



Repo Man delivers on digital

Report of the keynote address at INFOG 97

On May 8 and 9, INFOG 97, a conference on the impact of recent developments in digital technology on screen culture practice, was held in Melbourne by the Australian Film Institute, the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Cinemedia and RMIT. The keynote address was given by Robert Rosen, Chair of the UCLA Department of Film and Television and Director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

Rosen opened his address by telling us the obvious: the world will never be the same after the introduction of the new digital technology. He then proceeded to discuss its various implications.

The digital paradigm

While many traditional filmmakers have viewed the digital revolution with awe, wonder and often fear, those brought up with the culture of the dial must now deal with the new culture of the button. As an archivist, Rosen has welcomed this revolution, as it provides opportunities to effectively bring back old film, and to make perfect copies of existing film.

This effects a paradigmatic shift. In his view, the digital media of the 1990s is at the same stage that film was in the 1890s. This relationship with film history should not be ignored, but used to bypass constraints of the present and move to the future. He believes we are still waiting for the creative artists that will produce the significant works of this revolution.

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Rosen drew the analogy of the garage band to the development of change in rock and roll music; arguing that new energy nearly always comes from the margins. In the 1970s, the new generation of film graduates changed the whole industry. Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas and Spielberg were all incredibly film-literate troublemakers, wanting to make movies in new ways - which they did, often inspired by the movies of the past. They didn't recycle those movies: they used them as a base to move on to their own visions. When asked - as he often is - what he would do if given \$10m to spend in development of new media, he replies that he would spend it on research into aesthetics and narrative, because that is where new material comes from.

Ebb and flow

With three of his students, Rosen made the cult film *Repo Man*, which he describes as a 'post-modern youth culture film'. When discussing it with young people, no-one ever talks about what the film is about. They talk about their favourite line, character, or moment. It has been appropriated by young people in relation to its parts. They look at the pieces, before moving on to the whole.

Digital technology is perfectly placed for this new perception of the film. While film has traditionally about putting pieces together to form a

whole, new technology and the new aesthetic are about flow of storytelling. There is a shift toward ebb and flow, transformation storytelling, where movies can move from fantasy to fiction and back to fantasy. In the past we have had the spectator and the spectacle. Now we can include the spectator in the spectacle, which may or may not have a beginning, middle and end.

The audience relationship

Rosen discussed areas of possible research into the uses of digital technology. He felt that the base was always going to be about what gives viewing pleasure to people. He used the examples of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Blues Brothers*, where the audience felt happy to dress up and sing and dance along with the film. Other examples of this are karaoke and the making of home movies, where all of those involved feel pleasure through participation. Sports viewing is also very interactive with people shouting, and screaming to the players, the umpires and other spectators. The spectators are part of the spectacle, and their behaviour can help creative people work on meaningful interaction in film and video.

Rosen believes that, particularly in western culture, there is a lack of historical consciousness, and yet history is fundamental to all creative work. While history 'flies beneath the radar', its significance is waiting to be emphasised. He concluded by suggesting that the film troublemakers of the 1990's seek to create a new genre to truly make use of digital technology. □

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