

## PART TWO

### *BlackBOX: Creative Production*

#### Chapter Five: blackBOXES – digital media as a journey of discovery



Figure 25. *blackBOX* interface still from *jewelBOX*<sup>1</sup>

Fritz Hohl defines the *blackbox* idea as an agent where only input and output can be observed. Hohl also refers to “...the blackbox test, its aim is to determine characteristics of the inside of a “blackbox” by executing the box with different input parameters and by watching the effects. The recorded reactions can be formal results like output values or characteristic “activity patterns”.<sup>2</sup>

The creative text moves across and draws from a complex of disciplines, discourses, and references. These however, are realised primarily through the lens of visual arts practice. The term *black box* resonates with notions of flight, the voice and aircraft instrument data recorder that archives all flight data<sup>3</sup>, in the event of misadventure. It

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<sup>1</sup> Interface still from *jewelBOX* depicting a silver spice box from North India (courtesy Dr. Devleena Ghosh), a classical Indian *Odissi* dancer, Chitritta Mukerjee performing *Konarak Kanthi* dance item.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz Hohl, “Time Limited Blackbox Security: Protecting Mobile Agents from Malicious Hosts”, in Giovanni Vigna (ed), *Mobile Agents and Security*, (Lecture notes in computer Science; Vol.1419), Berlin, 1998, 92-109.

<sup>3</sup> The 'black box' “was invented by Australian Dr David Warren in 1953. He was part of a team working to uncover the cause of a series of British Comet jet airliner crashes when he came up with the idea of using a continuous wire recorder to capture the cockpit events leading up to an air crash. He encased the recorder in a thick, fireproof asbestos box to be anchored in the tail of an aircraft.”

<http://www.phm.gov.au/scripts/webdbs/collone.idc?id=15andcat=6> [accessed 18 February 2003]

contains the key to questions about ‘what went wrong’? ‘blackBOX’ is an emblem of a *container for meaning* of symbols, and is a symbol in itself:

...the content of a symbol...what it means – is often far from clear, and it is precisely because it is a communication from the unconscious that its meaning remains shrouded in mystery. At the same time, symbols possess a universal imagery and thus address themselves to the needs of specific individuals or cultures, but in a mythological and psychological language.<sup>4</sup>

These ideas form the heart of all program development in a computer environment, specifically in relation to legibility across cultures. The strategy of mobilising a series of myths cross-culturally is at play in the inner workings of the game device. The fact that the icons, signs and symbols from outside western culture are legible inside and can be interwoven into the storytelling and narrative process, suggest that there may be a reservoir, deeper than our dreams and imagination that can be tapped into and that shapes societies’ myths. A central theme operating in *blackBOX* is *the quest*. The quest has long motivated narrative progression within the trajectory of storytelling. This is examined in Joseph Campbell’s cross-cultural investigation into ancient hero myths and the struggle for identity is in his seminal text *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.<sup>5</sup> And in many ways the *quest* in *blackBOX* is unabashedly the quest for self-understanding.

Mapping a history of the term ‘blackbox’ incorporates an investigation of the *technological* implication of the notion ‘box’, a device, an instrument, and an *idea* created as a piece of *equipment*, a vessel for cultural artefacts, in the contemporary sense, in the physical, virtual, and thinking realms. As I referred to before, Lev Manovich argues in “Avant-garde as Software”<sup>6</sup> that the software and windows environment of the computer is indebted to the techniques invented in the 1920s by the Russian avant-grade artists. Their techniques:

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<sup>4</sup> Like Hockey, “The Objective Psyche and Archetypal Patterns”, in *Cinematic Projections: The Analytical Psychology of C.G Jung and Film Theory*, University of Luton Press, U.K, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, Great Britain, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Lev Manovich, “Avant-garde as Software”, From *New Vision" to New Media*, <http://www.manovich.net/ARTICLES> [accessed 18 November, 2003]

...became embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software. In short, the avant-garde vision became materialized in a computer. All the strategies developed to awaken audiences from a dream-existence of bourgeois society (constructivist design, New Typography, avant-garde cinematography and film editing, photo-montage, etc.) now define the basic routine of a post-industrial society: the interaction with a computer. For example, the avant-garde strategy of collage re-emerged as a "cut and paste" command, the most basic operation one can perform on any computer data. In another example, the dynamic windows, pull-down menus, and HTML tables all allow a computer user to simultaneously work with practically unrestricted amount of information despite the limited surface of the computer screen. This strategy can be traced to Lissitzky's use of movable frames in his 1926 exhibition design for the International Art Exhibition in Dresden.<sup>7</sup>

