

Celluloid Film as Digital Art: Aesthetics of Translation, Information and Intermediality in the Works of Cory Arcangel

Jakub Zdebik

jzdebik@uottawa.ca

Abstract: The multidisciplinary artist Cory Arcangel questions the nature of contemporary representational strategies by exacerbating the rift between digital and celluloid images: *Untitled Translation Exercise* (2006) is Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993) overdubbed it with voices of workers from an Indian outsource firm reading the original film's script; *Colors* (2006) vertically outstretches each colour pixel constitutive of the cinematic image of a Dennis Hopper film resulting in a projection that resembles a Molinari painting; *Structural Film* (2007) is a 16 mm projection of a glitchy digital film that seems to be a “fake” avant-garde film. These three works are explored through notions of translation, information, and intermediality that shed light on the zone of indiscernibility between celluloid and digital images by suggesting a concept of the image based on varying degrees of formal and abstract arrangements. With the help of thinkers such as Benjamin, Heidegger, de Man, Massumi and Deleuze and recent theories by Kalindi Vora, Carolyn L. Kane, Irina O. Rajewski, this paper maps out the intermedial haptic zone full of redundancies, pure information, scrambled codes and nontranslations.

Keywords: digital art; information; data aesthetics; intermediation; translation; code

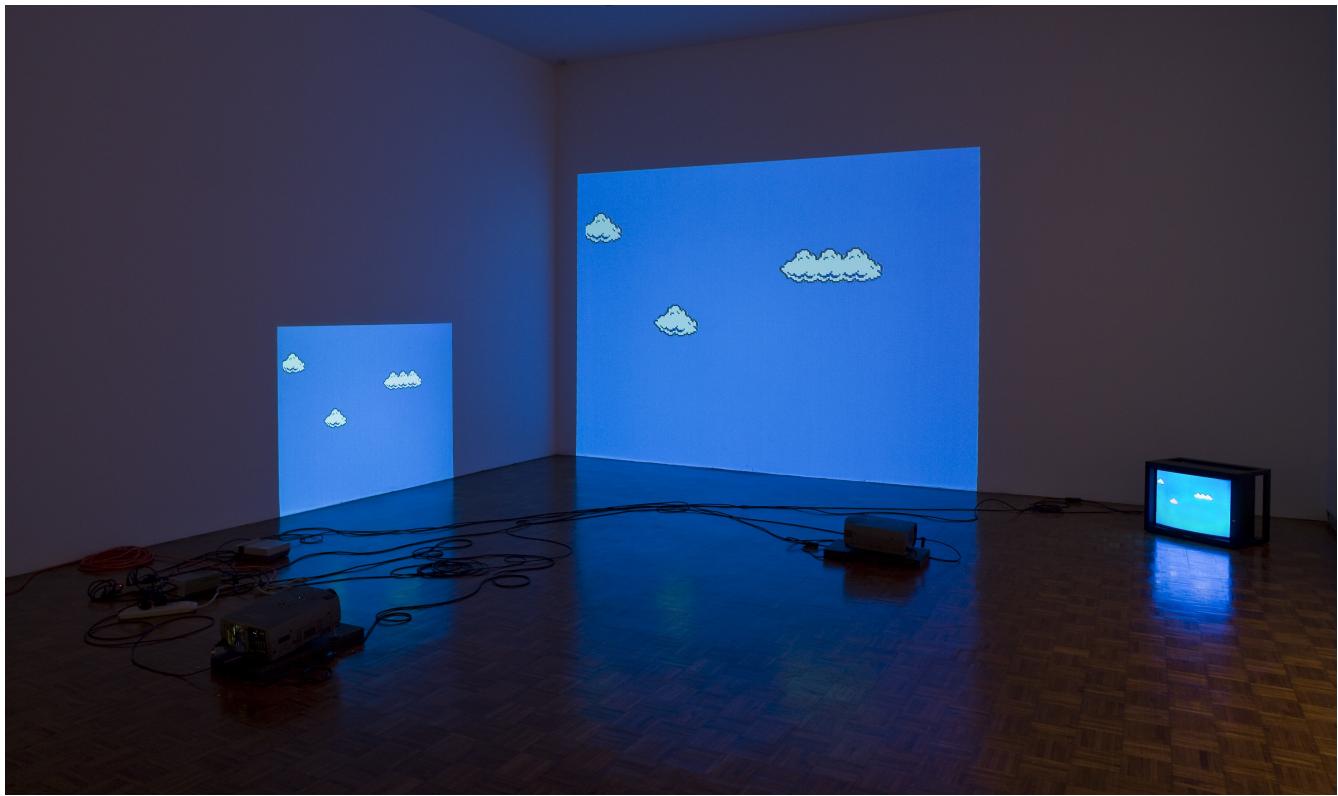


Figure 1. Cory Arcangel. *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002–. (Installation view, Synthetic, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2009.) Handmade hacked *Super Mario Brothers* cartridge and Nintendo NES video game system. Edition no. 2/5. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 2005.10.© Cory Arcangel. Courtesy of Cory Arcangel.

Cory Arcangel is a multimedia artist best known for *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) (Figure 1). Consisting of a projection of the entire *Super Mario Brothers* (1985) video game without the brothers, the mushrooms, the Koopa Troopas or the obstacles—just the distinctively pixelated white clouds serenely floating on a perfectly blue backdrop from left to right—this work is not, as one would expect, purely digital. It straddles the digital and the material: the artist has cut into a Nintendo cartridge and physically hacked the circuits to modify the game. Arcangel qualifies the term “hack” by adhering to an older definition, wherein hackers felt their way haphazardly through code rather than the newer understanding of hackers capable of erasing their traces (Birnbaum and Arcangel 2009:198). Arcangel emphasizes his connection to the materiality of the object, not just its virtual content. For instance, in *Super Mario Clouds*, the Nintendo cartridge is rather bluntly cut-into, the chip removed, and a new one refitted more or less in the place of the original. The modification also brings to light the materiality of

the cartridge, the sight of which conjures nostalgia (Birnbaum and Arcangel 2009:197). Nostalgia, in this case, doubles as a connection to a recent past and an important stylistic device for the artist. The virtual space shown on the screen—deceptively simple clouds—taps into nostalgic feelings by mapping out a relatively new type of territory: the video game space. References to landscapes—such as the scientific observations resulting in Turner's famous cloud studies, or even Steiglitz's series of photographs of clouds, entitled *Equivalents*, signaling self-referentiality in a medium focusing on its limits—are inescapable, firmly planting *Super Mario Clouds* into an art historical continuum (Krauss 1979). Arcangel's work opens up to many rich associations while simultaneously engaging pressing contemporary issues of intermediality, as well as those of place of technology in art and culture. It speaks about a technological history from the perspective of someone who has “cracked” the aesthetic “code” of the Internet and video games for a new generation whose constructed memories are of the virtual landscapes in which they dwelled for so much of their childhood (Birnbaum and Arcangel 2009:193.).

Super Mario Clouds is just part of Arcangel's extended media practice, which includes music, music videos, email-based art, drawings, kinetic sculptures, and even a novel based on other people's tweets. Recently, he has questioned the nature of the image in the digital age by emphasizing film in an attempt to exacerbate the rift between digital and celluloid images. While he sought to *bridge* the digital and the material with his Nintendo cartridge (see Burgoyne 2009), his new work seeks to *disassemble* the digital and analog. This paper explores three such “film-hacks”: *Untitled Translation Exercise* (2006), *Colors* (2006), and *Structural Film* (2007). *Untitled Translation Exercise* starts with Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and overdubs it with voices of workers at an Indian outsource firm, creating an uneasy disconnect between the portrayal of middle-class America and the perplexed tone of Indian voices. *Colors* (2006) appropriates Dennis Hopper's 1988 film of the same name, re-screening the gangland cop movie one horizontal line of color pixels, outstretched vertically down the screen, at a time. The film's figurative representations are replaced by an abstract digital image while the narrative soundtrack plays on. With *Structural Film* (2007), Arcangel projects a 16 mm film of a glitchy digital video filter to create a “fake” structural film while, in effect, offering a close study of the formalist tension between digital video and film aesthetics. These three works show the artist problematizing and intensifying the rift between the digital and the analog. I analyze Arcangel's film-hacks through the theories of translation, information, and intermediality. Rather than doing a comparative analysis of each medium's technical characteristics, I propose to explore the zone of indiscernibility between celluloid and digital images by suggesting a

concept of the image based on varying degrees of formal and abstract arrangements rather than representation. In fact, these images play on paradoxical yet productive redundancies, scrambling codes in content and form to exploit failures in order to carve out an intermedial haptic zone. In the process, I bring attention to the new types of images developed by Arcangel, reinvigorating the aforementioned concepts so as to repurpose them for a visual aesthetic theory geared towards digital art.

Untitled Translation Exercise, 2006



Figure 2. Cory Arcangel. *Untitled Translation Exercise*, 2005 © Cory Arcangel;
Courtesy the Artist and Lisson Gallery

The poetic, the unfathomable, and the mysterious can only be tapped into by a translator-poet, argues Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator." Initially the preface to a translation of Baudelaire's writings, it is now a text of high importance to the craft of translation. There is an irony in this since Benjamin's text problematizes the very notion of the possibility of translation (Ferris 2008:62). Indeed, it could almost be seen as an anti-translation tract. I use Benjamin's text to interpret Arcangel's *Untitled Translation Exercise* (Figure 2), itself, despite its title, a nontranslation. Because of its odd status as translation, Arcangel's exercise serves as a metaphor for thinking about intermedia translation or intermediality. On the surface, it seems to be a work of appropriation, but it is also a work of conceptualism with a global social component. Arcangel appropriates Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* to make modifications that seem benign, but which, in practice, actually have far reaching consequences.

