END OF CINEMA / END OF WORLD

This essay observes how the evolution of cinema over the last decade has altered our relationship with the silver screen seemingly forever. Films are made today with technologically different processes, viewing habits have changed in myriad ways and artists are responding to and using these changes within their practices. An exhibition exploring artists’ reflections on cinema in 2010 requires diversity of media and approach in order to evaluate the past and to look forward to what Cinema 4.0 could be. At a time when serious cinema is at odds with the dumbing-down of film culture, artists are seeking to mine and use its archive.

We look to artists (and our reflections on their work) to see the world we inhabit anew, to skew the familiar towards other potentials. To expose the range of contemporary artistic approaches that probe cinema we must navigate different terrains and angles. This essay eschews one direction in favour of several contextual strands that are reflective of the artists’ work in UnSpooling – Artists & Cinema, without talking about specific examples. Read this metaphorically as equivalent to Breton and Vaché charging between cinemas in Nantes (or the surrealist game of exquisite corpse), splicing together new readings and possibilities to fashion a fuller sense of artists’ use of cinema as inspiration.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF MAX CASTLE

In Flicker, Theodore Roszak’s eulogy to cinema, the protagonist, Jonathan Gates ends the novel imprisoned on a tropical island and finally encounters the enigmatic film director Max Castle. Himself stranded over a number of years, Castle has spent his time splicing together fragile fragments of celluloid classics to create hybrid never-before-contemplated movies. His final creation consists of memorable cinematic conclusions followed by “an accelerating succession of ‘Fin,’ ‘Das Ende,’ ‘Fine,’ a graceful cascade of final frames artfully arranged into a mobile collage from scores of movies in all languages.” As Gates watches these cinematic gravestones, the film burns to ash in front of his disbelieving eyes. He becomes the only person to view Castle’s masterpiece, revealing the fragile majesty of celluloid. Much of the art in UnSpooling summons the spirit of Flicker, using cinematic fragments to forge new possibilities.

Roszak unfolds a tapestry of conspiracy, involving Orson Welles, scientists, Hollywood recluses, the Knights Templar, and the influence of the flicker. The eye actually sees two movies of equal length; through persistence of vision the brain erases the completely black parallel film so we only experience movies as

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1 This is a mis-translation of the Mandarin Character breakdown for cinema by a friend of the curators.
2 This is the provocative conclusive caption of Weekend directed by Jean Luc Godard (Athos Films, 1967).
4 For example Mario Rossi The End, Gebhard Sengmuller Slide Movie, Sheena Macrae Odyssey, Ben Gwilliam & Matt Wand I Married a Foley Footstep or Elizabeth McAlpine Hyena Stomp.
we know them. However Castle’s films transmit secret, subliminal other films into the viewer’s mind through the flicker. These are revealed to Castle’s scholar, Gates, by the mysterious Sallyrand instrument as he views obscene and ritualistic scenes of decapitation and orgies, which subliminally affect and influence those who watch. The Sallyrand is an apt analogy for the artist’s act in allowing us to see new glimpses and experiences of the familiar.

FREEZE-REMIX // With the advent of digital technology we can now perfectly freeze a single moment, to enable the spectator “to hold on to, to possess, the previously elusive image.” Now we all have the ability to fast-forward, slow down and freeze fleeting images from the movie archive. Nearly a half century after Warhol’s Empire and Screen Tests and Chris Marker’s La Jetee and over thirty since James Coleman’s La Tache Aveugle, we are all able to reveal the flicks for what they truly are; a sequence of still and magnificent images.

Artists are using movies as material in a manner akin to DJ’s, sampling and remixing a plethora of cinematic fragments to create something new. Perhaps artists’ are drawn to films’ status as a copy, but one that has no original (taking into account the master tape). Nicholas Bourriaud has talked of how contemporary artists are using works (including movies) created by others and re-interpreting, reproducing and appropriating them anew. “These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production, consumption, creation and copy, ready-made and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary.” Artists are pushing and pulling the movie about in a manner not disimilar to the use of more traditional materials like stone and paint, to create new artworks.

SOMETHING DARKER LIES UNDERNEATH // Nowadays artists utilise technologies that diminish their own presence within the gallery; projectors are near-silent and high definition images seemingly flawless, compared with the primal roar and crackle of 16mm apparatus. Artists and filmmakers now rarely shoot on film, preferring data wrangled from their HD cameras, to be edited on computers rather than the traditional splicer. David Lynch has famously stated that he will never return to the dinosaur of celluloid. Those who still use 16mm and 35mm film often transfer to digital formats for display in the gallery and movie theatre. We are living in a culture that aspires to be perfect and flawless, yet it is the cracks that often reveal the more interesting facets of life. Cast your mind to the wonderful scene in Blue Velvet where the camera passes from Disneyfied picket-fenced suburbia to the more exciting and disturbing place of dreams and nightmares (of Frank Booth), via the bugs and worms beneath the picture-postcard lawns. Perhaps analogue technologies can be seen as a parallel to the alternate realities seen in Lynch’s oeuvre, when compared to the glimpsed perfect worlds that rapidly uncoil in his films.

