Wavelength, Beyond the Wave

Ayse Demir
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Original Essay Link

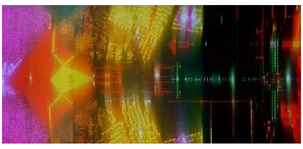
Michael Snow's *Wavelength* is the only film I watched in a cinema class I took as a student in Binghamton, in upstate New York, a place known for its black winters, and never returned to because I knew I could not repeat the same experience. Watching an almost empty room for forty-five minutes, through nothing but changing light and shifting angles, reminded me that day of the times in childhood when I tried to memorize the details of our home's curtains and carpets, without the haste of adulthood.

The clarity of things I once watched with full attention, without trying to impose coherence on the past, has always given me a kind of resolution metric: a way to determine how real an experience is, and how close it is to dream, when compared with the rooms and places I now inhabit and perceive. Of course, the estrangement that comes with living in two identities and two languages has a great deal to do with this. But observing the experience of time within myself as I live it, comparing it with the past, and somehow making the past part of the present, is no longer a habit whose grip I can easily escape.

I remember, with the same clarity as *Wavelength*, the way our wonderful teacher Tomonari Nishikawa, whom I learned had passed away in recent months, spoke in those classes about Stan Brakhage's films. I also remember how, to demonstrate the production technique behind *Mothlight*, he cut frames from stray strips of negative he had brought in and added them to the main strip, leaving gaps or allowing them to slip out of alignment, telling us that this was a way of splicing time together.

Stan Brakhage, Mothlight, 1963

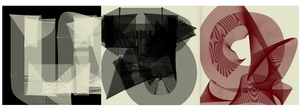
The idea of the image ceasing to be a pure symbol and becoming instead an accumulation, an operation applied to time, can in fact be seen in many masterpieces since the early twentieth century, when themes of dimensional transformation began to spread, including the interstellar passage sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick's overlapping exposures, formed by layering the traces produced through long exposure, where some frames appear sharper or less sharp than others, are also harbingers of the age we were entering. This scene, in which we witness not only a passage into the stars but also the protagonist's fractured identity, seems to signal a radical change in the paradigm of perception, technology, and the way we experience time.



Stanley Kubrick, 2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

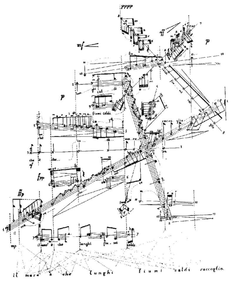
After graduating from college, I often experimented with this technique, called slit-scan, which creates a sense of temporal displacement, by transferring it into algorithms.

Taking a predefined algorithm, or a set of rules, and playing with its internal and external variables, then repeating this regardless of programming language or tool, was the central idea behind these practices. The results were unfinished sequences extended through time, leaving traces of how the form had been produced. Algorithms with a little bit of system inside them, broken and corrupted in places, trying to hold themselves together.



Spatial Forms, 2021

These days, I think this practice was, beyond art, a direct reaction to all the closed systems we are exposed to without noticing, almost as if under a spell. In contrast to technologies designed around predictability and optimized according to certainty and perfection, it came from an understanding of the necessity of structures that carry tension within themselves and never fully resolve.



Sylvano Bussotti, graphic notation — "il mare e che lunghi fiumi caldi raccoglie"

"the sea and the long warm rivers it gathers"

Closed Systems

As we know from Shannon's information theory, meaning and experience can emerge only under conditions in which uncertainty has not been completely eliminated. Yet most of the systems we live in are built on precisely the opposite idea. Models in which the world and the universe are largely reduced to functions, where everything that makes something work or not work is defined as inputs, rules, and uncertainties to be managed, have now permeated every part of our lives.

Chatbots, especially those focused on language processing, are among the most powerful tools capable of producing confusion at a social scale through this loss of nuance.

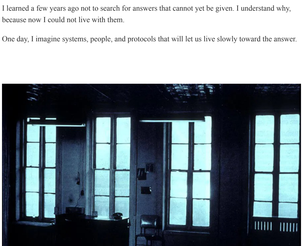
Compressing facts into schemas and templates is, of course, useful for scalability. But we should not forget that no model can explain the world in all its complexity and splendor. Strangely enough, in this respect, every discipline that manages uncertainty by taking averages, from astrology to politics, resembles the others quite closely. There is a real risk in a language model carrying the habit of certainty it acquires from questions such as "What is the population of Turkey?" into social and moral questions whose answers are far more uncertain, and doing so with the same confidence. Because nuance is a direct reflection of how a model handles variation and counterexamples, and therefore of the thinking of those who designed it. The issue, then, is not simply understanding the limits of what these models represent, but the possibility that we might come to see them as an unquestionable reality.

Perhaps for this reason, it is important to keep some part of ourselves awake, so that our cognitive freedom is not taken from us without our noticing. In a world where protocols and algorithms have worked their way so deeply into our lives, developing an intuition capable of sensing their internal mechanisms — noticing when something is closure, when it is lack, when it is averaging, and asserting its own will — may be the most tangible starting point for what we can do.

On the other hand, for artificial intelligence not to evolve over time into a religion or a universal court, it is a systemic necessity that, when defining a fact, it take as essential the preservation of the uncertainty around that fact, and of our not-knowing. Models that make room for hesitation and doubt by considering not only the next frame before us, but also future horizons and the past. Models that begin to understand the quality of an openness that can remain unresolved.

I learned a few years ago not to search for answers that cannot yet be given. I understand why, because now I could not live with them.

One day, I imagine systems, people, and protocols that will let us live slowly toward the answer.



Michael Snow, Wavelength, 1967