Dazed and Confused follows several teenagers on the last day of school. Jocks chase cheerleaders, nerds get out of their comfort zone, virgins want to lose their defining trait. The film is a compendium of heterosexual, sexist clichés firmly associated with the myth—in the Barthean sense—of American high school with all of its underlying socio-economic white privilege. Of course, the high school kids are all struggling with potentially life-changing issues: *will I stand up to coach's authority, will I sleep with the girl I like, will I tell my father I want to be a dancer?* The problems here, even if they drive the narrative of the comedy, are nevertheless a social construction of the suburban American middle class. It is a feel-good film: everyone wins at the end by getting high, getting laid, and getting into a fist fight for the first time. And as the sun rises on a post-party landscape, these teenagers know the future is theirs for the taking: "Slow ride, take it easy," the words of Foghat, spread through the film's soundtrack.

To read Arcangel's video artwork of Linklater's movie through Benjamin's celebrated text on translation involves exposing the rift in Arcangel's translation through the notions of communication, embodiment and data in Indian call-centers. I then look at Brian Massumi's (2002) concept of affect in his treatment of voice-over. The translation—which-isn't-one will push us towards an aporia, making J. Hillis Miller' (2012) "Paul de Man at Work," in which he provides an update on de Man's famous take on Walter Benjamin, indispensable. Finally, I will use Martin Heidegger to show the role of a bad translation in aesthetics and Gilles Deleuze to stratify it—code it, as it were—for further use.



**Figure 3. Cory Arcangel. *Untitled Translation Exercise*, 2005 © Cory Arcangel;
Courtesy the Artist and Lisson Gallery**

Arcangel displays the film *Dazed and Confused* on a TV monitor (Figure 3) in a gallery space but with one modification: the film has been “dubbed back into English via an outsource firm in Bangalore” (Arcangel 2006). The film is “translated” into English after taking a detour through India. The trajectory insinuates that the original American language needs to be dubbed into English to be understood. The fact that this English has a decidedly Indian accent only serves to decode the confusion of the original. Arcangel commissioned workers at a phone answering company in India to read the script, and then dubbed the resulting recoding back onto Linklater’s original film. The accents articulated by the voice-over “actors” (more like “voice-over laborers”) sound conspicuous. The artist seemingly creates a disjunction between the English spoken by white American kids and the English spoken by Indian phone workers for a purely comic effect. The disruptive humor also emerges as a result of the fact that, whereas the original English script was spoken by the actors themselves, the dubbed English, with call-center agents’ inability to see the context of the action, is tone deaf. This effect is manufactured, on some level, by having call-center agents read a script in isolation without visual guidance from the film. But if humor was the goal of *Untitled*

Translation Exercise, the work would hardly be worth analyzing. Instead, it is quite serious: as Arcangel warns his audience at Berkeley during a talk on the subject of his corpus: “in five minutes you will not be laughing” (Arcangel n.d.). What stands out in this “translation” is the confusion, the tentativeness, the miscomprehension in the voice-over track. What becomes apparent is the rift between the low-paid Indian voice-over crew and the superficial kids and their privileged lives on screen. It seems almost cruel, in the end, to juxtapose Indian voices with those of American teenagers. Not cruel to the Indian call-center workers, but to the suburban teenagers, for whom you feel a deep embarrassment as they traipse around their unself-reflexive lives.

The incongruence between original and “translation” in the case of this art piece seems to issue from modes of communication. The work seems to problematize the global circuitry of communication rather than offering communication as a solution to problems of globalization. Communication is significant because it is indicative of higher levels of social differentiation, as Harmut Winkler explains: “Communication, above all interrelates what has been separated by the division of labor, with regard to its content, its functions, but also its geographic implications” (2010:231). Here, communication seems to suture the rift between languages on a global scale. Communication, according to Winkler, joins us together. And yet, Arcangel articulates a problematization of communication. Separations in labor division are not brought together but rather, and explicitly, make the geographic implications, to use Winkler’s words, the “real” issue behind call centers. The problem of geography was an easy solve for communication: global space has been bridged since the first telegraphic message. Yet, the problem of geography emerges quite urgently in the context of affect and biocapital, which will be discussed below. One potential solution, displayed in Arcangel’s *Untitled Translation Exercise*, is to forego meaning sought in communication in favor of intensity. Highlighting the theme of cultural rift further, Arcangel explains to his Berkeley audience that he had the call-center employees record over a 100 minutes of *Dazed and Confused* script, at the cost of \$193.¹ An audible gasp from Arcangel’s audience accentuates the discrepancy in pay scale in globalized labor conditions between Hollywood rates and those of call centers in India.

Kalindi Vora (2015), in her text “Call Center Agents: Commodified Affect and the Biocapital of Care,” explains the sociologically affective issues behind India’s customer service industry, whose manpower is made up of English-speaking college graduates. Vora explores the biopolitical deterritorialization that leads to an accumulation of surplus value capital outside India, and in particular focuses on a type of globalized alienation afflicting this relatively new source of “affective labour” (V2015:43–5). The

affective element denotes labor valued for such nontangibles as personality and emotional quality of the voice, and refers specifically here to the need for call-center agents to develop a persona—a new name, fake accent, back story—to effectively do their job. Essentially, the call-center agents are actors reading a script, but somewhere the lines get crossed and communication becomes complicated—the callers and their interlocutors are processed as data: “The customer becomes a ‘profile,’ chosen by dialing software specific to the call center industry. The software that manages this digitized interaction chooses profiles based on algorithms that determine the highest match rating between the profile and the type of call being made, whether this is sales, collections, and so on” (Vora 2015:46). On some level, from this data-based transmission, we are dealing with “specters,” in Vora’s words, composed of data forms constructed to produce affective commodities; these “ghosts” are derived from the manipulation of specific cultural knowledge with the aim of soothing agitated customers while rendering the caller, if only virtually, approachable (2015:46). Vora also mentions how the culture behind the call-center is problematized on some level within their actual society: “They are also frowned upon because the youth culture around those who work in call centers—going out to clubs and bars after work in the early morning, dating, and otherwise emulating Western culture—has negative connotations outside of young urban social groups” (2015:49). Here, they might actually have something in common with the disaffected teenagers of *Dazed and Confused* (Lisson Gallery n.d.). Arcangel’s voice-over critiques the rift occurring in a global economy and the alienation brought about through communication technology. Much like a literary chiasmus, the viewer is exposed to the interplay of inverted social structures that reveal their sameness, and that illustrate the rift within each youth’s respective space because of the global economic and communication exchange.

But the link between these two groups of young people, the call-center agents and the suburban filmic Americans, happens in a moment of transfer that relies on an exchange of an affective self through various technologies: “Affective labor and human biological materials also rely on specific technologies of extraction to be transferred to distant bodies. How value is carried and transmitted by affective commodities is an essential question for thinking about alienation as well” (Vora 2015:52–3). How this process is enacted is really interesting from the perspective of translation, embodiment (or disembodiment), and information: “The transformation of the [call-centre] agent into her data form requires the suppression of her real form and yet results in the enhancement of the real form’s life chances, because it gives her access to global flows of capital and labor demand” (Vora 2015:53). Vora strikingly demonstrates how the opposite is true: “Her non-data form can contribute only by reproducing the life of her data form”

(2015: 53). The interconnectedness between non-data and data forms comes from Vora's assessment of the slippage between biology and data; information neutrality is what is at work here, where the content matters less than the expression of information: "the biological sciences are increasingly becoming information sciences, as what are perceived as the basic units of life, DNA, are translated into binary code and managed by computerized information systems. The production of biological life as information, or data" (Vora 2015:54–5). Might this be the ultimate translation? Life as data? On some level, these disembodied voices tentatively trying to approximate the images on the screen do seem like an emergence of a new type of life based on the virtuality afforded by communication networks.²

This notion of the voice-over is important to further explore from the perspective of affect (already introduced by the nature of the labor of call-center agents). Brian Massumi (2002) constructs his definition of affect on a psychological case study where the variation is the impact of a voice-over on the overall film's effect. The voice-over is yet another name we could give the translation of Arcangel's work, since it is an English film overdubbed into English and therefore comments on the film—a bad translation. In "The Autonomy of Affect," Massumi recounts the details of a case-study where children are asked to watch three variations of a cartoon of a melting snowman: the first has no sound; the second has a factual voice over; and the third has a voice-over accentuated with emotional words. The children liked the soundless version, disliked and had trouble remembering the factual voice over version, but remembered the emotional one the best. Interestingly, the children reported that the saddest parts of the cartoons were the most pleasant to them. The children were wired so as to record their physical response: the factual cartoon (the least liked and least remembered) deepened their breathing and accelerated their heart rate the most, while their skin responded most positively to the wordless cartoon. Massumi concludes no connection can be drawn between an image's effect and its content, its qualities and intensity: "The level of intensity is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires: on it, sadness is pleasant. The level of intensity is organized according to a logic that does not admit the excluded middle. This is to say that it is not semantically or semiotically ordered . . . it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate" (2002:24).

