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## Keynote Speaker

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## Synaesthesia and Cross-Modality in Contemporary Audiovisuals

In experimental electronic music, and beyond, audiovisual practice is proliferating. In particular, the ideal of tightly coupled or synaesthetic audiovisuals has a renewed cultural currency, and is manifest across popular and experimental domains. Automated techniques such as analysis-driven visualisation, and more direct transcodings, seem synaesthetic in their literal cross-wiring of one mode with another. In this paper I will pursue the notion of synaesthetic media by setting this practice and its techniques against neurological theories of synaesthetic experience. Does this work seek to induce, simulate, or perhaps teach, synaesthetic perception? If so, are there contemporary cultural conditions that underpin that aim, or is this work simply a continuation of the long tradition of "visual music"?

As a counterpoint, an approach based on theories of cross-modal perception is proposed. Audiovisual work emphasises a process of perceptual binding - the formation of correlations between elements in the sensory field. Bindings across sensory modalities are powerful and readily formed, but also commonplace, unlike synaesthesia. Science suggests that such cross-modal correlations are crucially useful in perceiving our environment and identifying a single underlying source or object. Yet if audiovisuals offer us objects for cross-modally bound perception, what is the underlying object that they, or we, infer? Is it the source data or signal - the sound being visualised, or the video being sonified; or is it in fact the map, the structure of the transformation between modalities? Pursuing these questions positions contemporary audiovisuals within a broader context of new media practice, and suggests that their significance lies partly in their ability to feel out the abstract forms that underpin digital culture.

### Biography

Mitchell Whitelaw is an academic, writer and artist with interests in new media art and culture, especially complex generative systems and digital sound and music. With a background in music and the visual arts, his work has continued to move between media. His sonic work has emphasised live sampling and improvisation in the ensemble Omnivore (with Phil Slater and Greg White), and in solo performance and recording. In 2001 his work with processed field recordings was released by Irish label Fällt in their celebrated invalidObject series. More recently he has been investigating audio mosaicing techniques and data sonification. 2006 saw a return to

visual and interactive work, after a long hiatus, with the generative series boom.

Whitelaw's writing has also spanned sonic and other new media modalities, with a focus on generative techniques and an approach based on technically engaged critique and interpreting the work in its cultural context. His writing on sound and music has focused on the "post-digital" scene, analysing its wider implications and its own discursive constructions in papers such as "Inframedia Audio" (2001) and "Sound Particles and Microsonic Materialism" (2003). In 2004 his work on artists using artificial life was published in the book *Metacreation: Art and Artificial Life* (MIT Press, 2004). Other recent work has considered creative data sonification, and critical approaches to generative visual art. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Creative Communication at the University of Canberra.