single frame contains a singular image of photographic stillness: each "frame" is composed from multiple conflicting phases of the motion, given them the character of 'summarized movement' even when seen individually as stills. Even though these 'frames' are a product of the immanent rendering of the digital file (in removing the image data, there is no longer a 'frame' to display) my reworking of their 'imageless qualities' results in multiple fragmentary 'frames' being displayed at the same time.

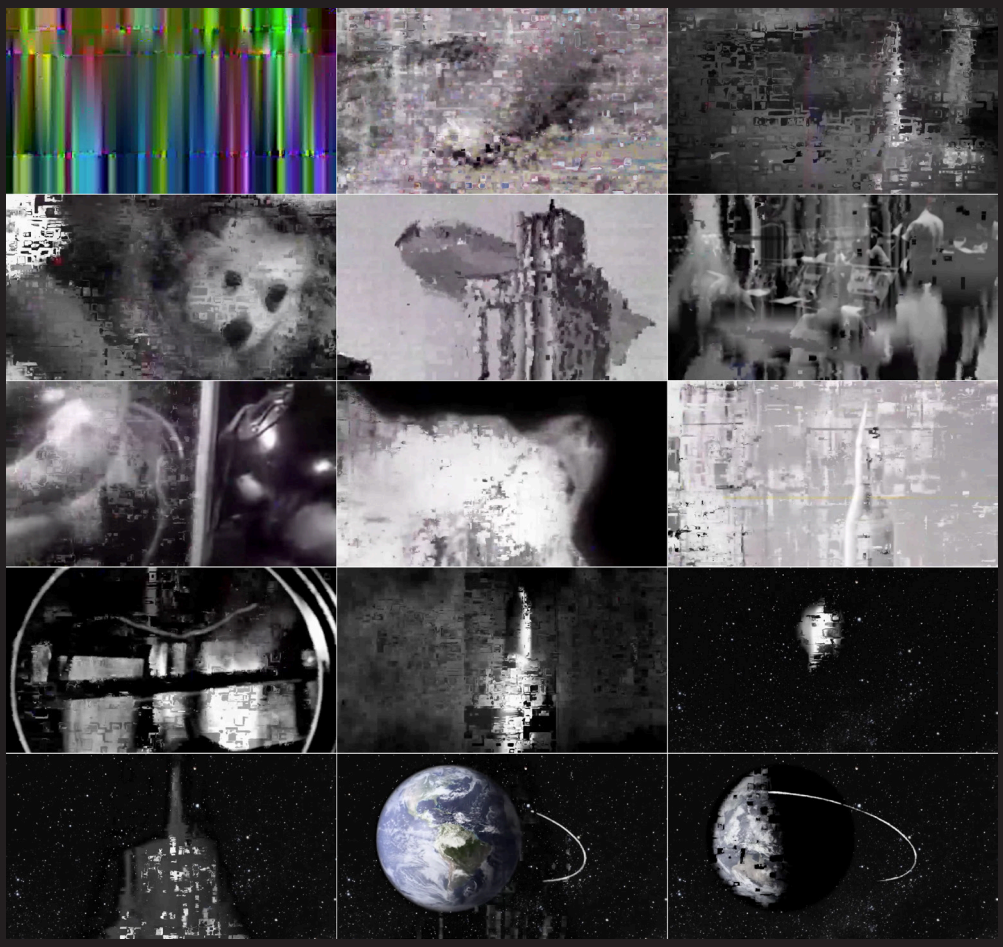
This approach to digital technology produces an explicit critique of the realist assumptions built-up around motion pictures generally. They reveal the fallacy of photographic index and the dispositive of cinema that assumes a direct, proximate ontological link between what appears on screen and some material action in the physical world: in being transformed into data, these analogue connections are replaced by the sample and its algorithmic approximation. What looks indexical to a human viewer is an artifice created by a technology designed and constructed to simulate the analogue realm of earlier motion pictures, but in replacing its material link to physical phenomena with the digital sample, the apparently indexical link becomes instead an explicit contingency. This separation allows the kinds of transformation appearing in my movies: they are *postcinematic* critiques of the realism in digital technology as an ontological fallacy. These differences between analogue and digital are not simply commonplaces; they reveal how the instrumentality of computer technology is of an entirely different order and technique than that of analogue technology which always carries a material trace of the phenomenal source as the continuity of what appears in the work. In breaking this material connection, the digital substitutes a new and different type of interpretation for it, one that is mechanical and descriptive – semiotic – and so allows for a separations of elements that cannot be divided in actual physical experience: the separation of the imagery from its movement.