Why is this significant in the context of a work of overdubbing? Because the success of Arcangel's work resides precisely in this gap between content and affect. By doing this translation, not only from English to English but from movie to art, Arcangel is, following Massumi's logic, displaying the affect at play. But to understand the mechanics of affect, we have to look to the duality of intensity and qualification.

Massumi explains how intensity and qualification are instantly embodied. "Intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things" (Massumi 2002:25). Qualification—or the reaction to form or content—occurs at a deeper level (heartbeat, breathing) because, as Massumi explains, it depends on consciously being aware of narration and expectation of its continuity (2002:26). Arcangel enacts this idea in his translation piece: instead of being commentary on the unself-conscious privilege displayed by American whites in the Linklater film in relation to a larger global context, the overdubbing creates a disruption in our expectations of the narrative. Consequently, the narrative of the filmic medium is disrupted. A gap emerges: What to do with this zone between two media, two versions of English, and two forms of expression?

In his "Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin asks about miscomprehension: "Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?" (2007:69). An immediate question arises: Did Arcangel really believe we did not understand Linklater's film to such a degree that we required a translation? For Benjamin a translation is not simply a work presented again in a different language. Rather, according to his theory, the original work and its translation are fundamentally different things: "This would seem to explain adequately the fact that the translation and the original have very different standing in the realm of art"; Benjamin asks why one would go through the trouble of "saying the same thing" over again (2007:69). Does *Dazed and Confused* say something completely different in its modified, yet repetitive, form as *Untitled Translation Exercise*? A bad translation, Benjamin says, simply reiterates the same message of the original, so Arcangel's word-for-word reiteration of the original should be a source of the work's failure. And *Untitled Translation Exercise* seems to be such a bad translation that, even as it actually repeats the same words as its source, the original message is lost in translation. Thus, Arcangel, by literally reiterating the same text in the same language, translates something into a new form. Arcangel presses Linklater's film, with its cliché roles and nostalgia for the 1970s, towards a commentary on the current fearfully conservative view of white Americans feeling assailed by "barbarians" who can't speak "their" language. It is a reflection on the global economy that allows the Western world to wallow in its own consumerism while being blind to the work going into the production of goods. It asks about what services one can buy with money. It is about a fundamental global inequality. Arcangel asks through his translation exercise: Do you not understand the original? No? So let me translate it for you.

Reading Paul de Man on Benjamin's notion of translation is illuminating when applied

to Arcangel's recent work. For Miller, de Man's sense of urgency is triggered by the message of the inhumanity of language he unearths below the strata of meaning in Benjamin's translation theory. Can inhumanity be also uncovered in Arcangel's light-hearted art pranks? (Birnbaum and Arcangel 2009:198). Arcangel drives at a gap dividing old and new media by wedging a distance in time (from the 1970s to now), space (between India and the United States), and levels of expression (movies and art). But does the gap in Arcangel's work open to Miller's bleak reading of translation? Miller explains how the failure of translation is the result of what is meant and how it is meant: "Far from being a matter of human intention, this incompatibility is a consequence of the inhumanity of language" (2012:79). He suggests that we should be suspicious of language in a time when we need it the most.

Why is that important now, when we have other things to worry about, from the melting of the Arctic icecap to global financial meltdown to the meltdown of the humanities? My shorthand answer is that de Man was prophetically aware of the way assumptions about "the human" and about related concepts such as pan-organicism can get us in big trouble. Paradigmatic within aesthetic ideology is the assumption that language is human and within human control, whereas language, as de Man patiently showed by way of what Benjamin is really saying, is an inhuman machine. Language is a machine that, performatively, *verspricht* (sich), falsely promises and contradicts itself at the same time. (Miller 2012, 87)

Miller's inhuman machine is an indictment of the power of communication. de Man, following Benjamin, sketches out the difference between translation and poetry. Whereas poetry does not transcribe, imitate, or paraphrase, a translation is rooted within language: "Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated" (de Man 1986:81–2). Arcangel manages to say something like the poet, paradoxically by showing the division in the relationship of language to language, or in this case English to English. The "extralinguistic," or affective, meaning comes from the disjunction or what Massumi explained as the curbing of expectations. "You can translate only an original" (de Man 1986:82). By not translating it really, Arcangel shows the clichéd nature of the paradoxically original movie, or already slippery nature of seemingly hermetic boundaries between media. And translating also brings other problems for the original. de Man draws similarities between translation and criticism or theory insofar as they are ironic gestures. The purpose behind irony in the gesture of critiquing/theorizing is the same as translating, that is, to destabilize the original. The

importance of the original is underscored because it is translated. But then, the original is foregone in the importance-bestowing translation or critique. Ironically, the theory of the object matters more than the object (de Man 1986:82). The original is not definitive, says de Man, since it needs to be translated. Translation ironically undoes its importance by playing off this very need. The irony written about by de Man is clearly visible in Arcangel's work. It is paramount to the success of the piece. Here, though, Arcangel translates ironically by not really translating; in doing so, he undoes the perceived stability of the original. By extension, he destabilizes the medium of film, whose images are transmediated, wrenched from their material origin.

To reiterate this point: according to de Man, critical philosophy, literary theory, and history—as activities—“do not resemble that from which they derive”: instead, “they disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated” (de Man 1986:84). Isn’t it what Arcangel *Untitled Translation Exercise* does exactly? Besides, wouldn’t Arcangel’s art as critical translation fall within the grouping of “activities”? Arthur Danto, after all, once defined art as art theory (1964: 572). In fact, Danto carved out this definition of art as art theory from a contemplation of the nature of the original and its imitation. de Man goes further: “They kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead” (de Man 1986:84). This tautology is the point of *Untitled Translation Exercise*. It reveals the retro corpse of middle-class America that was already its own nostalgic specter in the 1990s when the film was shot.

But translation can be even bleaker for de Man: “Translation, to the extent that it disarticulates the original, to the extent that it is pure language and is only concerned with language, gets drawn into what he calls the bottomless depth, something essentially destructive, which is in language itself” (1986:84). Who knew that translating an English film to English would be ruinous to the viewing experience. Does the voice from India calling us on the phone sound like a signal from a bottomless depth? In addition to the alienation due to communication in global markets, consider also the alienation de Man digs up from Benjamin’s translation theory. The point was already made with the alienation that occurs in the global markets through communication, but here de Man also shows how this alienation is present at different levels of language: “What the translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language, that the original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering” (de Man 1986:84). Maybe in the film we see the economic seeds eventually growing into a global crisis manifest in call-center alienation. And this is the ultimate

reveal of Arcangel's disruptive nontranslation. Like a Heidegger photograph of the masks of the dead, Linklater's film is a dead photograph or a dead era that never existed nonproblematically. *Untitled Translation Exercise* illustrates that, as Benjamin says, "[a] literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility" (Benjamin 2007:78). Arcangel's work clearly illustrates how a translation translates language and not text: he is using the same text yet making it say something else. But how do we map out this rift in language, between translation, between media?

Can translation across language or media platforms open a space, a critically considered boundary line? Can translation, to be more precise, self-reflexively, in the case of Arcangel's work, offer clues as to what happens to an image translated between media? The concept of rift (*Riss*) is important to Heidegger's theory of language and aesthetics. For Heidegger, the issue of translation is one of artistic form. How we understand art is in part based on the rift in translation between ancient Greek and Latin. Heidegger (2001), in his *Origin of the Work of Art*, names three different ways of approaching art before settling on the equipmentality: structure, aesthetics, and hylemorphism. Structure is defined by a thing and its characteristics and is based on language—in particular sentence structure and its relationship to the thing it claims to describe; aesthetics is based on sensation; and hylemorphism on form and matter. Each of these ways of approaching art is discarded by Heidegger for various inadequacies. The first is rejected on the basis of a bad translation from Greek to Latin. This rift is, according to Heidegger, responsible for "the rootlessness of western thought" (Heidegger 2001:23). He perceives the problem in the inevitability of structuring a theory of art on language. He writes, "Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed, rather, a translation of Greek experience into a different way of thinking" (2001:23). There is a detachment between words and experience, or, as it were, language-based alienation. Experience is not transmitted in the translation. And yet, it is experience, albeit in a very different form, that makes itself apparent in Arcangel's artistic repetition. It is this unfamiliarity in the differing experience that makes this translation, or nontranslation, successful in Benjamin's eyes and important for Heidegger who claims this unfamiliarity, this rift in experience, as the impetus to "think and to wonder." Benjamin also wondered about the form, or the packaging, of the element of translation: "[T]he translation must be one with the original in the form of the interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united. For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines" (Benjamin 2007:82). Benjamin is reading between the lines, probing the intra-linear; the unfathomable aspect of a successful translation is captured in the zone between the

lines, devoid of content, empty of intention.

