

Can't You Make It Bigger? Part 2

Digita online

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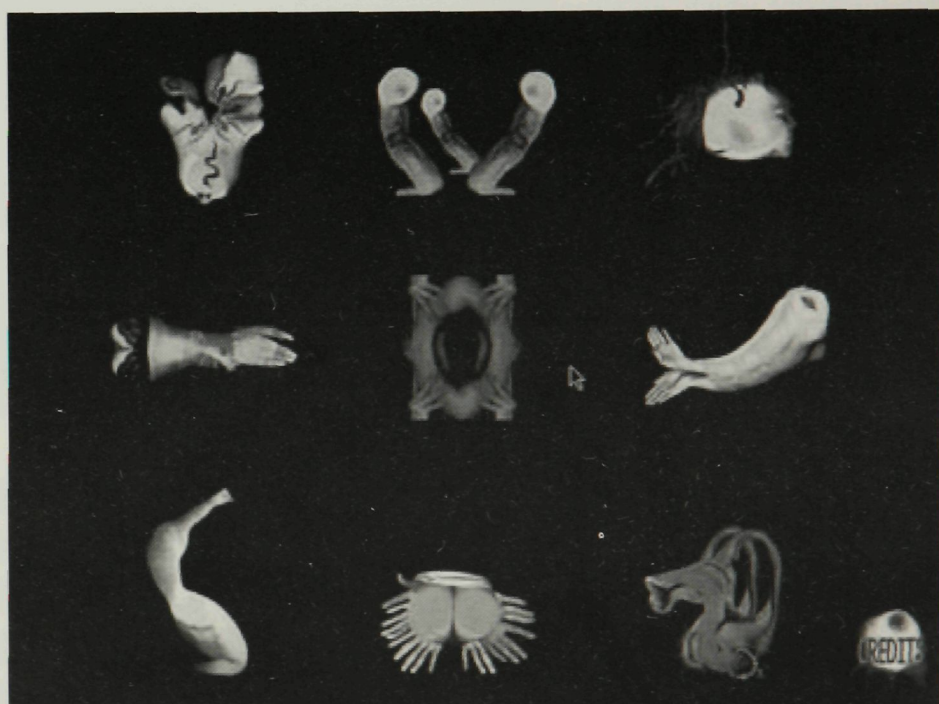
Digita online was (and still is) a collection of resources which aimed to examine ways in which moving image technology was being used on the Internet. It consisted of a general collection of Quicktime, AVI and MPEG movies, a serialised web movie titled *Beyond*, an extensive listing of sites relating to moving image technology on the web and links to what we chose to call 'internet verite' – the use of live camera to document events at a set location. The eclectic nature of *Digita* online reflected the multifarious uses being made of the moving image, particularly in WWW pages, or rather screens.

Perhaps because it was a Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) event, there seemed to be a desire among many of the visitors to *Digita* to see the various components (including the exhibited CD-Roms) in cinematic terms. Hence, the most overheard comment or question from visitors to *Digita@lower town hall* was, 'Can't you make it bigger?' The films invariably screened in frames 160 pixels wide by 120 pixels high, a size dwarfed even by the small screens of the desktop computers. Compared to Cinemascope, this is indeed ridiculously small. And I guess it could lead one to ask, what is the relevance of these technologies to the cinema goer of the '90s? What are the connections between the new digital domain and more traditional media such as film?

Georges Méliès' film *The Vanishing Lady* (*La Dame Fantôme*) one of the films exhibited in *Digita* (not submitted, I should add, by the filmmaker), seems to hold the answer. In *The Vanishing Lady*, Méliès plays with temporality through the use of simple

editing to create the illusion of the vanishing lady of the title.¹ In a move David Copperfield would be proud of, and with the swish of a blade over celluloid, Méliès helped to contribute

appropriate metaphor for the ethereal nature of communications technologies like film and the internet. And it was toward the inventive and experimental which *Digita* attempted to turn the



to a revolution in filmmaking which has helped to bring us to the cinema we know and recognise today. No longer content to use the camera as a fixed eye on a theatrical performance, Méliès took the technology of film and tried to make it less like theatre and photography and more like itself. That is, rather than seeing the film camera as a mere recorder of whatever was placed before it – the mechanical eye – he made a conceptual leap. By shifting in an instant from one temporal zone to another, he could create the illusion of disappearance. The film camera became not merely a tool for reproducing reality but a tool for creating the illusion of reality. Méliès was imbued with the spirit of invention, with spirit being an altogether appro-

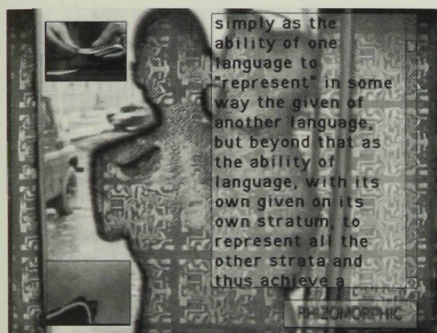
priate metaphor for the ethereal nature of communications technologies like film and the internet. And it was toward the inventive and experimental which *Digita* attempted to turn the

gaze of the silent, cinematically devoted patrons of MIFF. One of the best examples of the kind of inventiveness which *Digita* online sought to honour came in the form of Zoe Beloff's *Beyond*. *Beyond* is a Quicktime serial. Each week a new movie is posted on the *Beyond* website². *Beyond*, in Beloff's words,

operates in a playful spirit of philosophical inquiry [and] explores the paradoxes of technology, desire and the paranormal posed since the birth of mechanical reproduction; the phonograph severing the voice from the body, photography capturing the soul and cinema resurrecting the dead. Monsters cre-

ated by the marriage of Freud and Edison. There was an almost magical element in the way people saw these developments which *Beyond* brings to light as we enter this strange new digital realm.

