

Projection

vanishing and becoming

Sean Cubitt

Refresh! First International Conference on the Histories of Media Art,
Science and Technology,
Banff New Media Institute, Banff, Canada, 30 September - 1 October 2005

Abstract

In Pliny's account of the origins of painting, projected light is the medium traced by the maid of Corinth. In Leroi-Gourhan's account's of palaeolithic art, projection plays a key role in the definition of hands as petroglyphs. Gorky's memoir of the first film screenings in Russia speaks of 'the land of shadows'. Projection is the medium of perspective in all its forms, and of cartography. In these later, more rigorously abstract and mathematical forms, projection reveals one of its key qualities: anamorphosis. On the one hand then, projection is the most direct record that previous ages had of light ? a function it had in the art of the silhouette, for example. But at the same time, the projection of three dimensional objects like the globe onto two dimensional planes like maps meant that all projection was also distortion. The evidence of presence is always open to the anamorphic vision so integral to cinemascope and other photographic technologies. By looking at some examples of the use of projection in contemporary art, I want to contest the hegemony of the four-square, flat projection and its pretence at the cinematic, and to ask whether the field of projected light has more to offer than the emulation of the real. Is projection, after all, a kind of psychological fantasy? Or is it a quality of the visible world that enters deeply into all our metaphors but as yet only marginally into our arts?

In Pliny's story of the origins of painting, a maiden in Corinth is spending a last evening with her lover, who has to leave on a long sea journey. The lamplight throws a silhouette of his much-loved profile on the wall. She finds a charcoal stick among the embers of the fire and traces his outline on the wall. And this is how the world of art enters human life. As David Bachelor (2000) has argued, this classical authority for the preeminence of drawing helped establish the Western tradition of the preeminence of *disegno* over *colore*, the rational impulse of mimesis from

the irrational luxury and femininity of colour's rapture. Interestingly enough, the first Buddhist story of the invention of art I found in my new research has a quite different sense of the matter. When the Buddha was still alive and living in Bihar, a young man was sent to make his portrait, despite the fact that painting had yet to be invented.

when he arrived at the place where the Buddha was in meditation, our first artist realised he had a problem: he was so overwhelmed by his subject's enlightened glow that he could not look at him. But then the Buddha made a suggestion. 'We will go down to the bank of a clear and limpid pool', he said helpfully, 'And you will look at me in the reflection of the water'. They found an appropriately limpid pool, and the man happily painted the reflection (Finlay 2002: 228)

The world we see is but a reflection of a reality that escapes its reflections: this Buddhist myth of origin contrasts neatly with Pliny's tale of the origins of painting in preparing for absence. I cannot help thinking here of Bazin's argument that art has always been an attempt to cheat or at least outlive death; to secure some record of presence that would fill in for the real absence of the deceased. I imagine the maid of Corinth saying goodbye as if her lover will never return from the unutterable dangers and unknown reaches of Ocean. Both tales, it might be argued, are about absences. The Pliny version is about line as the origin of painting in projection; the Buddhist version is about reflection and concerns the whole figure, not just its outline. The Tibetan myth of origin includes colour where the Greek omits it. The Buddhist version does not distinguish line and colour. Nor does it, perhaps unexpectedly, pause as Plato did before the vanishing

reality of the reflection of a reflection. The Buddhist version nonetheless retains in common with its Greek parallel a sense that the beginning of art lies in projected light.

I like to begin lectures on the history of cinema in a darkened room with a flashlight, making hand shadows in its beam. to indicate that while the moving image technologies may be the most modern of media, they are also grounded in the most ancient. The point is made more strongly still by the 'Hands of Pechemerle' addressed by Leroi-Gourhan (1986) in his pathbreaking work in structural archeology. This right hand was outlined sometime in the upper palaeolithic by someone blowing clay or charcoal over their or a hand to leave its outline on the rock. It is hard, probably impossible to decipher what was intended by this gesture: a record of a life? A hunting signal? What is clear is the method of its making: the puffs of pigment round the hand are, I would want to say, a projection of the hand, size for size, on the rock wall.

In her work in psychoanalysis, Melanie Klein proposes the mechanism of projection as a vital step in the development of the child (for example in 'Weaning', 1988: 291). The child, she surmises, has immensely powerful; self-destructive tendencies which, were they ever to be enacted, would destroy the infant once and for all. Projection allows the child to transfer these emotions to an other or others. We use the phrase occasionally in adult life, suggesting that a colleague is projecting their paranoia onto others around them, or imagining that their insecurities motivate people who are entirely self-assured. For Klein, this ability to project inner life onto external objects is a key and distinguishing element of human development, a primary

process on a par with Freud's condensation and displacement, indeed integral to the latter.