This space of translation is picked up by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is a zone, a space in-between the lines. But the lines are material striations. Here, translation becomes a way of thinking about the movement between two systems. The strata, striated, linear horizontal platforms, demonstrate a way of codifying information that can be seen as skipping from one system according to incorporeal functions: "The temporal linearity of language expressions relates not only to a succession but to a formal synthesis of succession in which time constitutes a process of linear overcoding and engenders a phenomenon unknown on the other strata: translation, translatability." For Deleuze and Guattari, translation is a question of moving from one system of representation to another. The notion of translation is based on function, and this very spacing between two different system takes on a form. And so, we are here near to what Benjamin had in mind when he was looking for translatability between the lines and what Heidegger augmented in terms of a rift leading towards aesthetics. Deleuze and Guattari write: "This property of overcoding or superlinearity explains why, in language, not only is expression independent of function, but form of expression is independent of substance: translation is possible because the same form can pass from one substance to another" (2005:62).³ So how do we move away from this notion of translation based on content to translation based on function at the level of form? How do we continue to search for a zone between media that is, by all accounts, indiscernible? A good place to continue is in the notion of streamlining of information, or in more concrete terms, the abstraction of figurative images into geometric abstraction in Arcangel's *Colors*. The shift is between metaphorical lines illustrating codification and the organizational space of two language systems to actual, and colorful, albeit not static, lines.

Colors, 2006

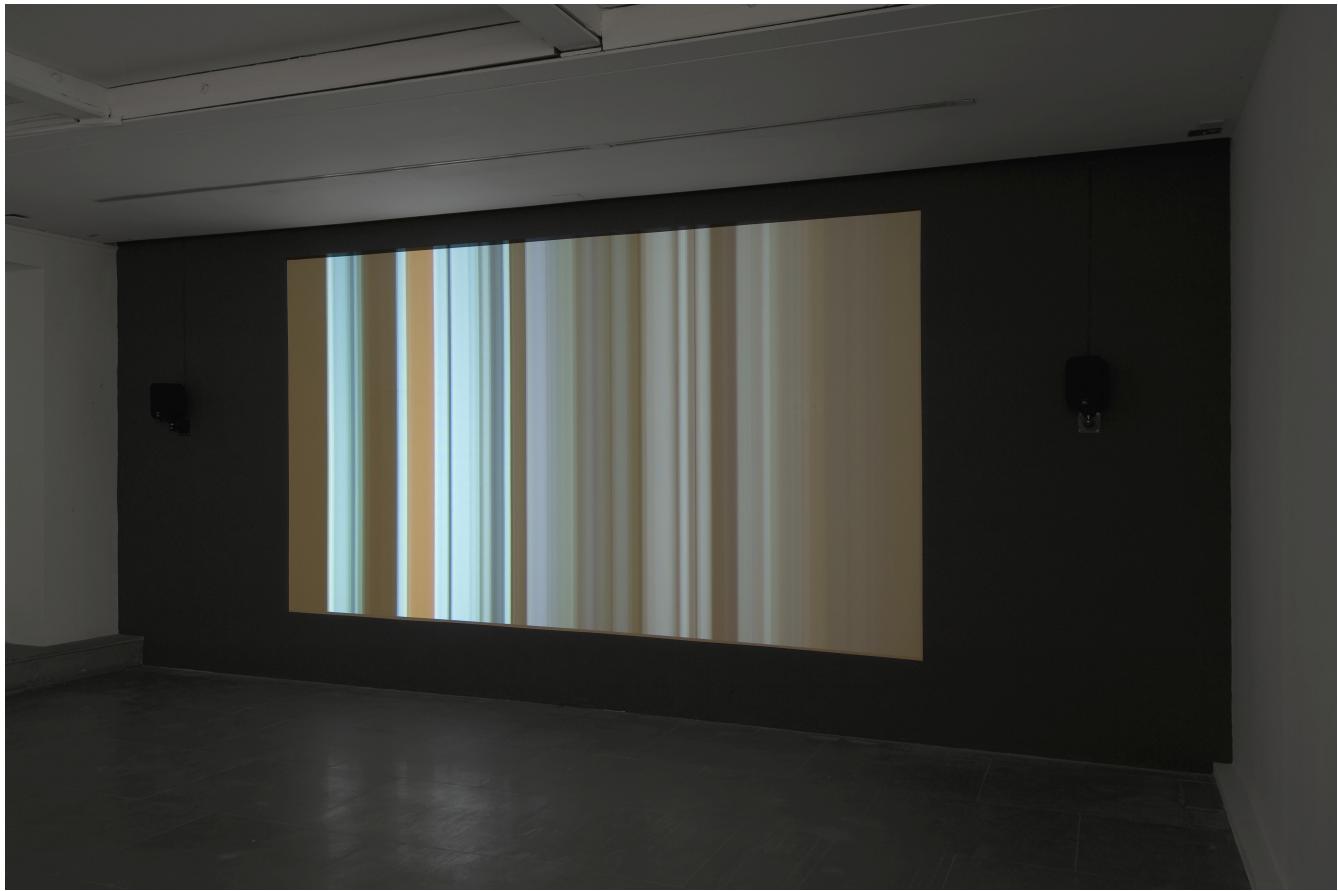


Figure 4. Cory Arcangel. *Colors*, 2006 © Cory Arcangel; Courtesy the Artist and Lisson Gallery

Colors (2006) (Figure 4) is Arcangel's appropriation of the movie *Colors* (1988) played one horizontal line of color at a time. The identical title functions here like the English-to-English nontranslation: ironic critique of form and content of the original. More precisely, the artist transforms filmed images in video form based on an algorithm he has provided for the public on his website. The source is the movie *Colors* but it is unrecognizably transformed into an *objet d'art*. The original movie is directed by Dennis Hopper. It is a police drama revolving around two cops played by Sean Penn and Robert Duvall assigned to an Los Angeles gang unit and their differing styles in dealing with two gangs: the Bloods and the Crips.

Duvall is experienced, steady and cool; Penn is hot-headed, violent and impatient. The colors are not only referring to the black and white of the racial divide, the blue of the Crips and the red of the Bloods, but also the blue of the police uniforms and the red stains cause by gunfire. Multicolored murals, graffiti, and artworks as backdrops intensify the scenes. The use of primary colors—yellow “Pac Man” car, red blood, blue jeans—makes the scenes pop. But maybe, apart from the title of the work, what is

significant in the film is not the colors, both figural and symbolic, but rather the outdated 1980s street slang and Ice-T's synth hip-hop. The image is reduced to vertical strips of color, leaving the soundtrack as the only recognizable aspect of the film. The work by Arcangel suggests a continuity with the narrative elements of the film: "Hopper's narrative structure also suggests the stubborn resilience of codes of color, stereotypes, tropes when the true reality is much more complex, and yet these easy patterns are repeated over and over again" (Villaseñor 2015:19). The art work reduces the stereotypical patterns of the narrative film into coded color patterns—the codes of the street become codes of programming. In effect, rather bluntly, the artist makes an analogy between the conventions of social-coding and the informational equalization of digital coding.

In this section, I first compare *Colors* to Guido Molinari's paintings from the 1960s and 1970s. Molinari reduced the color field to vertical stripes by researching the link between vision and understanding in structuralist theory. Structuralism, despite being an antiquated apparatus, can still offer some clues about the relationship between abstraction and visual information. Even though the comparison between two artists who happen to use stripes seems to be made on the surface level, it opens a discussion into the nature of information and the visual medium. First, this discussion is prompted by Molinari's use of structuralist theories to inform his art practice. Second, I examine the nature of abstract information and its relation to art.

Colors was Hopper's second directorial effort, the first one being *Easy Rider* (1969). It is noteworthy that Hopper was also an artist who transferred images from one medium to another, specifically, photography into painting. He was also a practicing abstract artist. But Arcangel's radically modified version of Hopper's movie is far from being an homage to the actor/director's artistic career. Rather, the look of Arcangel's piece is more of a visual analog of Montreal minimalist stripe painter Molinari. Molinari started doing paintings consisting exclusively of stripes in 1956 (de Singly 2004, 150). A Molinari could thus be facetiously considered as a photorealist still for Arcangel's *Colors*, which, in turn, could be construed as a live-action rendition of Molinari's paintings. For Molinari, the stripes were a solution to a vertical/horizontal duality as the source of the problem of mass, gravity, and trajectory within the internal structure of the picture plane. Molinari believed that vertical/horizontal duality reinforced the idea of closed space. This vertical/horizontal opposition is at the base of a Euclidean conception of space with an already built-in perspective, which, in turn, implies figurative representation (Massumi 2002:185). The stripes solved that ingrained problem.