In breaking these elemental units of motion pictures apart, the digital enables alternative types of engagement that can become critical. The emergent recognition that the imagery is a fluid series of mathematical and algorithmic transformations, whatever realism those pictures may have becomes instead only one potential choice. Even though the construct remains within the dynamic range of naturalism: stylization that defines the realist image, this framework itself becomes a contingency – it demonstrates itself as an imposed, encultured constraint – acting to reveal the artifice of its own presentation. These processes emerge directly out of the experiential encounter – the identification of imagery, audio-visual synchronization, and the elaborations of paranarrative in movies such as *Going Somewhere* – offer a metastability that arises from the differences between digital and analogue motion picture technologies as they modulate human engagement and perception.

Stills from *The Kodak Moment* (2013), Michael Betancourt; Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Stills from *the Dark Rift* (2014), Michael Betancourt; Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Stills from *The Dogs of Space* (2015), Michael Betancourt; Artists Rights Society (ARS)

Stills from *Going Somewhere* (2016–2017), Michael Betancourt; Artists Rights Society (ARS)

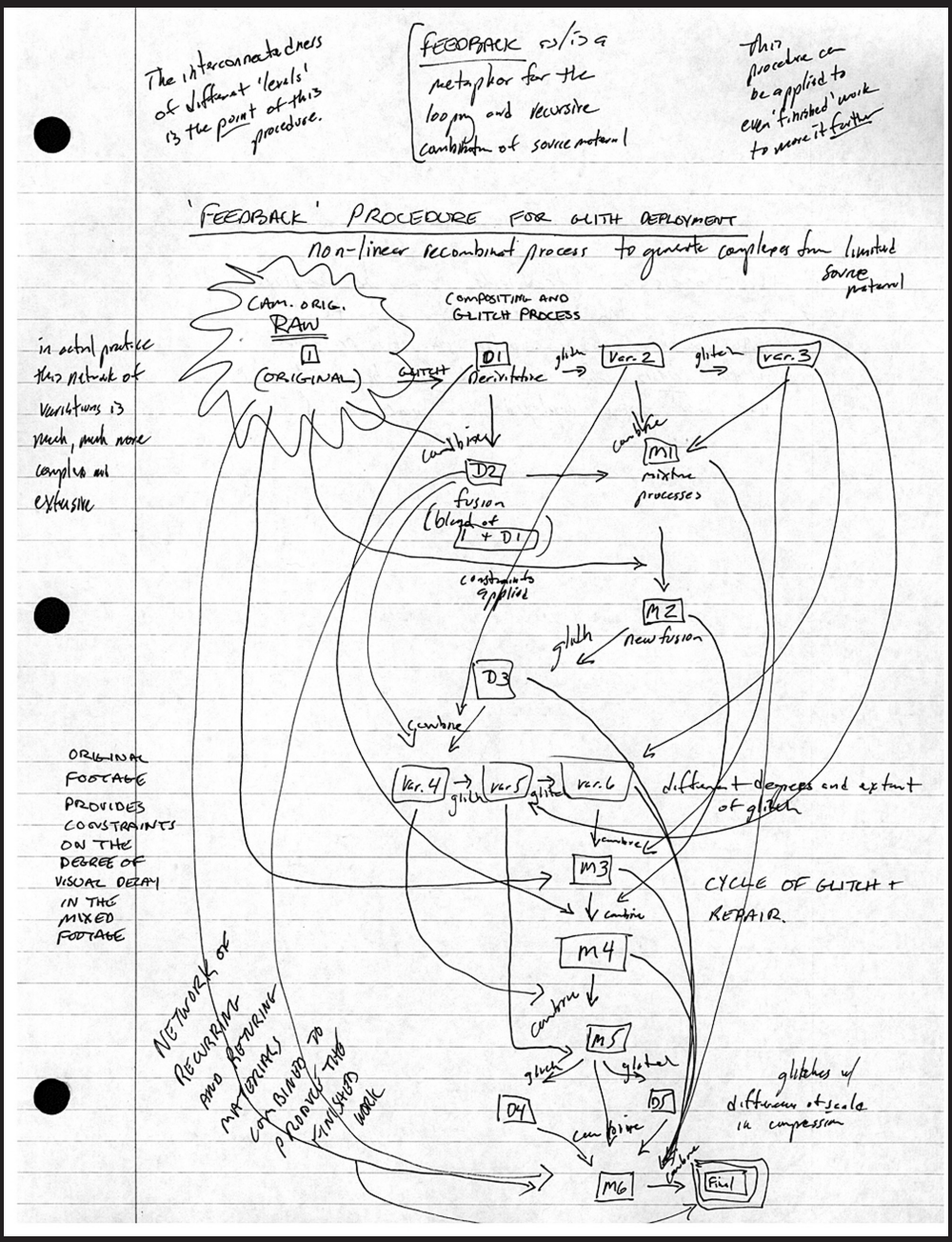


Diagram of compositing and recombination process.