...the transformation of the 1920s avant-garde techniques into the conventions of modern human-computer interface (HCI) such as overlapping windows...now function as the strategies of computer-based labour, i.e. different ways we use to organize, access, analyse and manipulate digital data (for instance, discrete data representation, 3-D data visualization, and hyper linking)."<sup>8</sup>

Lev Manovich also discusses the development of interface metaphors in contemporary computer environments where abstract data is visualised as compartmentalised 'windows' and 'boxes'. But can we take this analogy back in time and across cultures? Are these visual metaphors, the bases of operating systems worldwide, legible across cultures? Visual literacy and perception exceed the boundaries of language. The ability of the "icon" to convey meaning and convey narrative is comparable to the religious icon and the contemporary digital icon (emptied of any spiritual connotation). However, since grammars of the visual are culturally specific, it could be argued that a new global visual language is emerging with the use and spread of the Internet. While readable text inside the frame remains linguistically expressed in the national language, the lingua franca of the conventions of the computer screen are clearly trans-national.

This theorising can be carried through to the religious "icon" as a window into spiritual meaning, and the picture space as a window into an imaginary landscape in Western modernist abstract and figurative

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<sup>7</sup> See El Lissitzky, "Exhibition Rooms," in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky. Life - Letters - Texts*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968, 366-368.

<sup>8</sup> Lev Manovich, "Avant-garde as Software", From *New Vision to New Media*, <http://www.manovich.net/ARTICLES> [accessed 18 November, 2003]

painting. However, the new environment of digital media imparts a different ability to images, sounds, and texts - *interactivity*. Interaction is extended beyond eyes and hands on the page, to the creation of a text where the hands electronically manipulate the new image/sound/text. *blackBOX* utilises non-religious icons for movement through its narrative, and unfolds through active engagement with these screen icons. According to Lev Manovich the emergence of 'new media' as a European term was referred to by "European artists, designers, architects and photographers: Jan Tschichold<sup>9</sup>, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy<sup>10</sup>, and Le Corbusier<sup>11</sup>. Thus:

Although nobody, as far as I know, published something called New Cinema, all the manifests written during this decade by French, German and Russian filmmakers in essence constitute such a book: a call for a new language of film, whether it was to be montage, "Cinéma pur" (also known as "absolute film"), or "photogénie." Similarly, although not declared in a book, a true visual revolution also took place in graphic design thus "making it new" as well (Aleksander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, etc).<sup>12</sup>

*Ridley Scott's Blade Runner* also influences *blackBOX*, a Hollywood science fiction *film noir* "...set in Los Angeles, 2019, with a narrative that is structured and centred round Chinatown."<sup>13</sup> Like *Blade Runner's* hero Deckard, Nina the protagonist of *blackBOX* unveils aspects of her self and cultural origins in the course of the project. While Deckard's quest comes in the guise of 'retiring' replicant humans that stand in for aspects of himself, Nina's journey is a struggle and search for virtual objects that represent characteristics of her outer world and inner self. This search mirrors for the player/participant his/her own search for self-understanding. We are thus invited to consider the cultural artefacts that shape us and our deeper reservoirs of mythological ruins.

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography: a Handbook for Modern Designers*, trans. Ruari McLean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995);

<sup>10</sup> Although Moholy-Nagy's *New Vision* exhibition took place only in 1932, it was a retrospective of the 1920s movement in photography and which was largely over by the time of the exhibition.

<sup>11</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells, Architectural Press, Praeger, New York, London, 1963.

<sup>12</sup> Lev Manovich, "Avant-garde as Software", From *New Vision* to *New Media*, <http://www.manovich.net/ARTICLES> 18 November, 2003. [accessed January 2005].

<sup>13</sup> Like Hockey, "Re-reading *Blade Runner*", in *Cinematic Projections: The Analytical Psychology of C.G Jung and Film Theory*, University of Luton Press, U.K., 2001.

#### *Mythological Pandora and her Box*

The first mortals lived on earth in a state of perfect innocence and bliss....when Pandora expressed a strong desire to peep into the contents of the mysterious box...the noise seemed to increase, and she breathlessly applied her ear to the lid to ascertain whether it really proceeded from within...Jupiter had malignantly crammed into this box all diseases, sorrows, vices and crimes that afflict humanity and the box was no sooner opened, than all these ills flew out...in the guise of horrid little winged creatures...pricking and stinging them mercilessly. They flew through the open door and windows... It was well for Pandora that she opened the box a second time, for the gods with a sudden impulse of compassion had concealed among the evil spirits one kindly creature HOPE!<sup>14</sup>

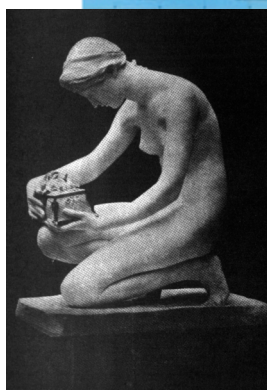


Figure 24. Contemporary map of Greece and Islands and Pandora and her box<sup>15</sup>