These three senses of projection establish three types of origin: one mythical, one archeological and one psychological. As metaphor, projection has a powerful place in the ways we construct our conception of humanity, from the idea of the self and its masks that recurs throughout social and anthropological reports, to the aspirations we have to beam some word of our existence out to the furthest reaches of the galaxy. Klein's proposal for a psychoanalysis of childhood and the hands of Pechemerle share an implicit thinking of the body as light source. There is something charming, naïve even, about these inferences. More recent work on the concept of projection has been more resolutely critical in its production of a sense that projection is necessarily and forever an ideological action.

The critique might be taken back as far as Plato's simile of the cave in *The Republic* (Part 7, §7; 1955: 278-86). Older still of course is the second commandment of the Decalogue, which forbids in very definite terms the making of images:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Plato's simile rests on the premise that the projection which the captives watch is illusionistic. They fall for it as reality because it resembles reality, even though they may not know reality too well. The problem is not the reflection or the projection but the illusion: that the scene on the wall of the cave might be mistaken for reality. The simile of course is an analog for a more contentious argument, that the phenomena we all sense are merely reflections - projection - of a higher reality which exceeds them as much as our world exceeds its shadows on the wall.

The night after Maxim Gorky attended the first film screenings in Russia, he wrote

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows.

If only you knew how strange it was to be there. It is a world without sound without colour. Everything there - the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air - is dipped in monotonous grey. Grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces and the leaves of the trees are ashen grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre . . . Noiselessly the ashen-grey foliage of the trees sways in the wind, and the grey silhouettes of the people, as though condemned to eternal silence and cruelly punished by being deprived of all the colours of life, glide

noiselessly along the grey ground (in Leyda : 407)

This vision of the cinema as the realm of those who have passed over Lethe, realm of the ancient dead, hums in harmony with Plato's account of the cave. And somewhere too it seems to echo the iconoclasts of the orthodox church who smashed every sacred picture in brutal obedience to the Second Commandment. The realm of the dead is the realm of absence, and therefore the realm of the line, silent,

colourless. Gorky's land of shadows reveals the fear of death that lies behind Pliny's story of Butades' daughter making the silhouette on the wall ahead of the loss of her lover. The realm of shadows also equates to Plato's cave in that it is the colourless, odorless, flavourless simulacrum of the world stripped of what most makes it real, of sensuous materiality for the 19th century writer, of ideal abstraction for the ancient Greek. Thirdly, the realm of shadows responds to Jean Baudrillard's three phases of the icon, which first 'masks and denatures a profound reality', then reveals the awful truth that 'it masks the absence of a profound reality' and finally crumbles under the discovery that 'it has no relation to any reality whatsoever' (Baudrillard 1994: 6). The avenue opened by anchoring our beliefs about imaging in general and projection in particular in the duty to represent cannot but lead us towards this nihilism. At such a juncture, subject disappears along with object, since they are mutually constitutive. There is no self to generate a world, no world to determine a self. The final truth of the realm of shadows is that representing leads not only to the loss of object but to the loss of the self.

From the delineation of the maid of Corinth to Baudrillard's disappearance is a long but unavoidable trip. The privilege granted to line in Pliny's tale is the beginning of a task of abstraction which is of course why the line became so central to the emergent rationalism of the Renaissance, and why it maintained that ascendancy at least into the 19th century, and perhaps as late as minimalism and conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. Form is the visual analogue of the physical sciences in that it extrapolates from the world the mathematical expressions which appear to function as its underpinnings. beneath the

world of phenomena, we believed, there lay a deeper, truer and more real reality of physical laws expressible as formulae or as the essential form. Everything else, but especially colour and the proximal senses of touch, taste and scent were epiphenomenal. It was not then sight as such which was feared so much as the temptations of sight to enter into dialogue with the phenomenality, the material textures of the world.

And so it happened that the one set of theoretical accounts that have addressed the idea of projection with any degree of rigour and precision sought to understand in its origins in perspective the establishment of the groundwork of ideology. Building on Panofsky's (1925/1991) essay on *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, apparatus theory in France and later in the UK and the US proposed that the dual vanishing points within the image and without it, at the place where the viewer stands to receive and decipher the illusion of three-dimensionality, is a machine for the production of subjection. Thus Simon Penny, (1994) the roboticist, could launch his remarkable attack on VR as 'completion of the enlightenment project', because it employed Cartesian coordinate space to generate an immersive experience of perspective. In rigorous materialist critiques grounded on the most meticulous art-historical scholarship, the machinery of projection stood accused of being the ideological instrument of oppression regardless of what material was shown.

