The Media Zoo-trope

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Introduction

In this project proposal, I will discuss a multi-faceted media art project, which I call the Media Zoo-trope. At the core of this project is a connection between research into media archaeology and mass media culture. Media archaeology suggests the recurring theme of the “image loop,” beginning with media devices of the 1800s such as the zoetrope and phenakistoscope and persisting today in digital media, in video games, the web browser, and the computer desktop. Mass media, and in particular television, leads us towards another type of loop, what Beverle Houston calls “the repetitive reformulation of desire.” We are drawn in by the repetitive nature of the television medium and the images it feeds us, at a place where scandal and spectacle meet. This project aims to bring these two lines of thought—the image loop apparatus and the mass media flood of images—together in the shape of an interactive installation.

Media archaeology and the image loop

In his essay “Generation Flash,” Lev Manovich proposes that while nineteenth century media devices relied on loops, the image sequences “kept getting longer and longer—eventually turning into a feature narrative.” He believes that the opposite trajectory is occurring now, with the DJ culture-inspired artists’ sampling of short segments from film and TV and re-arranging into “video installations.” He writes: “The loop thus becomes the new default method to ‘critique’ media culture, replacing a still photograph of post-modern critique of the 1980s.” I am skeptical of Manovich’s generalization of the trend towards longer sequences now suddenly reversing itself with the emergence of digital technology since careful media archaeological research often shows that the same themes appear repeatedly throughout history. The “image loop” may not have disappeared from media culture in the 1930s only to reappear in the 1990s. We see the image loop used in fact throughout the history of character animation, from Muybridge studies of the body in motion to cell-animated cartoons to video arcade game characters.

The image loop is visible in the current digital media landscape, often in unexpected places. The loop is often used as an animation strategy in cases where memory or bandwidth do not allow for long sequences or streaming video. We see this on the web with animated gif animations and on cell phones, handheld devices, and computer desktops with animated icons. Looping also becomes a default setting for Flash movie playback and a prominent option in the Quicktime Player. Looping playback also becomes the default setting for editors and computer animators when they are developing video content. Manovich suggests in
The Language of New Media that the loop may be a “new narrative form appropriate for the computer age” because it parallels the use of loops in computer control structures.

If the “new media loop” makes sense, given the technological state-of-the-art, the emergence of the “old media loop” in the 1800s may also be related to the science and technology of the day. According to Jonathan Crary, the pre-cinematic devices of the nineteenth century originated concurrently with scientific discoveries in afterimages and persistence of vision. Media apparatuses such as the phenakistiscope and thaumatrope represented a result of scientific research as well as a popular entertainment device—the “philosophical toy.” The discoveries in visual perception during this time period also coincided with the advent of railway trains and other high-speed machinery: “Like the study of afterimages, new experiences of speed and machine movement disclosed an increasing divergence between appearances and their external causes” (Crary, 112). What is important for Crary is how these discoveries and media devices change the relationship between spectator and the object of observation. That the zoetrope among other devices is based on an image loop may have an impact on this relationship. The observer sets the system into motion, but the fact that the system is clearly a loop, a closed system, prevents the spectator from entry into the narrative. The viewer cannot pretend the motion is concurrent or being propelled or motivated by his actions. At the same time, however, the repetitive nature of the loop may provide another point of entry because of its lulling quality. The viewer may enter a trance-like state due to the hypnotic quality of the zoetrope animation. This “trance” could be seen as a precursor to the state of the viewer today in our mass media culture.

**Looping images in mass media**

In the media-driven climate, we as image consumers are inundated with visual stimulation. Television news channels such as CNN supply an endless stream of new or new-ish images, trying to stretch a small amount of video feed into a twenty-four hour program each day. The same image sequences resound in our minds, reinforced by repeat viewings. Beverle Houston suggests that the “promise of endless flow” of television can be compared to “maternal plenitude,” perhaps providing the nourishment of a mother’s breast. For Houston, an essential aspect of the television medium is that it is repeatedly interrupted for the spectator, and that the fragmentation necessitated by market influences (ie commercial advertising) causes a strain on the imaginary promise of endless flow. Television’s unique promise is also linked with the “possibility of liveness, not only in the sense of simultaneity, but more especially in the sense of coextensiveness” (Houston, 184). We see this especially today, with the prevalence of round-the-clock news service channels as well as other
dedicated cable networks, along with the emergence of reality tv as a dominating genre of programming. Many of these programs are built on the premise that the viewer at home watches action onscreen “as it happens”; some of the shows rely on audience feedback—through telephone, text messaging, or Internet—to determine what happens next.

The cyclical nature of celebrity culture and the accelerating speed of news cycles means the media are constantly looking for the new images of spectacle to draw in viewers. When a truly newsworthy breaking story hits, television is the medium most of the public depend on to keep us up-to-date (up-to-moment?) with the latest information about what is happening. The criteria for what qualifies as “news” on image-driven television programming often is at a visual, surface level, as tv news producers look for an image or action which is shocking and scandalous—an image from which we cannot look away. These sequences in turn get repeated, rebroadcast, and recycled, often until well past the saturation point, when viewers merely stop looking or start searching for the next new thing. Whether this is the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, amateur video footage of the Rodney King beating, live video streams of OJ Simpson’s white Bronco shot from news helicopter, or the 9/11 footage of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center, these are images we cannot “look away” from because they have been embedded into our memories and the cultural psyche as a whole.

