

review

DVD

Scott "Spot" Draves
Spotworks: The Evolution of Visuals
DVD (San Francisco, 2003), 81 min.
by Jeremy Turner

Features: *Dub Visuals*, *Electric Sheep* and *The Bomb* -- each with a documentary explanation ("Sheepumentary" and "Inside The Bomb"). Audio by jhno, Spool, DJ Vordo and mbb.

Special features: Looping tracks with solid backgrounds for use by any VJ. The imagery is all Open Source.

WEB LINK: <http://electricsheep.org>
Available from Microcinema.com

Note: Not to be confused with Patrick Farley's Electric Sheep Comix

Being a closet bandwagon follower, I am going to make this DVD review completely dependent on other online resources. Therefore, the list of related links will appear first and not last. Call it either laziness or extra-contextual addiction, but I have come to the decision that summarizing the history of screensavers, visualizers, and distributed computing applications would not only take up too much space in a small DVD review. There is much more detailed explanation of the aforementioned context online, and the following links should be required reading before delving into my review.

Just as you now need to buy the video game *Enter The Matrix* in order to complete the movie-dominant narrative of *The Matrix Trilogy*, you will also now need to browse these online links before being able to completely digest the context behind this Spotworks DVD review:

A Brief History of Screensavers:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml?xml=/connected/2002/05/14/ecrboot14.xml&sSheet=/connected/2002/05/15/ixconrrite.html>

VJ FAQ:

<http://www.vidi-yo.com/content.cfm?page=73>

Playing Bass with Whale Tails: Exploring the Roles Of Visuals at Raves by Sean Healy (2001):

<http://www.vidi-yo.com/content.cfm?page=81>

Distributed Computing links:

<http://www.aspenleaf.com/distributed/>

<http://www.scientopica.com/resources/>

ARTIFICIALLIFE links: <http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/alife.html>

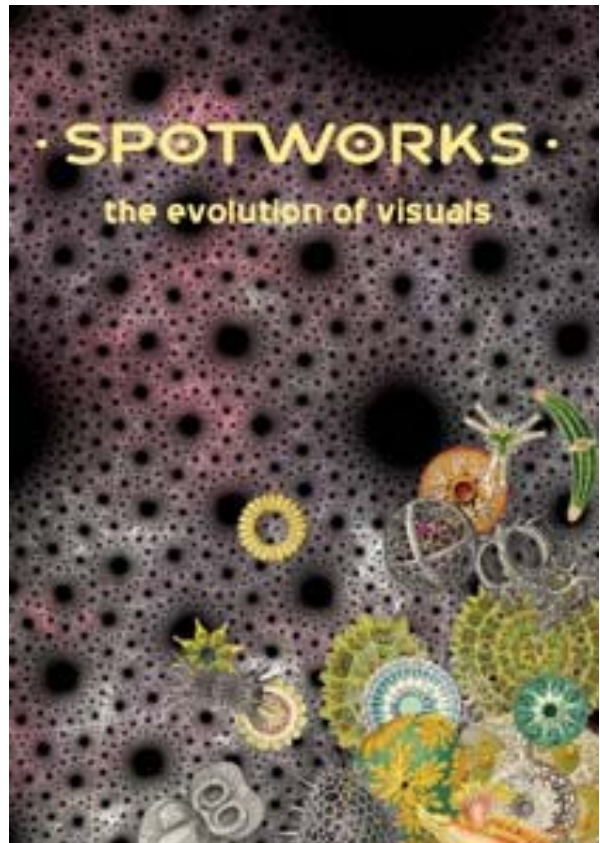
And now... an excerpted quote of praise from the *Spotworks* DVD homepage as a virtual cue card that will enable me to begin my convoluted review:

Mind-melting stuff, and refreshingly devoid of the usual fungal kitsch.

--Erik Davis, author of *Techgnosis* and contributing writer to *Wired* magazine

Now that the contextual basics behind screensavers, VJ/Rave Culture, and A-Life applications have been consumed by the reader, I feel I can safely disagree with Erik Davis on his particular observation that this *Spotworks* DVD appears virtually spotless when it comes to kitsch. Aesthetically speaking, I would have to say that there is just as much trippydelic tackiness in *Spotworks* (both visually and aurally) as in any mainstream visualizer and screensaver application I have come across over the past decade.

I should add that kitsch in general is not necessarily a bad thing, as far as I am concerned. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with appreciating kitsch and quite often, the aesthetic quality of kitsch is partially populist in nature because it appeals to the most basic and seductive of tastes (eyecandy and earcandy) and drives (the desire to be entertained by novelty).



