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Interview with Professor Marga van Mechelen
University of Amsterdam
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Introduction

This interview was conducted to gain insights in audiovisual arts and semiotics from Prof. Marga van Mechelen, a renowned expert in this field. We explored her film *The Dreamed Obviousness* (2023), which investigates the synchrony of image and sound and the synergy of the live performance. This film extends the discussions from her influential paper *What's in the Name: Live Cinema?* presented at the IASS World Congress in Buenos Aires. In her work, Prof. Van Mechelen explores the intricacies and developments in live cinema, differentiating it from VJing and placing it in the broader context of multimedia electronic art, as exemplified by works like Edgar Varèse's *Poème Electronique* (1958).

In a comprehensive conversation, Prof. Van Mechelen thoughtfully answers a series of questions, clarifying the context of her latest film, sharing her views on the evolution of live cinema in relation to VJing and other audiovisual art forms, and discussing the importance of a semiotic approach in comprehending these complex artistic expressions. The dialogue is presented as a continuous narrative, allowing direct access to her insights without a traditional question-and-answer session format.

Interview

Prof. Marga van Mechelen: You asked me to provide more information about the extended history of the documentary film *The Dreamed Obviousness*, which explores the synthesis of sounds and visuals. The extensive history of this film dates back to the 1980s. In the 1980s, a significant project was undertaken in the Netherlands focused on Edgar Varèse's *Poème Electronique* (1958). This was an old piece of musical composition involving not only Varèse but also Le Corbusier and the Greek composer and architect Iannis Xenakis. Le Corbusier was asked by Louis Kalff, the General Art Director of Philips Industries in Eindhoven to design their World's Fair pavilion for Expo'58 in Brussels. Le Corbusier enlisted Iannis Xenakis, who is known as both a composer and an engineer, to create a mathematical 'translation' of his sketches. Xenakis, in turn, sought the help of the composer Edgard Varèse. While Le Corbusier's name is more commonly associated with *Poème Electronique*, Xenakis was likely responsible for the entire production.

In 1984 Xenakis arrived in Eindhoven to give a lecture on the occasion of a new performance of *Poème Electronique* by the Dutch musical company ASKO. The

conductor, Reinbert de Leeuw, was a prominent figure renowned in the Netherlands for his promotion of 20th-century composers, who passed away a couple of years ago. I had the opportunity to attend both Xenakis' lecture and the performance of *Poème Electronique*. At that time, I collaborated with a young Dutch composer on the research of *Poème Electronique*. I used this research and more recent research about VJing and live cinema, following the research for my book *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands* (2019), and for my paper in the IASS World Congress in Buenos Aires. I had done some research in the direction of VJing and was interested in doing further research in that direction. The old research goes back to 2005. There was in that year a VJ contest, conference, and festival in Amsterdam called 'Visible Sensations'. They invited me to give a lecture and discuss with the VJs their design of the visuals in relation to sound. I was surprised they came to me, but I noticed they had sought me out for two reasons. Firstly, I was well known as a publisher in the field of performance art and video art, which we called new media at that time. I published a book about 'De Appel', a centre for new media arts, performance, video art, and other projects; it still exists. The book is about the first directorship of 'De Appel' that started in 1975 and lasted until the director's death, Wies Smals, in 1983. It is a well-known book on contemporary art in the Netherlands, and that was one of the reasons why they advised the organization to invite me.

The second reason they approached me was that there are few semioticians in the Netherlands, and I am one of them. I am probably the only one who is also conducting research in the field of visual arts. They thought that the field of VJing needed some theoretical reflection, and they realized that they would not easily get it from their own surroundings, from people like art critics, and so on. So, for these reasons, they asked me to give a lecture and talk with the people involved in the whole project.

I knew some of the VJs in the Netherlands because most of them have a background in the visual arts, they graduated from art schools. I saw them performing at these art schools. I was not someone who frequented clubs, so I did not have the experience that many people had of staying there all night. Altogether, it was not entirely new to me, and it was quite a challenge to respond to the request to talk about VJing from a semiotic perspective.

