

Christian Ziegler

66movingimages - Interaction in Filmic Space

„Expanded Cinema isn't a movie at all; life-like, it's a process of becoming.“

Gene Youngblood (1970)¹⁾

443

In fall 2002, I presented the interactive installation 66movingimages, a non-linear road movie, at ZKM (Center for Art and Media), Karlsruhe in the frame of the FUTURE CINEMA exhibition.

The Myth of Route 66 Route 66, also known as 'The Mother Road' and 'The Main Street of America', signifies breaking out and hoping for a glory-ridden future: 'Go West!' Once a route to the west for immigrants, today it is a cult destination for adventurers. The landscape's appeal strangely links it with a myth based largely on the road as a symbol for a vision of American tradition. The route runs west from Chicago to Los Angeles, is 2,448 miles long and traverses eight states and three time zones. Driving the Route in the opposite direction is historically and mythically 'wrong', the 'right' direction is from east to west, from the beginning to the end.

One Film, Two Channels I documented my motorbike trip along Route 66 with a camera attached to the handlebars. At every stop, I conducted interviews and filmed the environment and landscape in detail. My concept has really encompassed two films: channel 1 shows 'stills' which I took in motion throughout the trip (and subsequently morphed), while channel 2 documents the stops - in 66 scenes. Motionless pictures on channel 1 show the landscape whizzing past while driving, while flows of moving images

444

on channel 2 show stops. The two channels explore these interesting antagonisms. My approach to channel 1 also incorporates the observation that the faster you move through a landscape, the more blurred it becomes, until you have the impression that a 'tube of pictures' is spinning past you, seen from constantly changing vantage points. Everything is in motion. Close up (in the margins of the channel 1 pictures) the transformation is actually faster than in the distance (the center of the pictures). The physical phenomenon of spatial displacement - a forward-pushing body displacing and marginalizing the mass it passes - is metaphor as picture. Alongside the speed of travel, the uneven qualities of the road also leave traces of movement in the still pictures. I make the horizon 'fly' by linking the stills taken while driving by means of spatial metamorphoses (morphs). The road itself starts to move.

Interactive Road Movie In 66movingimages, I have installed my journey in the exhibition as an interactive road movie. Thanks to a linear navigator, the road from Chicago to Los Angeles becomes an over-arching spatial interface. A motorized screen, mounted on an 11-meter long rack, can be controlled by you the viewer. You see different spatial and temporal images on the monitor depending on whether it is in motion or stopped. Both kinds of images derive from a filmic map. When the monitor is moving, the film redisplayes the spatial image metamorphoses on channel 1. When it is static, you see the scenic/documentary takes from channel 2. You can also finely navigate right down to the single-image level of the film. Here, 'moving images' become images which you move. Memories of the trip can be called up in whatever order you like and connected with the pictures and associations that you form in your own mind. The dissolution of the linear nature of a time-space sequence reflects something of the incompleteness of your recall.

Progressive Dichotomies The interviews and corresponding detailed shots circle around the road's history and the people who live there. I met people who have spent their whole lives on Route 66 and witnessed how, over the decades, the road has become more lonely and derelict: how it has turned from a main artery into a cult destination. I also encountered an unemployed person who walked from Texas to New Mexico and a motel owner who was unaware of the historic significance of his building. I experienced how personal fates were linked to the history of the road, but also heard stories of life in the various regions around the road. The progressive dichotomy between east and west was also a central experience: how it was that upon reaching the west coast, you had really reached a final destination.²⁾

Linear Navigator - Real Motion in Virtual Space 66moving is a filmic documentation about a journey on Route 66. The linear navigator's interface uses a moving monitor to bring filmic space into real space, showing moving images in relation to you, the physically moving viewer.³⁾ If you want to see the film, you need to move. The experience of travelling is an act of leaving traces on an unknown state and mostly in a foreign realm. You face a similar situation in front of the museum installation: if you want to see the film, you need to 'enact' the story, having to move the monitor on its tracks. Like me, the creator of the installation, you need to decide when to move and when to stand still to see and enjoy a scenic event. You also reveal yourself in front of other museum visitors, making yourself part of a performative situation. Film, visual arts and performing arts are merging.