In a way, this is a very difficult DVD to review as I found this VJ-friendly archive much more stimulating on a historical-nostalgic-aesthetic level than on the level of grooving with it as a direct embodiment of profound intellectual premises and theories from whence the applications here first came into being.

To give Erik Davis credit where it is due, I believe that he is correct in that -- at least when it comes to Draves' *Electric Sheep* series -- there is little in the way of fungal shapes and rave-friendly retro-fractal patterns (remember 1990?). On the contrary, it is amazing how the quality of the resolution (texture / timbre) and aesthetic articulation of each individual 'sheep' is fully dependent upon the quantity of active, registered *Electric Sheep* users online who are offering their computer bandwidth to benevolently act as virtually real-time render farms. When the user-base is high, the retro fractalization slowly becomes a highly detailed impressionist screenscape.

However, in Draves' earlier *Bomb* period, one can say without much argument that fungoid fractals abound to please the frivolous whims of the Rave Community; but it still would be difficult to criticize Draves since he was producing this work in the early 90s where he would have been viewed as a pioneer and cutting-edge proactive proponent of the 90s technomantic zeitgeist.

This is one reason why it is hard to review this body of work today. It would be just as difficult to review Club Hits 97 or Dance Party 99 music compilations. The hype surrounding A-Life algorithms and participatory democracy that led to the creation and proliferation of artwork such as *Electric Sheep* seems to put the opus onto a much higher level of competition (it is survival of the fittest, after all) with (intellectually) interesting visualizer applications. If the entire *Electric Sheep* program were to be selected or rejected against the survival of other similar programs, how well would it fare (in the 1990s and today)?

Especially today, these programs are becoming exponentially taken for granted and phased out by Darwinian selection. Mass culture seems to be increasingly turning into a loyal disciple of Moore's Law where technology doubles every 18 months and aesthetic innovations become almost archaic only seconds after their unveiling. I am guessing that Draves' work -- when it was first unveiled to the public -- was already hailed as an 'Instant Classic.' In other words, visualizers with collaborative components and genetic algorithms for evolutionary selection have by now become almost ubiquitous.

In terms of the evolutionary process (i.e. online eugenics) that helped to determine the overall form of the 'Sheep,' I found it rather strange that the fittest entities, which managed to survive into the "Best of 2002" category, hardly seemed to resemble discrete entities but had much more in common with their landscape predecessors in the screensaver historical continuum. In a figure-ground relationship, the ground seemed to be much more popular than the entity-reinforcing figure. The evolution is focused on articulating the framing of the screen rather than the development of figural entities. In this case, the distributed user base seemed to prefer a 'truth to the medium' paradigm.

Clement Greenberg would be proud to know that the voting user base intuitively believed that any screensaver pretending to be anything other than merely a pleasurable screenscape for the eye, would not be true to its medium. These screenscapes are not the kind of Sheep to be dreamed up by androids; although they share a quasi-biological process with organic entities, I would consider the entities produced via the GOLEM project (see related links below) to be a much more reasonable example of entity-based A-Life software in action... and hey, GOLEM also doubles as a handy screensaver.

In conclusion, Draves' DVD archive seems to be more about the history of aesthetic VJ processes and tastes than the picturesque genealogy of distributed computing. Although I truly enjoyed watching all the demos and narration about the history behind the making of Draves' visual work, I cannot say how it would survive today among the seemingly endless variants of the A-Life screensaver genre that are becoming common fare. If I reviewed the DVD in 1999, my opinion might have been more with the times. I feel like a black sheep of the new media flock by reviewing the DVD through such a 'period-specific' lens, so I want to emphasize that all in all, *Spotworks* is a VERY entertaining DVD collection and feast for your eyes and ears.

Here are some more links which were not 'required reading' for the review but will help the reader even more:

GOLEM@ Home Project (Genetically Organized Lifelike Electro Mechanics)

The screensaver randomly creates a population of virtual robots on your system and then evolves them (the current rule for evolution is survival of the robots who can move the greatest distance over an infinite plane). Every week or so, a few of your robots will move to someone else's GOLEM screensaver and a few of someone else's robots will move to your screensaver (you can disable this feature if you're worried about security). These virtual robots contain design information that can be used to build actual working robots.

Note: entities can become sculptural using a 3D printer = much better discrete identity representation.

<http://demo.cs.brandeis.edu/golem/> <http://demo.cs.brandeis.edu/golem/download.html>

<http://demo.cs.brandeis.edu/golem/next.html>

Folderol, Scott Legrand: http://dsonline.computer.org/0101/features/fo10101_print.htm

Design and evolve robotic lifeforms via a screensaver. Based on representation of protein folding.

Muon1, Distributed Particle Accelerator: <http://muon.mega-reviews.com/>