Afterwards, I published an essay starting with 'why they asked me', reflecting on the reasons why they invited me and what kind of questions I had in mind with my background in semiotics. In fact, these questions are still the same questions in relation to *The Dreamed Obviousness*, which was, of course, your starting point. Questions like: What do we actually see? What do we actually hear? What are the signs? What kind of meaning do we give to them? What kind of experience is involved in the combination of sound and image? What is the spatial disposition of audience and performers? These were again my questions.

This covers the VJing aspect, and the film features two VJs of different generations: Tarik Barri and Jaap Drupsteen. But after 2005 there were later developments termed live cinema. Live cinema, as the name implies, centres around live performance and cinema, that is to say moving images on a screen. My familiarity with some live cinema artists partly stems from my role as an advisor for one of the most significant funds in the Netherlands. My advisory role here was specifically in media art. This position enabled me to attend almost all the festivals in the Netherlands,

where I witnessed numerous live cinema artists at work and performing. Although I didn't see Tarik Barri at work at the time, I knew his name when I started the project that led to *The Dreamed Obviousness*.

My engagement with this field, although not entirely new, had a different entry point than people who attend live cinemas, performances, or VJing events primarily for entertainment. My interest gravitated more towards what one might describe as semiotic inquiries and, at times, art historical questions. My goal has been to formalize and verbalize this field's ongoing trends and movements. As I mentioned, there is a way to position VJing and cinema in different time periods. During the 2000s, VJing experienced considerable popularity. I addressed the question why it became so prominent during that era. One of the reasons, I proposed, was the somewhat monotonous nature of the music prevalent at the time. When I presented this observation to those involved, they concurred, although it wasn't monotonous to themselves – as they experienced the sound throughout their bodies and recognized the need to augment it. VJing offered a visual and distinct experience that complemented the music.

However, the emergence of live cinema marked a different era, with artists in this field often showcasing distinct attitudes from those in VJing. As said in the Netherlands, and I can't speak for other countries, VJs usually come from a visual arts background, while live cinema often involves artists with a musical background, evolving in a direction with a more pronounced focus on visuals. Barri evolved his work along these lines. *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands*, edited by me and Sanneke Huisman has 18 essays, including two separate essays on VJing and on live cinema. The other essays deal with the history of Dutch media art institutions, video art, net art, computer art, robotics, post-internet art, private digital screens etc, all written by experts in the field. Sanneke Huisman and I wrote a long introduction, more than 100 pages, where we discussed the government policy and the significant role of festivals, a topic familiar to me. We examine the history of media arts in the Netherlands over a period of 35 years through three different lenses: Platforms, Policies, and Technologies. All three are important for defining VJing and live cinema.

Numerous art centres, festivals, and museums have their own implicit conceptions of media art, making their own selections and specializing in certain aspects. On the policy side, the Dutch government, through its institutions, had also to define at a certain moment what media art is. It's essential to understand how media art is seen in relation to visual art, film, and other related areas. Such decisions profoundly impact the support and presentation of media art in general and certainly also VJing and live cinema. Then technologies, they are crucial as well. Some of the invited experts shed light in the book on the technologies used in this field, overlapping sometimes with genres, as seen in live cinema and VJing.

The book inspired me to take up research into VJing again and to expand it with live cinema, that is, based on a comparison, giving answer to the question of similarities and differences. This led first to the aforementioned paper *What's in the Name: Live Cinema?* and second the film *The Dreamed Obviousness*. The model for the paper were the essays collected in my book *Art at Large. Through Performance and Installation Art* (2013). Each paper selected for this book poses at least one semiotic question, tailored to be approachable for anyone with a general interest in contemporary visual

art. They are semiotically inspired texts, although most of them not explicitly written for semioticians. This also applies to the film.

While working on that paper, I realized that Tarik Barri and Jaap Drupsteen likely share similar interests in the relationship between sounds and images. I thought they should know each other, so I tried to reconnect with them to see if I was right about their common interests and if they were interested in discussing them. To my surprise, or perhaps not so surprisingly, they spontaneously mentioned that they had already considered meeting each other. This made it easier to take the next step and ask if they wanted to have a conversation, which I conducted based on the semiotic questions I had in mind.