Artists working in projection began to unpack the machineries they worked with. Brakhage disassembled the camera, seeking a pristine vision untrammelled by habit. Structural-materialist filmmakers like Gidal and Le Grice emptied the scene of depth, refused narrative, despised

depiction. Early video makers intervened in broadcasting to upset the transparency of the receiver. In fact it was largely video that began to remake the possibilities of moving images, around the time that Baudrillard was first impacting on understandings of televisual culture.

The first distinction came from the realisation that the video monitor is a light source rather than a reflecting surface. In David Hall's *The Rite Envisaged II*, a bank of monitors is stacked facing a wall, so that only a corona of light escapes, while on the back, facing the audience, is a reconstructed vertical-scan Baird televisor image of the moon. The possibilities of broadcasting began to appear as complex and rich resources rather than an enemy predestined to destruction. For Hall too the sense began to emerge that projection had a number of new qualities when we deal with broadcast and video. Firstly, the unique locus of projection is no longer the cinema, a special, quasi-social space, governed by ritual, where the crowd is addressed as individual. In domestic media, the 'projector' is still central, but the screens on which it beams its images are scattered across cities and nations. And with the beginnings of satellite transmission and earth-orbit telemetry, and especially the live broadcasts of the Apollo mission in 1969, it slowly became apparent that human beings were not the only ones to be engaged in projecting images. As the EROS from the Hubble Space Station have made abundantly clear, the universe is just as busy projecting light (and radio and other spectra) as we are, and has been doing it for a long time.

It is in this turn to broadcast and to the first inklings of what might be meant by 'network media' that we need to turn to the second great governing visual regime of modernity,

the map. As everybody knows, a two dimensional map has to make compromises in order to present a three-dimensional world. The familiar Mercator projection stands accused of emphasising the Northern latitudes at the expense of the equatorial; the Peters' projection pushes in the opposite direction. The upside-down map plays on orientation (the word originally denoted East's position at the top of the map in honour of the Holy Land); the surrealist map is a forerunner of semantic mapping, where for example population is used to govern the space occupied by a country; the Pacific-centred map adjusts for the North Atlantic bias of Mercator; the hemispheric map suggests how powerfully ideological issues can play out - since the Cold war ended, you hardly ever see hemispheric maps; and the square map emphasises the vulnerable zones of the poles. Many, many others are possible. These map projections are indicative of a key concern I want to voice here about the nature of projection.

Let's first consider a few options. The majority of video artworks presented currently in biennale and major galleries are projected four-square onto either white walls or occasionally silvered screens. The artists involved talk of a relationship of some sort with cinema. It is a bitter shame that so few of them have come across the rich history of projection as a medium for video over the last two decades. My first schematic derives from a People's Show performance in about 1994 in Manchester, where two discrete images were projected onto a corrugated screen. Depending on your position, you could see one, or the other, or a striped rendition of both. My second is a crude rendition of the technology employed by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas as part of an installation at the Tate Liverpool in the early 1990s. The image was itself distorted across the wall,

as well as being intense and crystal clear closest to the projector and diffuse, fading to nothing at its furthest reach. In the 1970s Chris Welsby of the London Filmmakers' Coop projected one of his films vertically onto a pool of water. And a number of exterior and interior installations are using the powerful illumination of new generation data projectors to project onto scrims, playing with translucence as a performative element of projection. I touch only the surface here: Oursler's projection's onto dummies, for example, are widely known, as are Simon Biggs' projections onto ceilings and Mona Hatoum's onto floors.

The variables here are the screen itself, its materials, shape and reflectance; the projector, its illumination, and its position relative to the screen; the atmosphere through which the light passes (with the end of smoking in cinemas, audiences are far less fascinated by the beam of light cutting through the air); and any intervening reflective, refractive or filtering devices placed between the projector and the surface it projects onto. My first, and perhaps most important comment is that we are at the very beginning of understanding how projection might work. If as I believe, it is a hugely significant metaphor in the ways we understand our relationships with the world and with each other, then these formal permutations are potentially a great road towards making new ways of seeing. By analogy with the changing conventions of map-making, we have not yet made the move away from Mercator. We certainly haven't made the leap towards non-Euclidean geometries which digital animation and data projection combined make thinkable and possible as tools for remaking projection.

All this before we consider multiple screens and interactivity.

