

MUYBRIDGE – Project Description

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Producer: Sarah JM Kolberg,

Sept. 17 2003

Since the earliest days of cinemagraphic study, *montage*, the cutting together of shots into sequences, has been considered the grammatical basis of cinema as an art. This technique has had intuitive appeal to audiences and is still the main form of communication of action in cinema. There have, however, been other major techniques of communication used in non-time based image narratives, such as comics. Unlike filmic montage, where the imagination of the viewer makes connections between images represented one after another over time, the reader of a visual layout achieves closure between images juxtaposed in space. Scott McCloud, in his brilliant analysis of comic book narrative forms, Understanding Comics, terms the space in between comic book panels *The Gutter*, and notes that it is in this space (between the boxed images) that the reader must form the connections, actions, and movement of the story within his imagination¹. This he describes as the basic element of comic's grammar. This offers some important differences of semantics with cinema, the greatest of which is the ability to represent images simultaneously allowing for relationships of metonymy, parabola, and analogy.

In the panels of a single page of comics, there is an equality of imagery where a cause-effect relationship is not enforced by the technical necessity that one image comes first, and the second is only visible after the first disappears, as is true in standard film montage. In comics, where the chronology is presented in a series of still images, the flow of time is mutable and fluid, and not enforced by the film projector. This allows for the creation in comic book layout of ambient scenes full of a loose simultaneity and metonymically related images that are not achievable in standard, single channel film montage. Think of a comic book page where the action represented in a few panels is surrounded by a larger image of the general scene—perhaps a large drawing of the rainy streets surrounds a few inserted panels showing close-ups of the action of a character on those streets. Single channel film can create the same scene through temporal montage (a shot of the exterior streets cuts to a shot of the subject standing on the corner) but the images never share the same space; the cutting implies temporal movement of the viewer from far away to closer and the images are never presented simultaneously to allow their parallel relationship. The aesthetic

¹ Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, Scott McCloud, Harper Collins Publishers, NY, NY, 1993; pp.67-74.

is different, and relationships of space, such as one image enclosing another (like the rainy night enclosing the individual) are forced to be represented in relationships of time (cutting from one image to another).

In the past, the techniques of spatial layout of multiple image panels have been used in cinema at a minimal level: the implication of simultaneity through split screen (such as a phone conversation), or the use of overlaid informative graphics and text in news and documentary are the two main occurrences of this. Much of the rich semantics of graphical layout have never been translated to cinema because of both technical challenges and the lack of a large audience accustomed to a fractured perspective. Both the technical challenges and the lack of a savvy audience have recently been changed by the widespread use of the computer. New experimentation and exploration of these possibilities is immanent within cinema. Work conducted in this area now may very well take on an important role in the future as some of the first work exploring a large new area within cinema.

Tesseract, the story of Eadweard Muybridge, will be told in video and film utilizing changing multiple panels, or frames, of moving video imagery combined onto one screen. The layout of these changing panels will be based on certain semantics of comics and graphical advertising layout acting as an exploration and experimentation with the communication of a narrative using these forms. The juxtaposition of multiple video panels on the screen will explore 4 main relationships:

1. Relations of chronology where panels are taking place in different times (there is the possibility of closely related times, such as before and after a character's single action, and widely disparate times, such as flashbacks or flash-forwards simultaneously present in panels on the screen),
2. Relations of points of view where multiple subjects or interpretations of subjects are present simultaneously on the screen,
3. Relations of ambient aspects where different elements of a scene are presented simultaneously (such as building the scene of a single room through the juxtaposition of four panels, one showing the dripping faucet, one showing the flickering light bulb, one showing the rain out the window, and one showing the ticking of a wall clock),
4. Metaphoric or symbolic relationships between images.

As well, the piece will explore the use of abstracted subjects, frequently used in the simple line drawings of animation and pictorial narratives, layered over more realistic backgrounds. The

goal of the piece will be to achieve an immersive, interactive quality to the narrative that is different from that achievable in single channel video or film.

Because of the special nature of the work, it is possible to shoot on multiple formats (super 8mm, 16mm, miniDV, and HD) and compile the entire work into a final, high definition, digital master. This HD master will be printed to 35mm film to be screened at art house venues, microcinemas, and universities. As well, a web-based version of the piece will be created utilizing flash animation to distribute digitally on-line. The digital work will allow for a more interactive interface where the viewer is able to control the number of panels present and their relationship. After completion of *Tesseract*, I plan to produce two other 30-45 minute pieces in a similar style, one based on Steven Millhauser's story *Eisenheim the Illusionist* (the story of a magician at the turn of the century who abandons the magic of objects for the magic of images), and the second based on the true story of a cryptographer at the beginning of the 20th century. These will be compiled into a feature film in three parts.

This work is currently in pre-production. Here is a rough timeline for *Tesseract's* production:

September '03	Script rewrites
October '03	Screen tests; beginning of costume and set creation.
November '03	Casting; location scouting
December '03	Rehearsals; completion of costuming and set creation
January '03	Production phase (all shooting completed)
February-March. '03	Editing; Sound design
May '03	Rough Draft Screening; Mastering; transfer to film
June-July'03	Premiere; duplication & festival distribution

MUYBRIDGE – Script Summary

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The following story is based on an idea presented by Hollis Frampton in his essay “Fragments of a Tesseract”. In an effort to understand the work of the famous photographer and father of cinema Eadweard Muybridge, Frampton posits a connection between Muybridge’s obsession with freezing the instant of action with his act of murdering his wife’s lover, Colonel Harry Larkyns, in Calistoga, California in 1874. This moment of extraordinary passion in which time stopped for him, took a lifetime of work and obsession for Muybridge to understand.² I have taken this idea quite literally. Please note that in order to fully understand this script summary, it is important to first acquaint yourself with the experimental form in which I will produce it described in the project description. The story will be presented in panels of varying layout, the screen similar to the pages of a comic book made of moving images.

