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Algorithmic 3-channel video installation (combinatorial narrative):
DOOR GAMES WINDOW FRAMES: NEAR DRAMA



Topic: Generative Cinema

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Abstract:

This work is an automated multiple-window installation exploring mannerisms and **formulaic structures in Hong Kong film melodrama** from the 1960s. It consists of a database of about **500 movie clips**. In the form of a 3-channel projection, the **automated drama** explores the mannerism and formulaic structures of 11 such films. From the viewpoint of contemporary cinema, the frequent closing and opening of windows and doors to introduce a new scene is redundant, a residue of the traditional box-like theatre's treatment of space. But for this project, I have turned such door and window movements literally into a unique propeller of drama. As punctuations as well for emotive shifts, the **combinatorial game** I play with these clips constructs **micro-narrative movements**. The 'near dramas' resulting from the game are not prescribed, but rather programmed for open meanings as filmic elements freely align and combine based on **preset algorithmic rules**. As such, this work explores the use of technology and generative thinking in the practice of visual ethnography, a domain of anthropology. Rather than excavating, I argue that **generative thinking** directs us to both the **hiddenness and potentiality in image analysis**, thus an **experimental form of anthropological research**.

This work highlights an **internal self-generative logic**. A computer program was written to apply principles of self-organization to 500 carefully selected movie clips. Each clip is assigned a number, each digital representing a value, including which of the 11 movies it is from, duration, types of shot size and so on, together forming the grammar of **visual musicality**. **Combinatorial juxtaposition** and alignment within each of the three image discourses occur in THREE movements (phases), each operating upon a different set of rules to achieve its own visual music. The 3 consecutive movements are currently timed to finish in about 20 minutes and will recycle automatically.

Video demo:

- (1) <https://vimeo.com/35050069>
- (2) <https://vimeo.com/48866866> // Full Documentation:

<http://lindalai-floating-site.com/content/interactive/interactive/NearDrama/index.html>



Keywords:

Combinatorial narrative, algorithmic cinema, melodrama mannerism, multi-channel projection, automatic video clip alignment, a library of 500 video segments

DOOR GAMES WINDOW FRAMES: NEAR DRAMA

Generative Cinema

Algorithmic 3-channel projection | Combinatorial narrative

generated from a data library of 500+ short video clips

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Premise



Keywords:

Combinatorial narrative, algorithmic cinema, melodrama mannerism, multi-channel projection, automatic clip alignment, film analysis as artistic creation, digital archive

1. Film analysis through artistic creation: art as research

<Door Games Window Frames: Near Drama> is a generative art piece comprising of action sequences of open-ended drama based on a database of movie fragments extracted from Hong Kong (HK) Cantonese thrillers and melodramas from the 1960s. In the form of a 3-channel projection, the automated drama explores the mannerism and formulaic structures in 11 HK oldies.

1.1 Deploying mannerism: from unperfected montage to dramatic potentials

Works in commercial cinema are by and large nicknamed genre films, indicating the power of formulaic treatment of character relation and event development. While studying a dozen of HK Cantonese genre films from the 1960s, I was mesmerized by the frequent closing and opening of windows and doors that function as the lead to new scenes and actions. From contemporary cinema's viewpoint, such devices are

redundant, a residue of theatre, or a weak view of montage. The doors and windows in these HK oldies are nonetheless a unique propeller of drama. In *<Near Drama>*, I turn door/window movements literally into punctuations for emotive shifts.

1.2 Micro-narrativity → Open work → Infinite dramaticity

In *<Near Drama>*, viewers will see two of HK's most popular male stars in the 1960s – Xie Xian (Tse Yin, father of Nicolas Tse) and Zhang Ying (Cheung Ying) – in varied personae – as well as the best known female stars' close-up facial performance. As an example of algorithmic database cinema, the piece's **micro-narrative evolvment** is not prescribed, but programmed for open meanings as the dramatic elements, such as an object, a hand, an expression or a door, freely align and combine based on a few set rules. Here, the standard story-based narrative shifts to a recurring trajectory of dynamics created by juxtaposing shots of varied sizes, varied intra-frame motions and speeds and differential contents. Imagine the entire work to be a collage of signifiers of pathetic drama that do not amount to any comprehensible plot line. "*Near drama*" is indeed the core concept: actions and human interaction are evolving as if something significant is about to occur, but not quite there yet, and the combinatorial machine takes the viewer away (back) into dizzying blends of motions.

2. What's in the clips?

2.1 Constructing "'near drama'"

Visitors will see the same few faces repeated throughout the work – yet in different costumes and posturing, and variegated class background, as mentioned in the last session. This work thus explores "micro-narrative meanings," that is, to explore the free open meanings of individual elements – an object, a gesture, the banging of doors and windows – as well as the permutations of the meanings of each fragment as they combine with what comes before and after them in the ever-evolving image discourse. In this way, this combinatorial machine works against the conventional audience expectation as the fragments of images are never finally subjugated to a story-line to complete narrative comprehension. There could have been no end to this piece of automated 3-window drama, except that a black picture that says 'the end' will be attached to a few chosen clips so that it will appear at irregular intervals to give visitors a sense of a break or a breathing space.