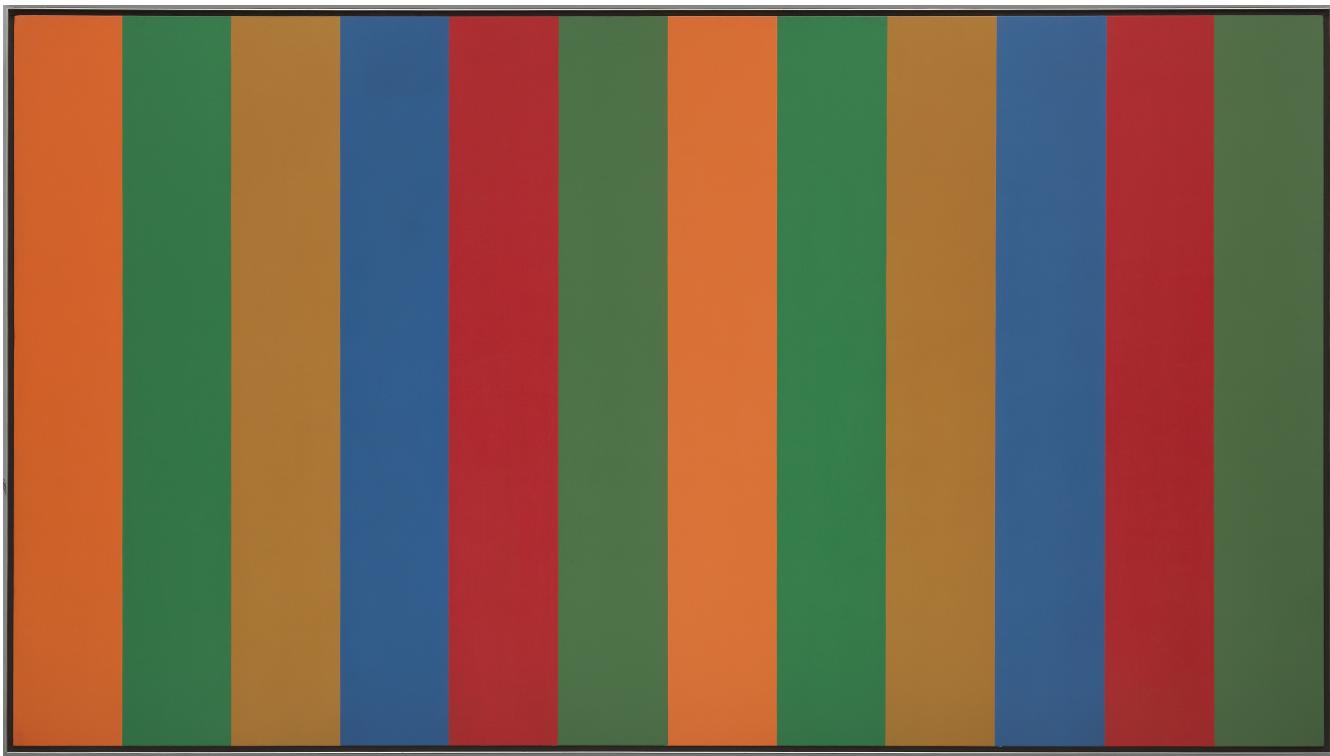


Figure 5. Guido Molinari. *Bi-série orange et vert*. Acrylic on canvas, 203 x 363 cm (1967) Purchased 1968 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa Photo: NGC

For Molinari, the issue revolves around an expressionist element he discovered in Mondrian's opposition between color and smaller scale rectangular forms. According to Molinari, this opposition expresses the relationship between individual elements and a whole, providing diegetic fundamentals. Molinari set out to eliminate this conflict between object and space and, at the same time, the tension between multidimensional objects in relation to each other. In doing so, he avoids a horizontal line, the minimal element suggesting a landscape. That is why he settles on stripes: their similar width eliminates the expressionism born out of a difference in proportions. They are then dependent on the qualitative function of the variation in color from one stripe to another positioned in the sequence that fills the canvas. Their vertical repetition creates a rhythm that, according to the artist, creates an illusion of space (de Singly 2004:150). This is not an analogical space, however, which is something Molinari wanted to eliminate, but a haptic space, a term we will get to. The illusion is uncanny: one only has to stand in front of a striped painting, for example *Bi-série orange vert* (1967) (Figure 5), to see a slight trembling movement opening a perceptible space between stripes: it is as if the canvas were in motion. It is a space resulting from a mix of digital and analog—haptic, intense—since the artist tried to supplant the medium's reliance on analog representation. Molinari rejects the figure/ground duality in painting based on his studies of contemporary philosophy of science (Welsh 1978:17). Despite

their outward similarities, video stripes and paint strips are essentially quite different. To shuttle from one medium to the other or one milieu to another, we need code. Abstract painters, Deleuze (2003) explains, do not simply apply an external code to painting, they rather “elaborate an intrinsically pictorial code.” Deleuze admits that “it is a paradoxical code”; coding painting is already playing in the interstice of the analog and digital: “It is the digital expression of the analogical as such . . . It is as if the diagram were directed toward itself, rather than being used or treated.” A code is necessary to a meaningless abstraction: “It no longer goes beyond itself as a code, but grounds itself in a scrambling” (Deleuze 2003:117). The result, like an old television set losing the signal, is a visual static. Digital code will bring data to a homogeneous whole and then binarize it on a separate plane: “Abstract painting obviously proceeds by code and program, implying operations of homogenization and binarization that are constitutive of a digital code” (Deleuze 2003:117). Translation comes into play. Analog is close to intensity, adding and subtracting—modifying as it were, that which is the diagram. Whereas in the case of the painter the codification is something achieved on the diagrammatic level, somewhere between gesture and brush stroke, Arcangel’s more literal code is shared online. Is the process that Molinari went through akin to figuring out an algorithm, a formula? The painter’s process was to rationally vet an artist for inspiration, consult visual researchers, and calibrate theories to arrive at a signature style. The stripes were meant to make familiar organization of the picture plane unrecognizable in a clear program of scrambling.

Molinari, as explained by Robert Welsh, went through a period of carefully choosing the alignment his style of abstraction was going to take: Pollock or Mondrian. To inform his decision, he also looked into the writings of Ernst Mach, known for his Mach Bands, where the edges of grey bands in a series of grey bands seem to have a slightly different shading than the rest of the bands; and Franz Schumann, who is known for his optical illusion studies based on grid lines of differing groupings. To refine his choice, Molinari also sifted through the structuralist theories of Charles Biederman, an abstract artist and theorist; philosopher Alfred Korzybski; and psychologist Jean Piaget. Just like the optical researchers, the three structuralists—the art theorist, the philosopher, and the psychologist—could be said to be interested in lines.

Biederman (1948), for example, writes about the importance of the line in the emergence of art in his *Art as Evolution of Visual Knowledge*: he writes, “The line offers the simplest and most direct possibility for man’s discovery of a medium and invention of a method of art” (Biederman 1948:65–6). As part of this evolutionary theory of art, Biederman sees the line and its manifestations as a sequential progression into the

development of representational meaning and symbols: “[T]hus the linear artist began by putting lines together, producing groups or arrangements of them which were at first the result of invention. In the process he must have come to attribute to them symbolic meaning, even before he discovered that they could be converted to *representational* functions and meaning” (Biederman 1948:65). His treatise on the evolution of art eventually tackles the problems of art and sciences and suggests that Mondrian is in denial of the structure of nature. This would be of interest to a painter like Molinari, who was trying to get rid of traces of the natural reference in his paintings. But for Biederman, the work of the artist in relation to science is one of relation with reality. Science revealed nature’s reality by lifting the veil of optical appearance (Biederman 1996:82). By going beyond appearances, Biederman believes that we can get to an equalized, or unified, field of information. The artist has to then focus on the concrete level of things, like tightening the focus on a microscope: “Does not the change from the ‘concrete’ to the atomic reveal nature as a *creative reality transformation* from one level to another? Do not art and science disclose nature as a many-faceted reality each a part of nature’s entirety, one grand creative progress?” (Biederman 1996:84). For Korzybski, as for Biederman, the line, reality, and art are also interrelated.

Lines, following Korzybski’s notions based on “matter, space, time, mathematics,” are connected to “real space” in relation to the “illusionist space of the painting” (Welsh, 1978:16). Korzybski’s working principle of abstraction hierarchizes perception. The appeal to an abstract artist is immediately recognizable in the way Korzybski considers the nervous system as “an abstracting mechanism” (Elson 2010:4). The theory states, for example, that an object observed from the perspective of its molecular structure is appreciated at a lower level of abstraction than when it is encountered in its daily setting (Elson 2010:4). The high level of abstraction of the daily encounter with an object can lead to semantic confusion or misperception of reality. Furthermore, it is the consciousness one has of the levels of abstraction that helps dissipate semantic confusion. Thinking in terms of visual illusions can help disentangle daily illusions: we see a solid disk instead of individual blades when a fan is turning (Elson 2010:5–6). If we were to apply these principles to Arcangel, the artist could come out as an experimenter of the image: reiterating structuralist theories in a moving medium. This is especially true of an artist who is making us aware of the levels of abstraction in semantic illusions. An illusion is underscored paradoxically by turning stereotypical color codes into meaningless stripes, like multiple blades of the fan scrambled into a seemingly solid disk—by exacerbating daily abstraction through further abstraction, we see the need for clarity. For Korzybski, we can solve the spatial reading of levels of illusions by making the mechanism of the conceptual levels visible through configuring

them according to a “diagram/blueprint” (Elson 2010:6). His spatial thinking is echoed in Piaget’s view of reality.

Molinari follows Piaget in denying the linear connection between perception and operative intelligence and stating that “abstract thought images are derived directly from perception” (Welsh 1978:18). Molinari’s work can be motivated by “a basic awareness of intuition of space” and seen as an “action performed on properties of objects rather than a mere reading of such properties,” which here echoes Massumi’s indictment of structure through the event (Welsh 1978:18; quoting Piaget and Bärbel 1947:533). The painted stripes, following this, would be more about what they do than what they mean. The actions performed by these objects’ properties in turn produce “operational schemata which are then formalized” (Welsh 1978:18; quoting Piaget and Bärbel 1947:533). This brings us back to Korzybski and the diagram/blueprint of configuration of a mechanism, in this case, of vision. But just as translation had its somber side, so does structure: “For structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules” (Massumi 2002: 27). As Massumi (2002) explains, structure is too rigid to accommodate intensity.

