

The boundaries of machinic image

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Discussing the work of Marcello Mercado entails discussing the history of audiovisual creation in Latin America. The scope of his artistic oeuvre implies considering the processes that convulse the relations between screen/image/viewer, pleasure/consumption, diegesis/identification, which Mercado respects, even though he transgresses them. Mercado's videos cross several boundaries of hypothetical speculation concerning machinic image. The illusion of reality and motion achieved through camera recording is displaced by Mercado's technological poetics in his account of experimentation processes using image.

We remember the first videos by Mercado, through which we became acquainted with his work. *The Torment Zone* (1992) and *Las nubes* (1991) already showed signs of diversity in a working system based on still image. The engravings and drawings in the iconographic series of notes, newspapers, religious prints, and X-rays were processed through electronic effects, in real time, using a Sony V 5000 camera, with which an initial graphic depiction of the frame was created. The reformulation of symbols, the plastic manipulation of image was carried out using analogical postproduction equipment as much as the camera itself.

The equipment available in the early 1990s could only withstand a certain amount of layers and recordings, as image quality deteriorated rapidly. In Mercado, this limitation gave birth to an editing aesthetic, spatial and vertical, that resulted in the proposal of a complex frame. *The Torment Zone* was made using the old, traditional 3/4-inch video format, the U-matic. Visually aggressive, it presented the transfiguration of that which we see and hear. Maximum originality had been achieved by means of the process of estrangement, on the road from figurative to disfigurative, through resorting to the haptic vision; an abstraction that converted itself into the acute reading of a perverse Argentina, a feat achieved by but a few audiovisual works in the fatidic 1990s.

The Warm Place (1998) marked the beginning of Mercado's work using a PC, in a private sphere, no longer resorting to a postproduction studio. M.M. became the operator who works alone on his own machine for long periods of time. At that time, certain complex commands in image manipulation took huge amounts of time in order to perform the calculations required for the composition, the so-called rendering. *The Warm Place* is an intense, visceral document that carried on with his quest based on pictorial hybridism in the electronic realm, albeit through mathematical/digital processes of manipulation.

In his work with analogical video, Mercado had already surpassed the boundaries of a technology devised for other corporate and artistic purposes. The disruption of the figurative aspect was based on the absence of typical scenes with characters within the frame, and on not resorting to moving images captured by the camera. The processing of archival footage, graphic drawings, and the combination of superimposed images shatter the conventions of literal association between sound and image.

Thus, *The Warm Place* hinted at another point of inflexion in Mercado's oeuvre, namely the creative combination of video and multimedia, which exacerbates the frame's composition structure, avoiding the transition, by cutting, between images. Nevertheless, we are always operating in two dimensions, within the frame metamorphosed by various software programs, which create a very broad variety of **covers** in the horizontal and vertical axes.

These processes may be interpreted as a metadiscourse on the use of certain hardware and software, which becomes a basic element for Mercado from this moment onwards. The artistic manipulation of such devices sets parameters for the expressive processes of images that convert any realistic dynamic optical image, be it recorded by a camera or archival, into its “deanalogized” form. These trajectories across the body, death, history, desire, and insanity are built up over the course of a long work in progress that breaks the linearity of habitual space-time relations.

These transitions question the notions of cutting, editing, and montage, thus subverting the commandments of classic audiovisual. In that way, more complex relations between the parties are proposed, as they transcend the frame and scene as units of meaning. This system of vertical image composition functions as a montage within the frame, creating a space comprised of various images resulting from algorithmic manipulation. It is by means of this endless manipulation that the work’s final form is defined. A temporary formality, because, to Mercado, audiovisual numeric operations are never over with, they are steps in his lengthy works in progress.

The old concept of editing is reconverted into a process that has no end. We are facing a new concept of *mise-en-scène* that breaks away from the notion of original work and master. The parameter of field depth, which had its genesis in a camera recording, is also modified through a process of artificial re-composition of the plans, based on their combination into layers, and the disruption of an analogical optical perspective. Despite its two-dimensional appearance, *The Warm Place* is a work in relief resulting from the vertical composition aesthetic described above. Mercado appropriates himself, phagocytizes, and transforms the uses of machines. At first, it was the video machine; now it is the PC. Let us remind that *The Warm Place* won the 12th International Electronic Art Festival Videobrasil, another important milestone in his artistic career.

Das Kapital (2004) arose out of processing by high-level digital machines and highly sophisticated software. This is another instance of technology, featuring equipment that processes complex image commands in real time. The reference to the work of Marx introduces a different form based on the association between the computer, text simulation processes, and the mathematical purity of a discourse about the world, political economy, the unconscious, and the epiphany of image.

A significant share of *Das Kapital*'s seventeen minutes is comprised of computer-generated images. It is a series of pure abstraction, combining text, formulas, and photographs, towards the end, of utter rawness, without any type of manipulation. There are pictures of dead bodies, bodies lacerated by violent action; the realism of death as the inertia of time past. Mercado uses the perennial photographic image as witness to the living, the motionless bodies culminate with an entire series of nonfigurative numeric images. This counterpoint is the effect of the work’s structure, in its mix of supports combining photochemical and numeric aspects, as a statement on what an artist can do by operating with technologies and linking together various visual devices.

With *The Chemical and Physical Perception in the Eye of the Cat, in the Moment of the Cut* (2005), awarded at the 16th Videobrasil, we begin to wrap up this brief overview of Marcello Mercado's work. A video that features the emergence of electronic arts as a viable path for developing new experimentations, ones that appropriate themselves of the chemical and biological industry. Using three- and two-dimensional animation, stemming from the transposition of the pictorial practice into the computer, Mercado emulates biological decomposition processes by disrupting the index and operating the numeric image to the maximum.

The transformation of codes translated by the computer into synthetic images points to a new audiovisual language, revealing, by default, the two streams that constitute the essence of image: the analogy with what is real and the illusion of motion. In these works, the unsaid, such as text, graphics, and sound, is combined with the unrepresented, as a referential resulting from the manipulation of the electronic/digital device. This denying of traces of reality in the audiovisual, photochemical, electronic, and digital is among the outstanding features of Mercado, and it is present in the whole of his work.

The exception is represented by the image of the box of aspirins and the picture of the dead body with a bullet hole to its temple. Two analogies of brain malfunction. The careful, handicraft construction of multiple graphic fragments which, as time passes, constitute the parts of a whole, in a process of escaping the figurative that comes to being in the construction of the work and which, based on abstract aspects, creates a deep departure from the forms contained in representation systems. Mercado's oeuvre bears witness to certain extremes in discourse and expression that video has been able to arrive at. It is in this function of art that one forces the audiovisual device into doing that which is not part of its program or representation system, i.e., an action that conquers new spaces of creative independence, a value that has lost its worth in contemporary audiovisual.

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