

Abstract-o-delica

One of the most memorable sequences of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is a scene showing a sound and colourful light journey in which astronaut Dave Bowman travels to another place and time. In the moment he exits Discovery One space station in a pod to investigate the unusual alignment of a planet, its satellite moons and a large floating black monolith, he gets sucked into a tunnel enabling teleportation at cosmic distances away. Kubrick's 5-minute star gate sequence is perhaps one of the best cinematographic representations of the so-called "wormhole", a classic trope in science-fiction literature, whose trip of visual psychedelic effects and intense psychology has amazed masses of cinemagoers over decades.

At first site Stockburger's video *Abstraction* (2008) appears as the brainchild of the rainbow effects of the star gate. To be brought in the giant wormhole is not a "space gater" but 100,000 pictures found in the most comprehensive image search technology on the web: Google Image Search. Kubrick's abstract colour planes are here replaced with images outsourced from different engines by way of search by keyword approach. Reflecting upon a theme, that of "abstraction", Stockburger turns this topic of investigation into a methodological tool used to compile images tagged by internet users and following these engines' recommendations to what can denote "abstraction." Highlighting similarities and discrepancies of programmes of internet search technologies (for instance Google's ability to laser-focus on the tastes of consumers) and those in the human brain helping it to translate and recognise patterns, the visual content of *Abstraction* – whose title remains self-referential and nominal by nature – depends on pre-existing indexes of preferences expressed by millions of web users who decide for the artist what can be labelled abstract or not. And like him, while contemplating the flux of *Abstraction*, we come to realise that for many of them the notion of abstraction is representative of a compendium of references that can be reconciled into a database, an inventory of other subjects' suggestions.

It is nearly impossible to distinguish any singular image within this video's neat mechanical, objective system of organisation. They all flash in front of the viewer's eyes at light speed, spinning around pictures that don't follow specific logics of selection but arbitrary principles of association, in that they all contain non-figurative patterns and art historical references to paintings of currents in modern art such as Wassily Kandinsky's abstract works, 1950s American expressionist and colour field painting, or other movements in sculpture of Modernist lineage. Strongly preserving the plastic language of painting, *Abstraction* in fact appears to be a synaesthetic, immersive, even hypnotic experience that brings together movement, colour and noise at once. He draws on mannerist graphic effects of colour, combinations of forms and lines summoned by Clive Bell's views of the 1910s and 30s at the heyday of European modernism. At the same time 20th century artworks masters of Modernity are only vacuous quotations that repeat ad infinitum, and show the iconical impact that abstraction has had in many spheres of today's culture and society: from advertising pamphlets to Prada garments, from architectural features to IKEA furniture, from archaeological plates to election day polls, from astrologic charts to Bauhaus jewels. Stockburger is not interested in giving shape to a formal understanding of abstraction as an heroic art historical or philosophical category. In citing historical moments concerned with artifice (extending a strand of formalist concerns that were always mannered and self-conscious), hyperbolic emotionalism, the recycling of older touchstones of utopianism revisited by religious spiritual and socialist communes of the 60s, Stockburger acknowledges his distance from these fragile cultural epochs, and so do the subjects determining his image archive. While contemplating the brutally fast image flow of *Abstraction*, we come to realise that for many internet users the notion of abstraction is representative of a compendium of references: decorative patterns on ceramic dishes, Arabic carpets, underwear and stained glass windows and jewels; religious imagery (how can you symbolize the spiritual otherwise?); optical effects provoked by kaleidoscopes; graph-based diagrams of economic statistics, computer software; close-ups of medical studies. Stockburger makes no direct critique of other people's taste but his terms of inquiry are opened to the viewer solicited to reflect upon the billion possible associations to be drawn among pictures that, because of the speed they turn around, can be captured by the eye as afterimages only.