This process of producing work serves to see the liminal space between quality and intensity as explained earlier by Massumi: to “stimulate a pre-operational, pre-Euclidian . . . experience of space according to motor-sensory rather than purely perceptual processes of analysis” (Welsh 1978:18). This affect-based knowledge is what Arcangel’s work brings to the surface, albeit with some degree of irony (since we are still hearing the movie play in the background, behind the vertical veil as it were). And so Arcangel’s work, following the premise of Molinari’s research that led to the conceptualization of painting as stripes, is an exploration of visual information and the limits of aesthetic production.

But for artists, this reliance on structure comes with a dark side. Eve Meltzer (2013) explains, in *Systems We Have Loved*, how the “structuralist imaginary” helps artists cope in the information-prison-house; instead of escaping the grid, they can recombine the code: “Just as ‘information’ at this movement drew much from structuralism’s imaginary, structuralism, in turn, leaned heavily on notions of the informational” (Meltzer 2013:60). The example Meltzer provides is Frederic Jameson’s *Prison-House of Language*, which describes the notion of binary opposition much used in structuralist theory. In it, she explains, the subject experiences communication as a machine. Communication for Jameson is a “‘technique for simulating perception,’

necessitated ‘when faced with a mass of apparently homogeneous data to which the mind and the eyes are numb’” (Meltzer 2013:60). The binary opposition principle is used to decipher or decode vast amounts of raw data that force us to perceive “difference and identity in a wholly new language the very sounds of which we cannot yet distinguish from each other” Jameson 1974:113). This notion of the subjects being forced to attune themselves to the frequencies emitted from this undistinguishable soundscape is also addressed by Meltzer, this time through an even more somber Piaget, according to whom structure “inflicts a kind of death” on the individual subject in favor of an epistemic subject or “cognitive nucleus which is common to all subjects at the same level” (Meltzer 2013:59.) This death of the individual subject, coupled with the subject-machine, brings us close to this idea of the leveling effect of information theory. It should be noted that Hopper’s individual subjects die in a shoot-out blood bath. For Meltzer, the coded epistemic subject leads to the grid: “[B]inaries, . . . data, devices, modes of decoding, and deciphering . . . all evoke in striking similarity the image of the grid. But not just any grid. This is a closed systems of synchronically occurring oppositional terms” (Meltzer 2013:59). Or we might say, not just any grid, but one that is depicted by Molinari, structured by codes of language, or the one established through coding by Arcangel.

Seen from the perspective of information theory, a narrative film of cops and robbers is pretty much the same as a series of stripes. Carolyn L. Kane (2014) calls information the “new common denominator” and explains the process behind this reduction of content into abstract forms through how cybernetics views information: “[A]ll communication and cultural processes could be analyzed, viewed, and understood in terms of data and pattern formation. All humans, animals, and machines were herein treated ‘equally’: as media technologies capable of analyzing, sorting, transmitting, and processing information” (Kane 2014:6). What is interesting here is how this view of equalization recalls the call-center workers who have been processed like data. The ultimate translation of humans into data is, at least symbolically, shown in *Colors*. The experience of human figures of Hopper’s film as a series of digital bar codes—ever changing in order to adequately respond to the complex reconfigurations occurring with each scene—illustrates the data-translation of call-center workers from non-data selves (figures in film) to data-selves (coded stripes). This line of thinking applies to *Colors* because the work speculates on the notion of information and its essence: When does the film cease to be a film? When is abstract art devoid of content? We can’t see the film, but we can hear the abstract work. There is synaesthetic confusion that highlights the difference, the rift, between media and, paradoxically, the lack thereof in a new digital landscape—where information constantly flows through

different platforms. Put simply, *Colors* is essentially an abstraction of human narrative into codified, non-narrative geometric art. It is a symbol of the same kind of stereotypical abstraction the film makes between whites and blacks or between blue and red.

But to understand this we must turn our attention not to content or form, but to the nature of information. Information theory, as Kane (2012) explains through Claude Shannon's 1949 Bell Laboratories experiments, "quantizes data in order to make communication processes more efficient" (Kane 2012:7). Is a striped form of representation a more efficient way of seeing the cop movie? Does this help us read between the lines in a more literal way than Benjamin suggested? This efficiency, Kane continues, "is accomplished by separating redundancy, repetition, and as much noise as possible from an encoded signal so that it may travel swiftly and efficiently through numerous interchangeable channels" (Kane 2014:7). What happens with this streamlining of redundancies into more efficient frequencies is a devaluation of meaning: "Because information theory quantizes data and information flows, concepts like 'meaning' or 'purpose,' normally given great weight in cultural and historical analysis, are abstracted into statistically calculable 'units of measure.' N. Katherine Hayles has argued that information herein 'lost its body'" (Kane 2014:7). This loss of the body through abstract information in the translation of meaning to an undifferentiated streamlining is exposed by Arcangel's *Colors*: the figures are erased from the screen, elongated into strict but random patterns by an aleatory set of principles (each pixel on the horizontal line descending through the grid of the screen vertically, systematically). But Kane warns, "information 'must not be confused with meaning . . . in fact, two messages, one of which is heavily loaded with meaning and the other of which is pure nonsense, can be exactly equivalent.' In information theory, the system only knows what it parses, processes, and orders as information, all else is 'noise'" (Kane 2014:7).

Kane also reminds us, however, that " [t]he line between information and noise is a precarious one" (2014:7). For example, Massumi (2002), discussing the idea of intensity and affect, describes it as a noise: "Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static—temporal and narrative noise." If we were to translate intensity into the logic of emotion, it would not register: only static noise would be perceived. Intensity is something not easy to put into words. It lays dormant to cause confusion: "It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption." Intensity is out of time; it is not something that fits a narrative; it doesn't transfer into a story: "It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it." Intensity is not passive either: as

you get closer, you see the vibration of a teeming movement: “it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance” (Massumi 2002:6). Vibration illustrates the notion of intensity as it can be perceived in art. It is not aimed at something in particular; it has no value, no meaning, no practical existence—except, Massumi adds, on the screen (2002:6). This vibration is perceived in Molinari’s work between the lines. We could say that hints of intensity in the viewer’s reception were already witnessed by Welsh when he suggested that, in the case of Molinari, “the entire painting is transformed into an event of visual and temporal energy vibrations through each viewer’s system of perception” (Welsh 1978:10). This event breaks us out of the structure of the painting and involves a vibration that, for Deleuze, is the destiny of a painting: “This, finally, will be painting’s great moment, its continuous movement, its vibration of vibrations” (Zepke 2005:207). These vibrations, central to the notion of sensation, carry the color that we experience in a Molinari or an Arcangel. The vibration itself is the interface of our reception of color. It is convenient that such reception in Deleuze is both digital and analog: haptic. The haptic is not precisely or directly the relation between touching and seeing. It is the all-encompassing experience of seeing and being aware of seeing.

[The haptic is] a tactile relation with the optical or visual that neither subordinates touch to sight (as in digital vision, where we can choose or touch what we see based on predetermined alternatives, as on a computer or video game), nor subordinates vision to touch (as in purely manual referents which scramble or dismantle the visual); rather, a relation that shifts from manual (or analogical) referents within an optical (or digital), codified space. (Young, Genosko, and Watson 2013: 153).

The haptic is the best way to approach Arcangel’s digital image. It is like a veil, beyond which we can hear the film playing. The analog medium has been digitized so that what we are watching is manifest intensity.