Associations Orient Non-Linearity Interactivity means non-linearity, fragmentation and an active viewer (in motion). In travel documentaries, you expect the film to start at the beginning of the trip and finish at the end. Any treatment of time and space normally needs a reference to this

446

expected behaviour. However, if you have a map which the viewer knows, there is no need to cater to these pre-expectations. Therefore, I have used Route 66, which most people have certain associations with. Some people will think of motorcycle riders on empty roads; others will think of historic events like the 'Dust Bowl', when many midwestern farmers had to leave their dry farmland in the 1930s for California. So others will recall that Route 66 was the first direct connecting road between Chicago and Los Angeles. If you can manage not to lose orientation on this map of associations and expectations, you can start anywhere and even travel backwards, because it is your interest that drives the story. You will not necessarily start where I began my trip, in Chicago. You will rather begin at, or go to, places that interest you personally. You define a route and time-span for travelling Route 66 rather than seeing the film from beginning to end. The next person will continue your trip where you left off – like a relay. While navigating to the left or right, he will discover new places of interest, connect and edit. Each viewer creates a different reading of my own journey on Route 66.

Channel 1: Travelling = Transformation Travelling on Route 66: the channel 1 images move according to the viewer's speed of motion. On the screen you see an animation of landscape transformations, designated as 'morphs'. These morphs are based on a consistent structure which I saw looking out west while driving my motorcycle. Two lines connected the horizon line to both sides of the road, creating a geometry like a cross. This cross can be achieved by constructing central perspectives in which parallel street edges merge into a far distant point. The cross is slightly different in each still picture taken every 50 miles. By morphing these stills, I transformed physical motion of a vehicle in space into pictorial motion of a landscape surrounding the viewer. Physical motion is perceptual and forces perspectival change.

The installation contains a long row of these still pictures. You the viewer can navigate in any direction through this landscape of morphed pictures. Playing channel 1 forwards, you travel east to west, while reversing the animation takes you in the other direction towards Chicago. The morphings are a motif of physical distortion through velocity. Objects in the periphery, more proximate to the viewer, change faster than objects seen in the distance. The representation of a moving object in rectangular 'cartesian' space changes to a 'polar' world surrounding a subject's point of view. As in medieval paintings, in which the painter's estimation of or interest in an object determines the size of its representation, in 66movingimages landscapes change according to one's degree of attention. 447

Imagination connects places and morphs/merges them into 'impossible' places. Even where these places look 'real' or historically reconstructed, there is still an ongoing uncertainty about the real experience of your journey. I took still images and morphed/animated them into a kind of memory path of Route 66, a dreamlike sequence of moving from place to place. Of course, none of the recorded images can actually show or represent the photographers 'real' experience of travelling. But moving with a physical interface from one place to another at least emphasizes the travel experience as a real physical event. Cinema provides an immersive experience but neglects the physical relations of the viewer to the film.

Channel 2: Scenes = Experiencing Whenever you the viewer stop the moving monitor, the trip down Route 66 switches to channel 2, showing one filmic event in one place. Every move to another place forces another cut. You are editing a non-linear story. If you do not move, you put yourself back into the more passive position required to watch what has happened at a specific place in the story. In 66movingimages,

your decisions to move or not to move are acts of transformation and participation. You steer the story like a vehicle.

448 During all movement, which gives the experience of travelling, there is also time for meeting people, enjoying a dinner, or possibly discovering stories alongside the road. Just as in 'real life', you personally design your own travelling experience. One possible way of reading the film can be never to stop on Route 66. If you do this, the road constantly changes shape in animated channel 1, the landscapes fly by, and you may reach your destination without meeting anybody. But if you decide to travel slowly, or to rest several times, there are a lot of scene changes on channel 2. These scene changes happen when the monitor is NOT moving. After watching these scenes, you might want to move on and start walking to other places using the interface, switching more frequently between channels.

Viewers of 66movingimages relate to the subjects shown in the film in many ways. These relationships are mediated by the following dichotomies:

- 1) between the travelling object in a static environment and the moving subject in action, surrounded by landscapes in transformation;
- 2) between watching a gaze and enacting an enactment of a story (discovery of places), a change in the viewer's perspective;
- 3) between the viewer's physical 'driving' interface and filmic space;
- 4) between the creator and the user, an interactive dialogue; and
- 5) between the active user and passive viewers, who together create a performative situation.

