This Battle of Algiers: Cinema as Database, Lines of Force
In *Battle of Algiers* commissioned by the Whitney and Tate Modern, I wanted to re-present the logic of the contestants in Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *Battle for Algiers* as presented in the dramaturgy as algorithmic instructions. What was seen in the film as an enacted drama is seen in the app as lines of force trying to control and occupy space.
In some sense, all films are computational, all films a kind of .net art. Think about it: a film is the product of a selection from different shots, hours of dailies and coverage—the film rests on a database. The film we end up seeing is only one possibility; cut it again and there’s a different movie. And then there’s the manner in which these scenes and these shots come to be this film. The director, the editor, the producers, the screenwriters—not to mention an entire cast of interested parties—conspire to make the final cut we see. Which is to say, films are built on a database and are authored by a network.

Of course, most of the films that make it to the Cineplex these days do not seem like .net art. They are stories, moving along according to some human law of inevitability: the would-be lovers overcome their misunderstandings, the family reconciles, the fighter wins—or loses—but in any case learns a lesson. These films are based on screenplays, on words, on stories; they’re illustrated storybooks. They do not really operate with the modalities of the moving image. We don’t witness the multiplicity, the varied directions, implicit in the film, that’s implicit in all films, the multiplicity that’s implicit in the meeting of database and network. It’s as if these filmmakers assume that because the movie reel is continuous the story must be continuous, that because there’s one screen they can only project one image.

(Daniel Coffeen, *Film, Play, Power and the Computational, or Byting Celluloid*, February 2006)

When I did my piece on the film *The Battle of Algiers* for the Tate and Whitney Museums I transposed the dramaturgy into lines of force putting in play the cell structures of the Algerian resistance and their movements in contradistinction to the hierarchical structures of the French Army. Here cinema’s representations are translated into the pure movement of these opposing sides.

*The Battle of Algiers, the artwork well represents the modalities in which the so called new (digital) media deal with contents that come from traditional media, trying to RE-WRITE them in a way that is the most peculiar to the interactive and procedural vocation of the digital medium...*
On the one side, “modernity,” the age of the novel and of cinema, which has its peculiar forms in narration and rigid sequentiality, and on the other side the “computer era,” in which the narrative form is superseded by database. Now, we certainly could argue that both novels and films have often tried to react “from the inside” to the regime of narrative sequentiality, inventing new forms of narration, subverting orders, frequencies, lengths and so on. It remains the fact that the film which is watched by spectators, and the novel which is read by the reader remains fixed in their only possible sequences, and are static and linear texts (obviously to be filled and interpreted by the user).

In opposition to the textual and narrative system, it stands the database, the characteristic paradigm of contemporary creativity and of its aesthetics, the symbolic form of computer based artworks. With the term “database,” in information technology we define a structured set of data, organized to be searched in a quick and logic way, to be compared, linked, and used for particular operations.

The other interesting example I would like to present is The Battle of Algiers by Marc Lafia and Fang Yu Lin. La battaglia di Algeri (1966) by Gillo Pontecorvo is the source on which the software The Battle of Algiers operates. The movie, awarded at the Festival del Cinema of Venice in the 1966, is a portrait of the Algerian anti-colonialist struggle which led to the independence of the north African country in 1962, after 8 years of fights between the French army and the National Liberation Front. The facts told by Pontecorvo focus in particular on the period 1954–1957, and on two main characters, on the one side the Algerian Ali La Pointe (symbol of the anti-colonialist struggle), and on the other the French colonel Mathieu. Despite the presence of these main figures, La battaglia di Algeri gives up to concentrate on the single characters, and prefers to show collective actions mostly.

(Cristiano Poian, “Investigating Film Algorithm: Transtextuality in the age of database cinema”)

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