Palo Alto, CA 1873. We open to a black screen. There is the approaching sound of a horse galloping. Fade up a long panel showing a line of large, black, box-like cameras hooked to a large series of flash bulbs. Below, a panel of Muybridge, standing tensely with his hand on an electrical switch fades up. The sound of galloping grows louder. The shadow of a horse enters the panel depicting the cameras. Muybridge cries and throws the switch. There is an extremely fast series of pops of giant flashbulbs. The panels with cameras go white. Below, the panel depicting Muybridge is replaced with the famous series of photographs showing the frozen instants of the champion horse, Occidental, in full gallop. The sound of hooves recedes...

Muybridge meets with Leland Stanford in his work laboratory at the Central Pacific Railroad building to present his groundbreaking images. The scene is presented in a mosaic of panels

² From Hollis Frampton, *Fragments of a Tesseract*: “Time seems, sometimes, to stop, to be suspended in tableaux disjunct from change and flux. Most human beings experience, at one time or another, moments of intense passion during which perception seems vividly arrested: erotic rapture, or the extremes of rage and terror come to mind. Eadweard Muybridge may be certified as having experienced at least one such moment of extraordinary passion. I refer, of course, to the act of committing murder. I submit that that brief and banal action, outside time, was the theme upon which he was forced to devise variations in such numbers that he finally exhausted, for himself, its significance. To bring back to equilibrium the energy generated in that instant required the work of half a lifetime. So that we might add, in our imagination, just one more sequence to Muybridge’s multitude, and call it: Man raising a pistol and firing.”

reminiscent of long-take tableaux. Stanford refers to the images of his horse, Occidental, as a “flying angel”. Muybridge describes the “magic of a single instant”. Moving his hand over the laid out series of images of Occidental, Muybridge says, “Over and over and over... there’s your bet.” An Indian guide awaits Muybridge. He is leaving to document the Modoc Indian War. The screen is split into two sections; the top displays stereoscopic photographs of the Modoc Indian war. Muybridge’s voice is heard in voice over reading a letter written home to his wife Flora describing both how he misses her and his experiences with war. Below, panels depict the concurrent actions of Flora Muybridge in montage: taking in a lover, the resulting pregnancy, and finally the birth of her bastard child. The letter announces his plans to return and while the voice-over continues, Muybridge is shown returning to discover his wife’s cheating while the images of war continue in the panels above. The letter’s description of war and his continuing fascination to return to his work capturing action, act as a counterpoint to the ensuing action. Muybridge is seen riding both train and wagon to Calistoga, an unwinking intense stare on his face. He enters the home of Colonel Larkyns holding a gun and backs his wife’s lover against the wall. The letter narration describes his fascination with “magically freezing an instant”. Muybridge cries and the gunshot goes off like a flashbulb. The frame freezes, full screen, in the act of firing the gun.

Leland Stanford visits Muybridge in the Calistoga jail. Muybridge’s hair and beard have gone white. He sits unblinking. In the corner of the screen a panel depicts his action of murder in extremely slow motion, to the point that every frame becomes still and visible. Muybridge asks Leland if he has ever experienced a stopping of time. Leland and his lawyer free Muybridge after four months in prison. He returns home. Instead of entering his home, he walks around to the bedroom window and stares unblinking at his wife asleep in bed. Feeling his stare she awakes. As if a flash bulb goes off, she freezes in that instant. Muybridge stares; then turns and leaves, never to return.

Muybridge returns to Palo Alto and begins his encyclopedic ark of captured action: animals, athletes, women, cripples all come before his battery of cameras and are captured. In this montage sequence, what is Muybridge’s perspective and what is photograph becomes confused. He begins seeing with the action-freezing eye of the camera. He begins to take in the world in instants. Inter-cut are the extremely slow motion images of his action of murder. It is in the midst of this that he receives news of his wife’s death.

During a visit by Leland Stanford, Muybridge unveils his Zoopraxiscope, which, when spinning, gives the illusion of the horse Occidental running, endlessly. Muybridge comments that it is “Zeno’s paradox in reverse. We show the half paths of the falling arrow, over and over and over and... animate the dead.”

We cut to a zootropic image of an athlete in action. We hear Muybridge’s characteristic cry. We zoom out to find we were looking through a giant Zoopraxiscope at the world’s fair. The images and viewing slits are human sized. Muybridge stands nearby. Flashbulbs go off as he is photographed standing next to his famous achievement. We see through his eyes the world around him. From his eyes it is like viewing through a slowing zoopraxiscope. The world is being broken up into instances and moving slower and slower, like Zeno’s paradox of the arrow that never falls. We now see Muybridge in this way. There is a look of relief in his eyes. Below, a panel appears of Muybridge’s memory of murder. The memory too, in conjunction with the image of Muybridge, slows to single frames, as if viewing through a zoopraxiscope spinning slower and slower, ‘til it stops in that exact moment of decision when the gun fired.

END.