2.2 Liberating the fragments: low-level study

There is no scored music. The work has a minimalist soundscape, comprising mainly the sound of doors closing and closing in some scenes, at times banging, sighs, yawns and murmurs, utterances of names of female characters, or a fragment of a spoken dialogue. Every now and then, a tiny fragment of a typical programmed music for tragedies would pop up. Like the case of the image track, the accumulation, distribution and juxtaposition of emotive intensity take over plot delivery in the sound track. The method of fragmentation and isolated of fragments from narrative comprehension is the artist's effort to further discover the low-level elements that comprise grand family drama and thrillers that have shaped the imagination of a generation of everyday movie-goers.

3. Technical specifications

All clips are tagged manually. In this version, we have simplified the analysis by giving each clip an index. For example, a clip indexed “0.30221” refers to the following:

1st digit = Film // [0-7]

2nd digit (1st decimal digit) = Duration [seconds] // Added decimal indicates the exceptions of clips over 1 digit range, eg. N. NN. NNNN instead of N.NNNNNN

3rd digit = Size of Shot // [0-4] 0-MS 1-MCU 2-FS 3-CU 4-TB

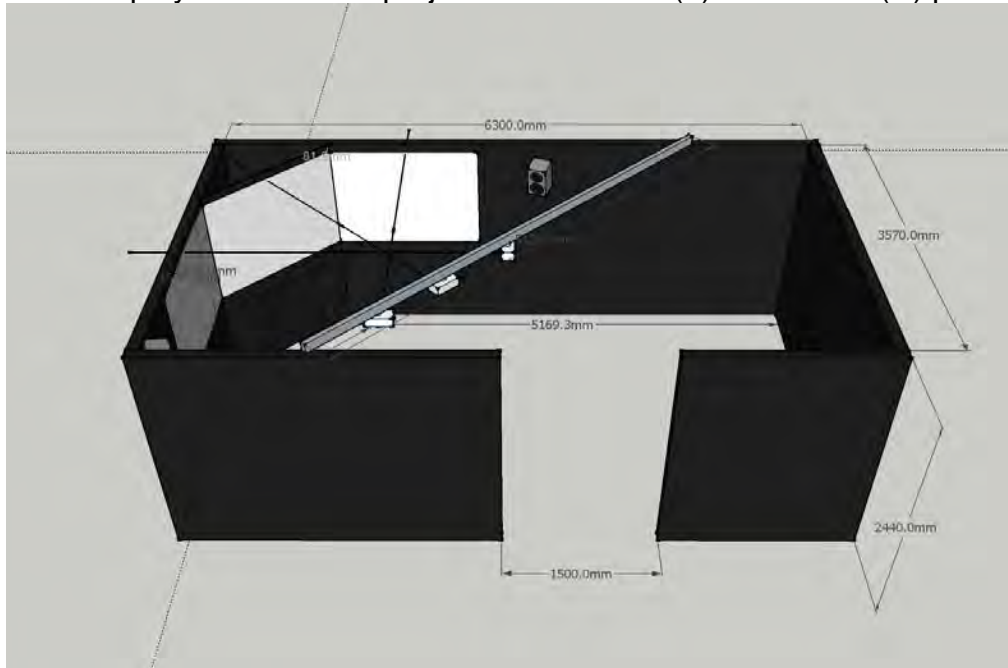
4th digit = Narrative Punctuation // [0-6] 0-Door 1-Drama 2-Window 3-Outdoor/Garden/Balcony 4-Object 5-Text 6-Corridor

5th Digit = Speed // [0-2] 0-S 1-M 2-F

6th Digit = Sound // [1-2] 1-No 2-Yes

	Film *	Duration *	Size of Shot *	Facial Expression	Narrative Punctuation	Actor	Dynamics *	Content	Notes	Sound *	Index
1	1	1	MS	Neutral	Window	XP	M	Picking up knife			0.10211
2	1	3	MS	Sudden	Window	XP, ZY	F	Turn and point at			0.30221
3	1	1	MS	Surprise	Window	XP	F	Woman run			0.10221
4	1	3	MCU	Angry	Window	XP, ZY	F	Hold knife and argue			0.31221
5	1	3	MS	Neutral	Drama	XP, ZY	M	Bed night play			0.30111
6	1	9	MS	/	Drama	/	S	Curtain sunshine			0.90101
7	1	6	CU	Curious	Window	ZY	M	Man look door			0.63211
8	1	8	MS	Hidden	Door	XP, ZY	S	Man behind woman think			0.80001
9	1	4	MS	Staring	Door	XP, ZY	M	Man look woman left			0.40011
10	1	2	CU	Shock	Door	ZY	M	Man shock			0.23011
11	1	4	MS	Neutral	Drama	ZY	M	Man with tie			0.40111
12	1	8	FS	/	Outdoor	/	M	Car passing			0.82311

Work display: a 3-channel projection: 1230mm (h) x 1600mm (w) per screen



This work is an application written in Processing 1.5.1. Java runtime environment should be installed on the computer.