According to Lithuanian linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas, whose theories have largely contributed to the birth of semiotics as a discipline studying communication processes, the production of meaning in language derives from patterns of recognition, repetition and invention. In his views, within each context of use, signifiers (words or images) and signified

(meaning) can be socially and culturally recognised by way of translating signs articulated in deep structures (hidden agendas) and surface syntax (the way signs manifest themselves; in linguistic this happens thanks to grammar). In other words, we give meaning to the universe only by way of interpreting it, we construct it thanks to words designating images. Moreover, all signs stay in close relation among themselves through formal structures, or groups, which have great influence on who uses them. Functioning like in language, *Abstraction* attempts to map out the maximal possible results from a process of translation and denotation of word-image, the consequence of the simple action of tagging by a internet user which can open up a whole universe of definitions on the web. In resembling the functioning of digital databases, how these cross-reference and network files together according to naming, Stockburger's constant stream of abstract images is therefore an index of perspectives combined under an embedded shared understanding of the term "abstraction".

How does human perception work when there are so many subjects involved? Who decides what is to be defined "abstract"? And once all these viewpoints are unified, what is the resulting common denominator? *Abstraction* visualises the mental ability of web users to distinguish what can be learned as abstract. Its methods of inquiry resemble the founding principles established by Google search engine as a system indexing millions of web pages and estimating a site's importance, so that users can search for the information they desire by help of keywords and operators. It is a polyphony of connotations and reference systems closely interlinked that is at the core of this work, without the artist making his viewpoint predominant and at the same time making all other perspectives objective in the process of identifying what is "abstraction" as in Google's system (the pages with the most links to them from other highly relevant web pages must be the most relevant pages associated with the search). Disregarding hierarchies and registers of taste, *Abstraction* highlights a demographic, anthropological dimension connected to images, how these constituencies inform the collective psychology of millions of web users. Paradoxes, desires and obscure combinations resulting from a term whose complex definition insists on an imperceptible confrontation of the individually perceived value with the socially perceived value. "Abstraction" stands not for things we see as they are, but as *we are*, with our own cultural-specific investment of practical, aesthetic, symbolic decisions. In other words, abstraction is in the human mind, not in things themselves, it is a faculty, a set of different meanings as intended and experienced by different subjects.

Stockburger's interest in translation, whether concerned with word-image interpretation or with media (transferring from the territory of internet to that of video), seems to be indebted to the legacy of conceptual strategies by Belgian artists René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers. In particular, the methods of signification in *Abstraction* can be further explained in the light of some predominant aspects of Broodthaers's work. Focusing on how language mismatches words and images, Magritte's painting *The Betrayal of Images (This is Not a Pipe)*, 1928-1929, or Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968-72, are not mere illustrations of an object or a concept. On the contrary, they gently destabilize our mental habits of representation, elaborating didactic classifications, denying images through words, or representing familiar objects juxtaposing a name other than their conventional ones. Similarly to these, Stockburger questions whether the image "abstraction" actually represents what we think it should stand for, and to categorize the many possibilities of meaning, his video follows similar rules of database programs of search engines. However, unlike Magritte and Broodthaers, Stockburger is not interested in juxtaposing text onto an iconic image but in piling up on top of each other as many pictures as possible in order to open up a space for critical reflection for the viewer, him/herself required to make sense of the information accumulated.

Developed in the late 60s in books and sculptural installations displaying organic materials such as palm trees or stuffed animals, chairs and shelves, Broodthaers's *Théorie des Figures* juxtaposed designations to objects, and introduced what he termed "musealisation", a phenomenon understood in connection with a range of meanings that objects can have in a given society and the ideological and economic context in which art appears. The mechanisms of signification of Broodthaers's objects didn't depend on the displayed object itself (a word or image didn't refer to anything else beside itself, without any hidden meaning) but on its context of appearance, in particular that of the museum and its multiple functions and conventions. Similarly, Stockburger's systematic execution in juxtaposing found images by web consumers reflects on their provenance, their homogeneity and, to some extent, populism, how their formal relations in choice transform abstraction into a dynamic and yet delusive process of image consumption.