Structural Film, 2007

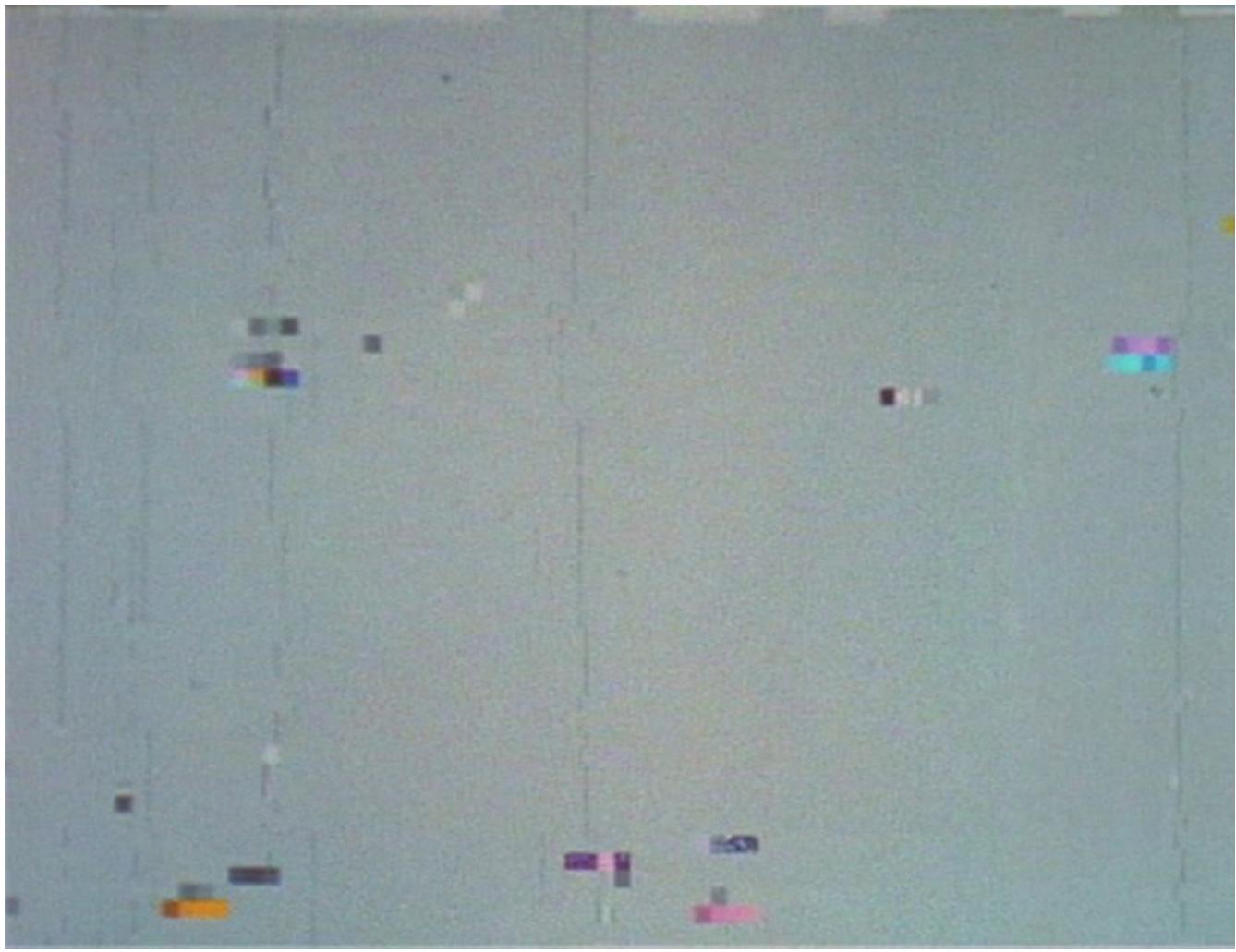


Figure 6. Cory Arcangel. *Structural Film* (still). 2007. 16mm film. 6:15 minutes. © Cory Arcangel. Courtesy of Cory Arcangel

Colors paradoxically made the notion of noise prominent. It is a noise intensifying into a vibration that finally reveals the nature of the digital image from the perspective of all equalizing information. But the idea of the in-betweenness of vibratory oscillation mediating two states becomes manifest on the practical level of the medium. *Colors* is not only about intensity emerging from the veiling lines of the narrative-obfuscating striped-screen; the piece also stakes out the borderline drawn between media. As Villaseñor explains, this negotiation between media is seen on the very surface of the materiality of the image:

Arcangel's *Colors* (2005) (fig. 13.2) seemingly takes a Hollywood movie and transforms it into pulsing lines of pure, abstract color, but with one notable difference: the lines are generated from the digital material of the films themselves. One could argue that a radical transformation has already occurred when something shot and released on celluloid film has been

digitized, but this too, is part of the reflective experience of Arcangel's *Colors*. (2015:196)

Abstraction leads us to question the notion of intermediality. And the intermediality broached by *Colors* is that of the translation between celluloid and digital formats. I examine this here with another example of seeming intermediality in Arcangel's art.

Structural Film (2007) (Figure 6) pushes the media boundary issue to the fore. Here, Arcangel has in mind the films of the structural film movement with the likes of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), which was filmed on random film stock coming from canisters at various levels of material integrity.⁴ Arcangel explains the nature of *Structural Film*: "Somewhere along the way on this one, a file got corrupted in one of the transfers, and some bits of colored stuff showed up, anyway, I kept it in the film, but those weren't actually part of the plan."⁵ Arcangel is working on a very thin edge between digital and analog. The content of the film, white screen glitches, is more in keeping with Nam June Paik. While the subject matter is, as the title suggests, modernist aesthetics, these aesthetics are achieved through the transposition of medium-specific glitches onto a whole other medium where material errors should not have occurred and that, in effect, makes them aesthetically valuable.

Paik's *Zen for Film* asserts its celluloid materiality as it accumulates dust and shows the passage of time through the glitches that appear on the film stock; the work shows signs of deterioration, such as smudges and particles (Hölling 2015:7, 10). A similar display of the ravages of time seems to be missing from Arcangel's work. And if the content of the projection—the glitch digital filter—appears immutable, the film stock, which projects the digital content, will eventually deteriorate. This negotiation between the celluloid and the digital has been recently waged against the digitization of *Zen for Film*. The analog film was displayed for countless hours and the traces it accumulated were eventually brought to a halt when the content of the analog film was digitized.⁶ With its digitization, part of the artwork's conceptual apparatus was lost. But its afterlife as a digital work was not without glitches: "[T]he digital display in turn reveals traces other than just scratches, dust, and chance events, in other words, digital forms of decay" (Hölling 2015:30). Perhaps *Structural Film* will become the "fossilized filmic artifact" if it follows *Zen for Film* down the intermedia translation road (Hölling 2015:81).

The glitch issue in-between media can be compared to the notion of failure in translation.⁷ Arcangel's translation of images leads to visible corruption even in a

medium that should not show any traces of fallible materiality. This failure of translation brings us back to de Man, who invoked the issue of failure between an original text and its translation (de Man 1986:80). Arcangel's acts of appropriation of Linklater, Hopper, and Paik have the effect of elevating to the level of high-art the first two objects while continuing the dialogue about intermedial materiality with the latter. The "gauche" appropriations are critical/theoretical readings of original visual texts based either on failure of content (bad translation), form (scrambling of image), or both (framing glitches in a failing medium). Through this critical or theoretical reading of a filmic artifact, "the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonicalized, questioned in a way which undoes its claims to canonical authority" (de Man 1986:83). What the actual canon can bring to art is far from our concern here. Where Linklater's or Hopper's films lose their "canonical authority" is where their ingrained worldview is deterritorialized by the digital treatment—the material translation of film to digital artwork mirrors a translation between ideological materiality and informational materiality. We no longer see them as they were intended to be seen. The new digital layer Arcangel adds to the film serves only, as de Man says, "to understand the original from the perspective of the translation" (de Man 1986:83). The source films of *Untitled Translation Exercise* and *Colors* are fossilized by Arcangel as artifacts of the original, their content undecipherable runes for present audiences.

But where are we in the exploration of the glitch or failure that manifests itself in the original digital medium and how it is presented in 16mm projection? If Paik was questioning the essence of the celluloid medium, Arcangel again frames it critically through an intermedial playfulness. Explaining how glitches are the embodiment of a software aesthetics, Peter Krapp (2011), in *Noise Channels*, writes about the presumed infallibility of digital media and the alienation of the user: "As our digital culture oscillates between the sovereign omnipotence of computing systems and the despairing agency panic of the user, glitches become aestheticized, recuperating mistakes and accidents under the conditions of signal processing" (Krapp 2011:76). As the chasm equalizes, can this glitch aesthetic be a balm for posthuman tendencies? Is the glitch in Arcangel's work an inoculation against the spread of the posthuman denounced by Miller as the inhuman of conventional language?

In the age of cybernetics, it can seem as if human fallibility is what keeps systems from achieving their full potential—from systematic closure. Yet rather than our becoming abstractly "posthuman" in information society, one might instead argue that people, citizens, and individuals in fact become realized for each other and for themselves in unprecedented ways through

The glitch is a manifestation of the human. *Structural Film*, far from presenting an empty screen with glitches, in fact projects the specter of the human haunting the machine. In a final analogy, Krapp opens up a question of intermediality: “One might conclude, however provisionally, that gaming glitches are part of the art form in the same way that brushstrokes are part of painting (2011:91). The discussion of painting within the context of intermediality (Hölling 2015:6–7) brings us back to our theoretical painting / digital cross-pollination between *Colors* and Molinari that can be carried over here as a general example.

What is this notion of intermediality? Why not simply speak of two different media and the mutual referentiality that occurs in interdisciplinary arts? It is because intermediality can function as critical translation in the de Manean sense: “[I]ntermediality is often viewed as having the ultimate goal of ‘figurating the infigurable,’ the incommensurable” (Pethö 2011:48). By shifting from one medium to the next, Arcangel captures a snag that illustrates the incommensurability between the media. What it reveals is that what constitutes intermediality is not only the smooth relation between media but also the interference resonating between them (Rajewsky 2010:51).