Images of spectacle, scandal, and violence become embedded within the cultural psyche. Other examples include:
The structure of the mass media culture we live in points to the issue of control since the airwaves, cable, and print media are dominated by just a few multi-national corporations: “Image companies are turning into instruments of power, specifically media giants like AOL Time-Warner, Bertelsmann, GE/NBC, Vivendi, Disney” (Klein, 490). Norman Klein suggests that the primary allegiance for “honest' media corporations” lies with “shareholders more than with the news itself.” The explicit and implicit linkages among corporate interests, the White House, and the media become apparent when, for example, the news networks repeatedly broadcast footage of US soldiers’ dismantling a Saddam Hussein statue in Iraq. The power of the media to affect the culture is evidenced when a split second of a “wardrobe malfunction” during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show has repercussions from legislation in Congress to impose higher indecency fines for broadcasters to a chain effect leading Clear Channel to drop Howard Stern’s show from radio stations they own. We live in an image-obsessed, image-driven society when video/audio footage of a Howard Dean scream at a political rally, re-echoed and remixed on tv and the Internet over the course of weeks, creates a measurable decrease in his polling numbers.

The image loop in media culture may also serve another role: to comfort viewers. In the case of shocking images, the repeated viewing may result in a desensitization, a familiarity, if not a true understanding. We are often comfortable with what we know best, which may be why television shows live on in syndication. We are familiar with the characters and situations, and we may even be watching to see our favorite episodes again. We might lose our way in an image world where everything is new every time.

The Zoetrope and media art

The zoetrope (also, “zootrope”) was invented in 1834 by English mathematician William George Horner, who called it the Daedalon (“wheel of the Devil”). It received its present-day name in 1867 when William Lincoln patented the device in the US, giving it a name from the Greek, roughly “wheel of life.” Images, at first hand-drawn and eventually replaced by photographs, were mounted on the inside of a cylinder. By rotating the drum and looking through vertical slits in the cylinder, viewers could see the illusion of continuous motion. While the device enjoyed popularity for years, the development of the praxinoscope in the 1877, then the advent of film around the turn of the century led to declining interest in the zoetrope. In the past few decades, however, the zoetrope has appeared again in the work of several media artists, often with technologies including strobe lights, projectors, and electric motors. Japanese media artist Toshio Iwai has developed several projects which relate to media devices of the nineteenth century such as the zoetrope.
and phenakistoscope. Iwai built, for instance, zoetropes with physical, three-dimensional, clay models within—depicting representational and abstract animated sequences—instead of flat, two-dimensional drawings.

Trained in philosophy, Gregory Barsamian uses the zoetrope as inspiration for large, motorized, and strobe-lit sculptures illustrating fanciful, dream-like animated sequences. Barsamian uses the zoetrope as a vehicle to dream imagery and the language of the unconscious mind. The work of Michigan-based artist Heidi Kumao includes repetitive gestures or motions, sometimes projected onto or through early media devices. In her work, Kumao makes use of the image loops to suggest the mechanisms of the subconscious: “By replaying certain recognizable gestures within facile settings of desire, education, and daily living, I am asking the viewer to recall or re-live moments that may not be very comfortable. By displaying both the mechanism and its corresponding behavior, I provide both hands of a metaphorical card game or two sides of a heated argument.”

**Project description: The Media Zoo-trope**

I am proposing a media art project inspired by media archaeology and mass media research. In the Media Zoo-trope, live feeds from television news networks are analyzed to find the leading image of the moment. This image sequence is reduced to a series of still frames that represent the salient images of the video clip. This sequence is then brought into a three-dimensional model of a virtual zoetrope. When a viewer approaches the display, the virtual zoetrope spins into motion, and the present moment of the media zeitgeist begins to play. The sequence must pass through many layers to reach the viewer: the cable tv broadcast channels, digitization and analysis by a computer, reduction to a few salient stills, texture mapping into a 3D environment, and the narrow slits of the virtual zoetrope model.

*The three stages of the Media Zoo-trope: live news feeds from tv news networks, a system to analyze video footage for repeating segments, and a virtual, onscreen zoetrope.*
The video analysis system looks at multiple video news streams, digitizing the video to a lower resolution and reduced frame rate. Using feature detection and pattern recognition techniques, the system identifies the most important video sequences which repeat most frequently, ignoring commercial advertisements as well as “talking head” news announcers. The system should also have some understanding of how cable news programs are structured, knowing which is the top story or recognizing when a story is breaking news and weighted these sequences accordingly. The analysis discovers which of the highest ranked sequences appear most often during a given time period, say, the last 60 minutes or previous eight hours. This in itself becomes an interesting media research project, as these results could be gathered, stored, and charted over time, giving a picture of the quickly changing media landscape.

The final component of the Media Zoo-trope involves the installation view. As a user approaches the display, the interactive system recognizes the presence of a user through pressure sensors in the floor. The 3D model of a cylinder begins to rotate, and the viewer realizes they can see a short animation loop by looking through the “slits” in the virtual model. They see an image loop snapshot representing the mass media environment at the moment of viewing. The Media Zoo-trope draws a connection between media devices of the past and our image-driven, media culture.
References