In *Beyond* Zoe Beloff's alter-ego goes on a journey in time and space recording her impressions. The movies are made 'live' without digital manipulation by rephotographing projected super 8 film and text with a



computer-based QuickCam. Through serialisation, the film is made accessible over the internet because each episode takes a much shorter time to download than the complete work, given the slowness of modem connections. Serialisation also takes account of how people actually use the net. Internet navigation is a nomadic experience and while net travellers tend not to stay very long in one place, they do seem to revisit places where they know something is going on. The entire construction of *Beyond* shows some savvy in terms of what the web is about beyond the hype of the superhighway. As well as recognising that the web is an audio-visual space, *Beyond* takes account of the very real limitations of networks and hardware which face net users.

The limitations of access speed and download time are central to the way in which material can be constructed and disseminated over the net. The best works in *Digita* acknowledge these limitations and work within the actual parameters of the net. Too often, the kind of work heralded as best practice on the net fails to take account of the user toiling away at the end of a 14,000bps connection. They work fine on a superfast cable modem or ISDN connection but they drive the rest of us crazy. As in most art practice, the most interesting and innovative work is that which overcomes limitations by lateral manoeuvring, by rethinking the boundaries. Many

of the works in *Digita* attempt this.

Films like Dirk de Bruyn's *Garden and Stars* and John Mount's *Genetic Movies* use Quicktime's looping device to create the illusion of movement while keeping the file sizes relatively small. Most of the John Mount films are around 600K and could be downloaded in less than 10 minutes. The screen size also helps to reduce file size. Most of the films, as mentioned above, operate within screens of 160 x 120 pixels, some are even smaller. Similarly, *Digita*'s internet verite sites, like *The Amazing Fishcam* and *Tabatha's Day at Work*, use internet technologies like QuickCam to chronicle scenes from everyday life for distribution over networks. They are inventive in the sense that they rethink the possibilities of content to fit with the mode of delivery. Again, file sizes, screen size and resolution are kept to a minimum. They are not Spielberg. But they highlight and play on the global intimacy which the net makes possible and their very lack of profundity comments on the banality which telecommunications seems to engender.

The point is that while all of the above 'films' may not be able to compete with films made for cinema in terms of kinematics, they deal with the medium of the internet on its own terms. Which brings me back to Méliès and the question of making it bigger. The reason, I think, many people respond to actual digital works with a degree of disappointment is that their expectations of the digital domain far exceed its ability to deliver the goods. Despite the fact that most people have only ever been briefly 'online', we live in an age characterised by cyberphilia. Writers such as Nicholas Negroponte proclaim that we are living through a digital revolution, a marvellous world of internet shopping, telecommuting and telecommuning and that soon there'll be no need for us to ever leave home. This from a man who admits that he gets other people to read his email for him! But he is not alone. The belief in a 'brave new world' brought about by global networking can be found everywhere from academic theorists writing about hypertext³ to the journalists writing for daily newspaper supplements like the "Computer Age" in Melbourne's *The Age*. It's no wonder then that when confronted

with the actualities of the net most people are disillusioned (in the sense that the illusion is made visible).

When I show films by Méliès to my undergraduate media students, they seem to respond in the same way until what they're seeing is in some way contextualised. When it's pointed out to them that film did not, in Méliès' time, have an obvious aesthetic or function, that these had to be invented, they begin to appreciate the work as an important precursor to the modern cinema they recognise and enjoy. The films in *Digita* can hopefully be seen in the same way if they are contextualised appropriately.

The context I would provide for *Digita* as an event is a scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. In the scene, Mina Murray stumbles across a tent-show in which the new cinematic devices like the zoetrope are on exhibition. The patrons stand around looking at the devices by turns bedazzled and bored. The scene invokes a time when cinema was both wildly lauded as a revolution and viewed in actuality as mildly diverting. *Digita* demonstrates that if we are undergoing a 'digital revolution' then we've barely begun the journey and that there is plenty to be learned about where we are through an examination of the histories and prehistories of what we now consider traditional media. Digital media need to be positioned along an historical continuum in order for us to better understand where we *really* are in this new datasphere and the association with early cinema, like the films of Méliès, helps us to see digital media with new eyes. To reiterate the nomadic metaphor, the net is like a desert. At first glance it appears like a wasteland, it's not until you get up close that you appreciate the microcosmic beauty of what you find there. Maybe if we traverse the terrain more slowly and appreciate it for what it is rather than what it's not, we'll discover that bigger is not necessarily better.

¹ In the film, Méliès covers a seated woman with a cloth. The woman vanishes when he pulls the cloak away.

² The address for *Beyond* is <http://www.users.interport.net/~zoe/>

³ See, for example, G. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992