Intermediality can be understood as a critical category, one that, in historicity and constructedness, can hold a meaning (Rajewsky 2010:54). If, according to Irina O. Rajewsky (2010), three intermediation groupings can be isolated (medial transposition –i.e., novel adapted to film; media combination—i.e., opera or computer art installation; and intermedial references—i.e., reference of painting to film or painting to photography), one of them applies to *Structural Film* which is the notion of “film qua medium” through references. Photorealist painting is not the result of a plurality of media coming together to create meaning. In the case of photorealism, she writes, “it is not two or more different forms of medial articulation that are present in their own specific materiality. Instead, what we are dealing with is nothing other than painting—but a kind of painting which inevitably evokes in the viewer the impression of a photographic quality” (Rajewsky 2010:58). The second medium is evoked indirectly whereas the primary medium is creating the illusion. To put it more clearly, Rajewsky (2010) explains further: “It is not photography which manifests itself materially; rather painting’s own instruments and means are applied and shaped in such a way that experiences, or ‘frames’, are evoked in the observer that are medially bound to photography, leading to an illusion, an ‘as if’, of a photographic quality”; Rajewsky

shows how only one medium displays the limits of its “materiality and mediality” (2010:58). Her theory can be used to identify the oscillation between celluloid film and digital art in *Structural Film*. What Arcangel is creating is a film projection of a digital glitch that itself came from a digital medium referring to film (and an “aged” film at that, as the filter is called). The level of self-reference could lead a skeptical viewer to interpret this process ironically, as an ironic “art film.” And yet, the art historical sources are here quite overt (Paik). The resulting referentiality is simply part of the—unironical—mediated condition of the image. The very corruption of the file indicates a materiality beyond the actual. A process of interference between media.

The film projects clusters of colored pixels where, in an analog celluloid film, hairs, scratches, and other more organic impurities would appear. The colored pixels reveal right away that we are seeing a digital projection of some sort. But the digital image is a film projection. The screen upon which the film is projected shows soft curls in its fabric and adds to the materiality of the medium. Vertical lines rain on the screen, underlying the horizontal trajectory of the film that twirls in the reels, as the projection machine is audible in the room. The pixels, colorfully peppering the white surface of the screen, seem to be part of a fragmented grid, much of which is missing.

Crossing the line between media has to be mentioned in reference to the line crossing between translations but also to the lines of colors. What determines the border between media is the “idea” we have of each medium. For example, film or painting each have a particular “medial configuration” (Rajewsky 2010:60–1). Of course, the configuration *between* different media presupposes actual borders opening a space of oscillation (Rajewsky 2010:61). The borders between media are conventionally drawn in the way that the conventionality of language was explored through *Untitled Translation Exercise* and the conventionality of color-codes was explored in *Colors*. Here, Rajewski (2010) is suggesting that the very separation between different media is itself a conventionally defined language or system of signification. The system of references to one medium in another can only approximate an illusion of the original media. Of course, “an overall actualization or realization of the other medial system is impossible” (Rajewsky 2010:62). Translation of the original is impossible. A rift opens. *Structural Film* is not fully film nor digital projection. It is a film about the degree zero of digital film-making since we already have a content, albeit more or less invisible: iMovie is the content or subject; the narrative story is that something happened to the iMovie filters. Intermediation allows for a reflection about the nature of each discreet media and the conventions determining limits. Intermedia exploration functions therefore like de Man’s notion of critical translation: not only does it question self-reflexively the idea of media

limits, but it also questions the very nature of the media itself (Rajewsky 2010:63). If the translation was once seen as pointing towards the impossibility of a translation, then intermediality points towards a conventionally constructed nature of each medium: “In other words, they [media practices] necessarily constitute themselves in relation to, and within the scope of, the overall medial and discursive landscape at a given point in time, including the respective delimitations of conventionally distinct art forms and media” (Rajewsky 2010:64). The border is a way of looking at the limits within any given medium and the role it plays within an intermedial work or event. But the medium itself, as Rajewsky has demonstrated, is a fluid, abstract, and indeterminate object that is made manifest through a series of conventions: “[T]he concept of a border is the precondition for techniques of crossing or challenging, dissolving or emphasizing medial boundaries, which can consequently be experienced and reflected on as constructs and conventions” (2010:64).

What Arcangel’s work actually questions is this border—against the conventional. Adding to *Untitled Translation Exercise*’s examination of the conventions of language and to *Colors*’ extreme treatment of the conventions of visual semiotics at play in society, *Structural Film* is about the conventional borders between media. But what Arcangel opens is a space between media borders that are not simple lines drawn in the sand between one medium and another that can be breached for cross-pollination. Rather, he uncovers a dimension allowing critical works to independently and fully exist: “The borders or—perhaps better—‘border zones’ between media can thus be understood as enabling structures, as spaces in which we can test and experiment with a plethora of different strategies” (Rajewsky 2010:65). For Rajewsky (2010), the border, should be treated as border zones—a space of experimentation, an “enabling structure,” just like Deleuze’s zone of indiscernibility. Deleuze, after all, already located the “zone of indiscernibility in the line” (Deleuze 2003:130). And here, this Deleuzean concept is what stands between media, but also what defines the digital and analog through each other’s parameters.

Conclusion: Analog and Digital

The zone of indiscernibility is the rift that opens up between the analog medium of film and Arcangel’s digital art. The zone of indiscernibility is a term that Deleuze gave his diagram: “Thus the diagram acted by imposing a zone of objective indiscernibility or indeterminability between two forms, one of which was no longer, and the other, not yet: it destroys the figuration of the first and neutralizes that of the second” (Deleuze 2003:157). From an analog medium, like celluloid film, which is no longer in Arcangel’s

works since it has been appropriated but modified, to a digital one, which is not yet free of analogy since it is heavily dependent on the source material, the zone of passage between the two media opens up and offers a place where each medium can mask itself as the other. By masking itself in the traits of another medium brings to mind Rajewsky's photorealist painting.

In effect, the zone of indiscernibility between the analog and the digital functions (metaphorically) as does the addition of information in modulation. They are put in contrast to the codification-bound digital. The digital functions through "conversion-translation" (Deleuze 2003:116). The modulation here has to do with the degree of information that separates the two media and the blurring that occurs in *Structural Film. Untitled Translation Exercise* started with translation, literal if idiosyncratically redundant, and opened a rift under the pressure of Benjamin, de Man, and Miller to a stratification of sorts. *Colors* nullified the very idea of meaning and introduced the idea of code—aesthetically, socially, and philosophically deepening the rift between the source object and its modified result. Finally, it is in the play between media that we glimpse the rift not as a break but a modulation. And this concept, modulation, definitely musical in origins, opens up other vantages on Arcangel's musical artworks.

Endnotes

1. One would be tempted here to compare art ordered remotely and produced by a call centre to László Moholy-Nagy's *EM 2 (Telephone Picture)* (1923). Moholy-Nagy placed a call to a factory, provided the elements of a geometric abstraction using graph paper and ordered an enamel painting produced to his specifications. Whether this took place (his widow contests there was an actual telephone involved), the remote, anonymous, industrial, mechanical, technological elements of the work are nevertheless resonant. This certainly would play into questions of the materiality of the work of art that starts with the idea, the process and ends in the hands of a worker on a workshop floor all in the scope of the logic of commodity production and the consequent alienation. But the telecommunication aspect of Moholy-Nagy's work also introduces another type of information age materiality. The artist becomes an "operator of feeds and feedback" (see Kaplan 1995:125). We are slipping here closer to an information age materiality, negotiating in twenty-first-century call-centres between data and non-data selves (see Vora 2015:53) at the level of information theory, where the boundary between matter and information is "permeable" (see Morton 2010:4). ↪

2. In the shadow of materialist exchange between capital and labour is the exchange of a data self and a non-data self. This type of materiality as exchange between biology and information is key to

understanding the intermediality of translation between content and form. The notion of individual is problematized through the disembodiment of the non-data self and its embodiment into a data self and the focus shifts from materialism as exchange to a feed-back operating exchange ushered into the algorithmic age by the idea of telecommunication the seed, which was already sprouting from Moholy-Nagy's telephone picture: "An algorythm is a script—a text—that automates a function, or functions, and in this case the script is encoded directly into matter. The matter-information boundary is permeable" (Morton 2010: 4–5, quoted in Cohen 2012:116). Matter, in this case, takes on the abstract character articulated by Deleuze and Guattari.⁵

3. Eugene B. Young explains what is at stake in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of matter. Firstly, the link between a language-based poststructuralist materiality as purported by Morton is introduced through the notion of "amorphous mass" explained by Hjelmslev. Matter is linked to the idea of stratification, or rather the non-stratified—matter is "unformed, amorphous, or formless" with its reconfiguration of a disembodied hylemorphic model seen in terms of the abstract machine (another way to say "art" by Deleuze and Guattari) as pure "matter-function". This relates to the cartographic or diagrammatic spatialization of materiality insofar as pure matter lies "outside" of stratification (see Young 2013:190).⁶

4. There is a shift between the materiality of the first section (*Untitled Translation Exercise*) and this one (*Structural Film*). Whereas the initial materiality was ideological, a shift began towards a Deleuzean amorphous materiality suited to information. What this essential shift in materiality underwent is mediated by information theory, which brings everything to the same level (as seen the second section *Colors*). In the present section, we focus on the material, concrete aspect of film stock, but as we will soon see, analogical conditions are enacted by a digital form (and translated again into analog), and a zone of indiscernibility opens up, bringing us right back to Deleuze's aesthetic sense of poststructuralist materiality and the cartographic, diagrammatic lay out of matter.⁷

5. See <http://www.coryarcangel.com/things-i-made/2007-002-structural-film> ⁶

6. Another work by Arcangel, *HITACHI P42H01U Plasma Burn* (2007), deals with the notion of digital decay, as the self-reflexive label information of the work that it is meant to describe is being slowly burned into the plasma screen of a big screen television.⁷

7. This brings us back to the idea of the amorphous matter that Deleuze and Guattari have located as the in-between strata. The matter-function of the diagram manifests itself, as we will see shortly, in the zone of indiscernibility.⁸

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