While watching *Abstraction* we become “gateheads,” to borrow a word from sci-fi fan clubs of the TV series *Stargate*. One of the most characterizing aspects of this video is the extreme, speeded up stream of pictures that, rigorously maintained in the original sizes, formats and resolution, draws the viewer from the centre out into another cosmos. We stare at a huge archive of pictures running at light speed, disappearing into a black background whose deepness and neutralising feeling of empty, negative space swallows them into a dark universe. The kinetic flicker of *Abstraction* results into a simultaneous convergence of the many pictures into a single inextricable one, recalling Jorge Luis Borges’ description of *The Aleph* (1949) as the artifact revealing the entire universe. The rapid image flow guarantees no single image dominates on another, illustrating instead what abstraction means for about 10,000 internet users globally. A crucial aspect of this work is that it isn’t concerned with a subjective perspective per se, we see something else than a singular image, an amalgamate instigating the viewer to examine his/her own visual perspective in browsing information. A critically-participant spectator is therefore essential for understanding *Abstraction* as its key analysis is addressed towards behavioural models of consumption over the time spent blogging, googling and making images available online. The puzzlement provoked by information displayed so quickly demands an active and alert visitor, made to question, not only in terms of social communication but also scientifically, which viewpoint to take (and asking “which one is the ‘right’ one?”). Consequently a phenomenological stance emerges: Stockburger solicits viewers to not be passive observers but become critical actors as the open-endedness of his video is structured for an audience predominantly, an effort close to that of conceptual and post-studio art practices interested in creating an apposite syntax for examining society and its systems. This underlying goal is something indicated in the early 1960s by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theories, which reclaimed an embodied type of perception of the world as what we perceive is dependent on our being at any one moment within a matrix of circumstances that determine how and what it is that we perceive. Therefore it could be argued that in this work, even though in a subtle manner, the viewer is inseparable from what s/he is watching, they become a single entity.

Requiring psychological concentration and visual immersion, *Abstraction* also shifts the viewer’s attention away from its content/subject matter to seduce him/her with a sensation of motion straining the eye, the traffic of images being so fast it induces neurons to leave impressions of afterimages on the retina by way of retaining pictures that, even after being exposed for a fragment of a second never cease disappearing in the same moment they appear. This phenomenon tricking perception belongs to a long history of deceptive art that features, among many optical illusions, *camera obscuras* and *lucidas*, anamorphoses, peep-shows, dioptrical paradoxes, magic lanterns, phantasmagorias, stroboscopic discs, chronophotographic and, last but not least, cinematographic pictures. In cinema in particular, deception plays a crucial role in the development of abstract art, vigorously reverberated in the avant-garde work of the Italian futurists, Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists. Such tradition reinforces Stockburger’s knowledge of how the philosophy of perception and consciousness fuelled a quest to produce durable images of the world, set in motion from cinema to 3-D computer games. *Kine* is the smallest unit of filmic information, created when the spectator blends two consecutive images into a third inside the brain: *Abstraction*’s persistence of movement enables us to enhance our vision to perceive the endless series of single pictures in rapid succession as a coherent, fluent film. As a counter-active effect to this, the video’s soundtrack is instead completely slowed down to become a permanent, abstract, loud noise whose main function is to provide a fluid sensation of a collection of particles in motion.

Identifying a theme whose content is by nature “unmarketable” to explore the assumptions that dictate what abstraction is and who it is for, we understand, in conclusion, that the main concern of *Abstraction* is to define the politics of representation and cultural imperialism existing within the digital domain of technology. It functions like a plug-in to a cultural system of knowledge production in which an orchestration of cohabiting images represents internet’s structural devices, how these, closely interlinked, are an influential apparatus conditioning the specific modes of reception, input and feedback generated by communities of web consumers. According to Stockburger, no single view should be elevated over another as a cultural signifier but it should be established a non-hierarchical organizational base for processing million of found images that, confronting us with all sets of codes and mechanisms, provide a context for critical negotiation among differences in taste, education, interpretation. The magical alignment of images relating to different aspects of a single theme, with the multiple, isolated perspectives of groups of online consumers, holds the

key to this work, a fusion that makes complex and contradictory generalisations around abstraction flow like harmonic vowels in language.

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