Speed and the Angle of Perception While driving the vehicle down the road, I took still images (1fph [frame per hour] or approximately

every 50 miles). Channel 2: when I stopped along the route, the videocamera recorded in video mode (30fps [frames per second]). Still images of Channel 1: If you move fast, the surrounding landscape freezes to a mere still image of the scenery: there is no motion around your own fast-moving vehicle. You perceive moving peripheral motifs and frontal long-distance motifs very differently. The faster the route disappears near you, the more aware you are of the places you have not yet reached. I decided to express this distorted view by morphing/animating the photographs into elastic landscape transformations. Using 'flying' horizons and moving streets, I have created a kind of reverse-angle perception of physical movement: moving images of physical movement in a physically moving image. 449

Expanded Cinema Expanded Cinema events of the 1960s and 1970s brought performative and immersive aspects into film. Works by Jeffrey Shaw and Tjebbe van Tijn, 'Life Performances', used multiple projectors and inflatables, and provided space for viewers to touch and carry screens. Peter Weibel and Valie Export established new cinematic situations, using the viewer's body to connect projector and screens, and sometimes attacking the viewer physically to force them into active roles. "The event of projecting a film became theatrical and supported the viewer's active role (in Brecht's sense) in abolishing the contradictory characters of the image and the physical matter... the development of the digital media questions the idea of a media as a material."⁴¹

Now that artists have explored film as canvas and developed performative qualities in cinematic space, interactivity can help develop this aspect further.

"The computer has now been inserted between projector and projection, and takes away the control over the timeframe from the film medium. The space surrounding the spectator converts from space for participating to space of

interacting, while the spectator is becoming a constructor, a performer and an observer of the work."... "Creative living starts," according to film critic and theoretician Gene Youngblood writing in 1970, "when the narration of traditional film is replaced by a cinematographic space of possibilities – when the activists present in the respective moment shape reality."⁵⁾

450

Working in the tradition of 'expanded cinema' I try to merge film with visual arts, sculpture, and also with new forms of interactive digital art and VR. Expanding the cinematic space using interaction and physical navigation adds principles of performance art to film. Every viewer watching, interacting and exploring the film is also enacting a story of 66movingimages: a digital memory theater where borders between the subject of the film, 'real world' experiences, watching and enacting a story are blurred.

Notes

¹⁾ Youngblood, Gene. 1970. Expanded Cinema. New York, NY : EP Dutton & Co. Inc..

²⁾ cf. Zbikowski, Dörte. 2002. " 66movingimages." In Future Cinema - The cinematic imaginary after film, eds. Jeffrey Shaw und Peter Weibel. Cambridge, MA: ZKM / The MIT Press.

³⁾ Pre - Future Cinema in ZKM Karlsruhe in 2002, a prototype was presented at transmediale festival in Berlin and at the Neumarkt Theater in Zurich in 2000. The installation looked more like a dual TV monitor system. A TV remote control was connected to the computer and a laser disk player. this player gave direct access to film sequences on a second monitor. I choose a couch potato system of a TV remote control interface to encourage the viewer to 'zap' into places of interest. I changed the interface for Future Cinema exhibition because of two reasons:
1. A TV remote control is not an easy to use interface. I expected the viewer to instantly start 'zapping' . Instead the viewers needed advice to use the control, because there is a different expectation using this device in a museum situation. This caused big delays in accessing the installation for most users.
2. In 2002 I found an interface, which was a perfect physical interface to my linear trip on Route 66.
The 'Linear Navigator', from Jeffrey Shaw was first presented as 'net art browser' in the exhibition 'net condition' at ZKM Karlsruhe in 1999. To browse

the Internet physically, a user moved a monitor on rails to URLs printed on the wall. Using this interface for 66movingimages, I was finally able to map a film onto real physical places.

- ⁴⁾ Le Grice, Malcom. 1998. „Art in the realm of hydra-media.“ In „Film & computer - digital media visions.“ Frankfurt/Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum (exhibition catalogue)
- ⁵⁾ Annika Blunck „Towards meaningful spaces“ in New screen media, cinema/art/narrative, British Film Institute Publishing 2002

451

About the author

Since 1993, media artist, designer and director Christian Ziegler has worked at ZKM Karlsruhe. From 1993 to 1999, he has been designing and programming award-winning CD-ROMs, DVDs and interactive museum installations. As „Artist in residence“ at ZKM Karlsruhe from 2001 to 2004, he has produced several interactive works for film, theater, dance and performance; his work has been shown in France, Japan, India, and Germany. He gives workshops and teaches internationally for the Goethe Institute and other institutions.

66movingimages was recorded on a motorcycle journey from Chicago to Los Angeles in summer 1998, after a period of teaching at UMBC (University of Maryland Baltimore County), USA.

<http://www.movingimages.de>