One of the aims of this research was to investigate the connections between the elaborate *taksim* music of *Rembetika* Greek blues and the improvisational musical pattern in north Indian melodies and Middle Eastern music. The *modal* drones of the Greek Orthodox Church combined with Arabic *modal* ‘roads’ brought to Greece with the mass migration of people from Asia Minor following the civil war in Turkey. The lyrics speak of the hopes, dreams, joys and sorrows of Greece’s urban refugees:

<sup>14</sup> H.A. Guerer, *The Classical Myths of Greece and Rome*, Senate, London, 1994, p17.

<sup>15</sup> Guerer op cit p21.

*THE BAGLAMAS (1928)*<sup>16</sup>

In the upper districts, two dervishes  
are siting smoking joints...  
It's the "loulas" and "kalami"  
that have reduced me to this sorry state  
the weed, that a widow taught me to smoke  
she turned me into a tramp and an addict



Figure 25. *Baglamas* a miniature stringed *Bouzouki* shaped instrument<sup>17</sup>

*IF I DIE ON THE BOAT (1920)*

Ah if I die what will they say?  
some fellow dies  
a fellow who loved life  
and enjoyed himself  
*Aman! Aman!*  
Ah if I die on the boat  
throw me into the sea  
so the black and salt water  
can eat me ! *Aman! Aman!*<sup>18</sup>



Figure 26. A Greek woman *Stavroula Petala* born *Athens 1926* in *blackBOX*  
Cairo, Egypt was her home until she migrated to Australia 1948

*Odissi* dance comes from the state of Orissa in east India, bordering

<sup>16</sup> *Baglamas* is a miniature stringed *Bouzouki* shaped instrument, traditionally hidden under a prisoner's coat. These lyrics are traditional and sung by Antois Dalgas from Gail Holst, *Road to Remetika: music of a Greek sub-culture, songs of love, sorrow and hashish*, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni, Evia, Greece, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> *Baglamas* from Holst op cit p70.

<sup>18</sup> *Zembekiko*, Anonymous. Several versions exist. *Katsaras* recorded these two verses circa 1920, USA, from Gail Holst op cit, p85.

the Bay of Bengal. *Jagannatha*, the Lord of the universe, is worshipped as the reigning deity of *Odissi* dance.<sup>19</sup>

Hindu art is like a pictorial script which expresses the subtle thought of its mythology and philosophy. Idealistic and symbolic, it exudes a deep sense of mysticism. The solid rock is made to live and give the impression that nothing is static. Ideas of space and time are woven into rock... The Hindu artist regards man in his spiritual, intellectual and physical attributes only as the microcosm in the macrocosm... his subjects are classical themes, the passive and active forces in the Absolute... in fact, everything from creation to destruction of the Universe...<sup>20</sup>

*Lord Jagannatha* is :

...the fusion of more than twenty religions and cultural trends. He is claimed as a *Savara* God . The *Savaras* (*Saoras*) numbering more than one million, now living in Orissa claim themselves to be the earliest inhabitants of Orissa and according to them, an old Saora tended the image of *Jagannatha* a before it found its way to its present home in the great temple at *Puri*. This legend also finds mention in the later *Puranas*.

Some ascribe *Jagannatha* a to be a Buddhist image; some ascribe him as a *Jaina Tirthankara* and *Chaitanya*; the great *Vaishnavite* prophet called him an avatar (incarnation) of *Vishnu*. The priests who serve in *Jagannatha* temple are both *Brahmins* and non-*Brahmins* including the tribal (*Daitapati*). People of all classes are treated equal inside the campus of this temple . This is the unique characteristic of *Jagannatha* religion.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 27. *Lord Jagannatha*, along with his sister *Subadhra*, and brother *Balabadhra*, forming the holy *Hindu* Trinity

<sup>19</sup> Before the performance any *Odissi* dance begins, icon statues of *Lord Jagannatha*, who, with his sister *Subhadra* and brother *Balabhadra*, form a version of the Hindu holy Trinity, are placed on the stage. This is distinct from the *Bharata Natyam* dance style where *Shiva* is the lord of the dance in his manifestation as the *Nataraja*.

<sup>20</sup> Mathuram Bhoothalingam, *Movement In Stone*, Soumani Publications, New Dehli, 1969, p1.