There is another lesson we can glean from the new potentialities of data projection. The first of these is implicit in Hall's discovery of the network, brought to fruition in works like Eduardo Kac's network piece in which webcams supplied enough light to keep a plant alive in a darkened gallery in Rio de Janeiro. This concerns the nature of virtual images. The term refers to the image created at a point in an optical system where the rays of light cross over one another. Traditionally, as I mentioned before, these have been understood as vanishing points. Their function has been likened to the absence of light that allows the illusion of movement, when the shutter falls and the 'entre-image' flicks through the projector under the mask of darkness. The vanishing point is such an absence. This chimes once again with the Plinian maid of Corinth who, as Stoichita points out in his remarkable *History of the Shadow*, (1997) delineates not her lover but his absence. It is as if the whole history of western art has been a long process of mummification, an elaborate sepulchre over the bones of the dead which keeps their memories alive, but hides the brute fact that they are no longer there. This, in effect, is the simpler truth behind Baudrillard's nihilistic vision: it is not God or the World that has vanished, but the dead who we sought so hard to replicate and so to keep alive. It is perhaps time enough for us to face up to our mortality. The subjection proposed by Panofskyan apparatus theory is premised on the real absence of the object represented, but also, as we saw, on the real absence of the subject which otherwise is supposed (pre-supposed) to be its material support in the world. The absence of the subject is as profound a consequence as the disappearance of the object in projection. Subjection, in short, is the grand illusion.

There is no subject, because the subject traced in projection is already dead.

In 20th century philosophy, however, that facing up to mortality has taken on an entirely fetishised role, most of all in the writings of Martin Heidegger, for whom the central fact of Dasein, of human being, was the being toward death. Surely, we all die, thank God. To make death the centre of life is, however, something of a dialectical dead-end. Instead of such 'fatal theory' Hannah Arendt proposed a concept of natality - the principle that

the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought (Arendt 1958: 9)

It is this thought, which seems so strongly to chime with the concept of messianic time in Benjamin, that inspires the thought that in the process of projection, we might be dealing with becoming, not vanishing. Vanishing points articulate the grounds of all representation in the abstraction of form from phenomenality and thence the risk that, in the absence of the represented, which is the very condition of representation, there can only be the stitching of ideological fripperies over the brute reality of the void. Instead, let's consider the possibility of projection as the typical manner in which all entities, human, animal, organic and inorganic, radiate their signatures across space and time. Our projection technologies then do not have to be

limited to the endlessly failing argument that they give an accurate account of the world, or a more accurate one than the neighbouring technology. Instead, they can participate in generating worlds, and specifically in the production of meaning as the articulation of points of becoming with one another. Remaking projection practices is going to be one of the most fascinating elements of the development of new media in the 21st century, because it opens itself up not to absence but to the perpetual becoming of a world which is increasingly future.

There is a last observation to make. When George Pal set about figuring the War of the Worlds, his Martians came equipped with one of the more impressive ray guns of the 1950s. In those early days of television, as Jeffrey Sconce's history of haunted media reminds us, the technologies of broadcasting came ready to hand as metaphors for paranormal and extraterrestrial anxieties. The projector as projectile is a variant on this theme, and suggests in the oblique manner proper to popular media a deep understanding of the nature of mediation. Every missile is a missive, and every act of war and violence a clumsy, defeated but unmissable effort at communication, even though its message is simply 'surrender or die' or even just 'Die'. The emergence of wireless technologies over the last few years suggests to me a further step. We may indeed be moving towards a world of ubiquitous surveillance, in which every citizen is equipped and ready to inform on his neighbour. But then, privacy was only ever a privilege of the wealthy few over a brief century and a half in a remote peninsula at the Western edge of the Asiatic continent. Wireless technology seems unlikely to assimilate all our toys into a single device, but if it could assimilate the data projector in place of its tiny screen? What price then a world of

ubiquitous communication, a world whose presence to itself would not be evaporated but redoubled? A raygun future?

REFERENCES

- Batchelor, David (2000), Chromophobia, Reaktion, London.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1994a), Simulacra and Simulation, trans Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Finlay, Victoria (2002), Colour, Sceptre, London.
- Klein, Melanie (1988b), Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963, Virago, London.
- Leroi-Gurhan, André (1986b), 'The Hands of Gargas: Towards a General Study', trans Annette Michaelson, October, Summer, 18-34..
- Leyda, Jay (1973), Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film, George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Penny, Simon (1994), 'Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project' in Bender, Gretchen and Timothy Druckrey (eds) (1994), Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology, Bay Press, Seattle, pp 231-248.
- Plato (1955), The Republic, trans H.D.P. Lee, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Stoichita, Victor I (1997), A Short History of the Shadow, Reaktion Books, London.