We prepared the whole interview by discussing three different subjects, the third one was a bit too complex, so we decided to focus the film you've seen on two main subjects: first, the synthesis of image and sound, and second, the synergy of the live performance. My main interest was can you compare it to the opera, an art form with its intertwined libretto and sounds? In Greimas' terms, could the perception of VJing and live cinema be called a syncretism as was done in the case of the opera? I shared this perspective with them as my starting point. In the film, both artists, Jaap Drupsteen and Tarik Barri, discuss a lot technical aspects, stressing that despite digital developments bringing sound and visuals closer, they still are technically distinct.

Jaap Drupsteen, in particular, has been pursuing for decades the idea that by just listening and setting aside the technical background, one could experience the integration of sound and image as completely unified. He is very excited about this, and it's one of the first things he discusses in the film's trailer. Our discussion didn't progress as far as I had hoped initially, but it still provides much material to think about and reconsider how the relationship between text and image and sound and image has been approached in semiotics.

There are other important aspects I haven't mentioned yet, which are significant for the perception of the live performance and dealt with in the film and relate to my previous field of studies, such as the spatial disposition of the audience and performers. It is linked to my studies in performance art. For instance, in a traditional theatre, mostly a black box, the stage and lighting, along with traditional curtains, separate the domains of the actors and the audience. In performance art, the situation is quite different. Performances usually take place in white boxes, where the separation between the audience and performers is less distinct, and often, the audience is positioned around the performance, not just opposite the stage. What we observed during the 80s was a significant transformation in theatre. I believe this change was partly influenced by what was happening in performance art. These kind of questions resurfaced when I examined the spatial disposition in live cinema and VJing. There is a distinct difference between the two. In VJing, the DJ is undoubtedly the most central figure in the performance. His name is always known because when people buy their tickets, they do so to see the DJ, generally not the VJ. The income disparity is also huge, that is telling. What I find interesting from a semiotic perspective is making these kinds of conclusions based on what's happening in space in terms of spatial disposition. Of course, there are exceptions. I mentioned Peter Greenaway in my IASS paper. He was a central figure in theatre, operating between different fields. He positioned himself like a conductor of a big orchestra, with half his back towards the audience, unlike a DJ who

faces the audience. But by adopting the position of a conductor, he as a DJ still remained the central figure in the performance. This contrasts with the VJ, who is usually not visible at all or positioned at the back or sides of the stage. I found it intriguing to examine the hierarchy between DJ and VJ in this spatial disposition and how it influences people's perception of such a performance, both visually and aurally.

As I mentioned, VJing mostly takes place in clubs, but sometimes also in artist spaces. Live cinema, as the name suggests, alludes to film cinema, making the screen central to what is happening. I didn't realize this so much at first, but later, it became pretty evident, especially when I saw the performance of Tarik Barri with Radiohead, which you can also see in the film. A good example of that the audience comes mainly for the musicians of Radiohead and not for Tarik Barri. There is a subtle difference in their positions on stage, with the screen itself and the music sounds in relation to the screen becoming the dominant elements. So, if you compare this with the traditional role of a DJ, and also with Peter Greenaway, the images of the Radiohead performances in the documentary show a different situation. I found this very interesting, from the viewpoint of performance arts studies and semiotics.

Another important aspect is that a live performance implies that it's not just a repetition of earlier performances. It varies depending on the specific circumstances of the space and how people respond to each other. There can be a certain amount of orchestration, but there's also room for improvisation. In text theatre, basically the performance every night is the same, though it can differ depending on the audience's response. An actor will sense the atmosphere. But in live cinema, artists can take this even further. Moreover, it's often a form of research, developing something on stage. They know their equipment, and they've had their rehearsals, but they have, more than a VJ, the attitude of a researcher rather than just an entertainer. This has its effect on the audience. Those who are familiar with live cinema watch and listen with a technically involved perspective. They're entertained, of course, but they also notice what steps the performers take during the performance. And that, I think, is an interesting aspect of the second part of the film about live performance in *The Dreamed Obviousness*¹.

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¹ The Dreamed Obviousness. A Dialogue between Tarik Barri and Jaap Drupsteen is a HD film of 69 minutes. Part 1 about synchrony of sound and image (30 min), Part 2 about the synergy of the live performance (39 min.).