<sup>21</sup> *Odissi Dance* <http://www.odissidance.com/Heritage/People.htm> [accessed 18 November 2003]



## Orissa Location Map



Figure 28. Map of the state of Orissa, Indian sub-continent<sup>22</sup>

In the research and documentation of the *Odissi* form of dance, I worked with Ileana Citaristi<sup>23</sup>, an Italian born classical *Odissi* dancer. I videotaped her performance of an *Odissi* dance item, *Mangala Charan* at the Tom Mann Theatre, Surrey Hills, Sydney, Australia, 2003. This recording was incorporated into *blackBOX* and formed one of the performances discovered by the protagonist Nina. At this time, I also conducted an interview with Ileana in which she talked about her philosophy concerning the cross-cultural performance of dance.

Tatiana: “You are from the outside. You are not indigenous, you are not Indian. There is a term as it is referred to in linguistics – the third term- a third space created, have you created a third space or have you entered this dance form?”

Ileana: “...well actually the personal interpretation is the third space [as it is referred to in linguistics]...these things come together and what comes out of it?...[Tatiana: is there is any Italian in there?] Yes. I was happy when you said, you can make us understand because you come from the outside...”

In many ways, Ileana Citaristi resembles my own relationship to

<sup>22</sup> Maps of India <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/orissa/orissalocation.htm> [accessed 22 February 2005].

<sup>23</sup> Ileana Citaristi's Internet site <http://www.kalinga.net/ileana>, Address. Dr. Ileana Citaristi 1965, Bindusagar (West) Bhubaneswar - 751 002 Tel/Fax: 91-674-2433779.



*Odissi*. The act of learning and participating in the dialectical process of dance created a space for my own understanding. I was taught that classical Indian dance is an ancient form of worship, a spiritual offering to God. In traditional terms, dance emerged as a devotional offering to the divine. The act of watching this dance, and participating in it is understood as a form of *Bhakti* (devotion) that would provide salvation and purification.<sup>24</sup> I, however, entered into a relationship with my dance teachers with an open mind and from an aesthetic point of view, concerned with formal, musical and bodily representation.

The reinterpretation of this form of dance in the digital domain, the existence of a living ancient form in the face of ‘modernity’, and its survival within the diasporic communities of Indian heritage is crucial. Indeed, the majority of Ileana’s audience in Australia was made up of immigrants of Indian ancestry from South Asia, Fiji, Malaysia and South Africa. Ileana herself was born and brought up in Venice, and, after a successful academic career as a scholar of Eastern mythology and experimental theatre arts performance, she left Europe to pursue a dancing career in Orissa, India with India’s acclaimed dancer Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She states on her website:

I was in search of a land where I could express in a total and unrestricted way those inner questions of the soul that could not find satisfaction in any of the solutions offered by the present patterns of living of this western civilization. After completing my doctorate in philosophy and having worked for some years in both traditional and experimental theatre in my own country, Italy, I followed the callings of ancestral and inexplicable paths and reached this land of Orissa. Here, completely dedicated to the sacred art of Indian dance at the feet of my guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, I am able to give shape to the inner striving of the soul and overcome the anxiety of human existence.<sup>25</sup> <http://www.kalinga.net/ileana/index.htm>.

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<sup>24</sup> “Spirituality is the core of Indian art. Evolved out of spiritual passions, art in India has gone hand in hand with religion since time immemorial. Be it sculpture, architecture, painting, dance, music, the theme of the artist is rooted in religion; the urge is as much spiritual as aesthetic. While religion is a matter of faith, spirituality is a divine experience of communion with the divine.” [www.odissidance.com/Heritage/Tradition.htm](http://www.odissidance.com/Heritage/Tradition.htm) [accessed 18 November 2003]

<sup>25</sup> Ilean Citaristi <http://www.kalinga.net/ileana/index.htm>

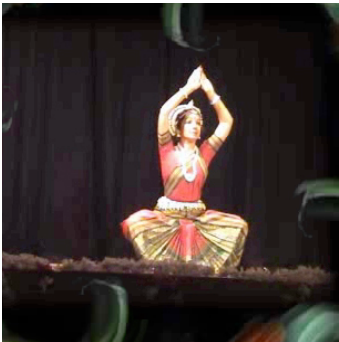
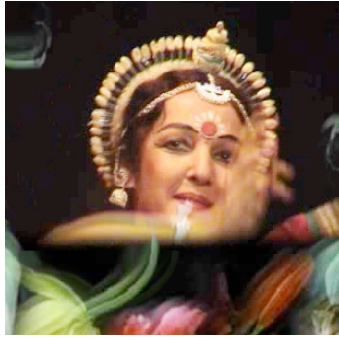


Figure 29. Ileana Citaristi performs *Odissi* dance *Mangala Charan*, Sydney, 2003<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Performance Text, *Mangala Charan* (Odissi Dance) performed by Ileana Citaristi, choreography by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Tom Mann Theatre, Surrey Hills, Sydney, Australia, 2003, Cinematography Tatiana Pentes, Direction Tatiana Pentes.