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CAMERA AS TOY // The more we see the lifeless worlds produced by the marvel of CGI, the more we yearn to see something at odds with this; the more imaginative and absorbing low- or no-budget experiments of fringe figures. There is a re-evoking of Annette Michelson’s 1966 musings on a future for cinema in the way artists (and countless YouTube posts) are using the explosion of accessibility in technology. “Within the structure of our cultures, ten-year olds are now filming 8mm serials in their own backyards. This, perhaps, is the single most interesting fact about cinema... the camera becomes a toy, and the element of play is restored to cinematic enterprise.” Current generations eschew or supplement the movie theatre experience in favour of surfing the web for, not only movie and TV clips, but also homemade films. What will this mean for the future of film? Will a more anarchic alternative to the Hollywood machine start to populate our collective consciousness?

EATING HERZOG’S SHOE // There is undoubtedly nostalgia for cinema’s past with the most compelling of today’s film-makers learning from and using, rather than rehashing and regurgitating the legacy of the silver screen. One yearns for Werner Herzog’s vision of the ideal film school, where boxing, juggling and languages would be taught to nurture an excitement of the mind in future film-makers. “It is not technicians that film schools should be producing, but people with a real agitation of the mind. People with spirit, with a burning flame within them.” Perhaps artists are the natural heirs to this vision, those who think not as technicians but as true creators, even, or especially, when using material already made and shown by others?

NOSTALGIC YEARNING // Not that long ago one could stay all day in the cinema on one ticket. Michael Tarantino has talked of his childhood visits to the movie theatre where his family would enter during the middle of a screening and wait for the film to begin again. “For now we saw the scenes unfold in front of our eyes that we imagined had taken place. Most of the time, of course, we had accurately predicted what we had missed in the first part of the film. It’s not so difficult when you know the end. But when we entered the point at which we had entered the cinema, entered the narrative, it was sublime. Everything had come full circle. Everything made sense. Time was predictable and it was on our side.” The A-B-C of narrative was surpassed; this is not that far from the way we experience artists’ films in the gallery.

In the Penny Arcades of yesteryear, a passer-by would pay a cent to escape real life and glimpse a yearned-for place. The earliest movie theatres used existing building where entrepreneurs swapped slot machines for projectors, to make viewing films a group activity. Contemporary artists’ adaptation of the gallery

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7 Annette Michelson, ‘Film and Radical Aspiration’ in Film Culture Reader, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York, Cooper Square Press, 2000) p. 421
8 Herzog famously ate his boiled shoe in front of an audience. See Les Blank, director Werner Herzog Eats his Shoe (Flower Films, 1980)
9 Paul Corrin, Herzog on Herzog (London, Faber and Faber, 2002) p.16.
11 Cornerhouse continues this legacy and uses the basement of the converted Shaw’s furniture store and in the space below the railway tracks of Oxford Road Station for it’s cinemas.
and other more temporary spaces to screen films harks back to the refashioning of demountable fairground booths and rented music halls. The bombed Eldorado movie theatre in Beirut survived as a tent with projectors that could be hand-cranked during power cuts, where “the sound of battle, sometimes coming nearer, sometimes moving away, merged with the soundtrack of the films.”

There is a curious romance to this, especially in light of the alternative; the bland yet coldly functional multiplexes. We no longer enter the cinema with a sense of danger or apprehension that the film might catch fire, like the demise of Max Castle’s final works, or imprison us in a overcrowded toxic fire-trap, as memorably seen in Giuseppe Tornatore’s Cinema Paradiso. Will we hanker for this lost image of the silver screen experience when it really is too late to ever get it back?

DIY LEGACIES // As cinema becomes safer and the digital revolution has distanced filmmaking from chemistry, a number of artists are re-evaluating the role of chemical processes in film; artists can see the “supposed liabilities and difficulties of film as assets.” These artists’ practices cut to the core of film as an alchemical process of light and shadow, recalling and building upon Plato’s cave and the camera obscura, pioneers like Muybridge, Edison, the Lumière brothers and Méliès and experimental cinema’s luminaries like Ken Jacobs, Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren and Anthony McCall. There is a kernel here that returns to the mystery and amour of early cinema and the possibilities of paracinema. Artists hybridise the projector, metamorphosing existing film stock to exploit the tactility of film or remove the camera altogether from the process. In Max Castle’s island isolation he created DIY films in which each frame contains parts of different films cut in jigsaw patterns to create strange, disturbing juxtapositions; Betty Boop struts over Nazi death camps, or hand-etched tiny figures are stomped and swatted by Fred Astaire’s feet and cane as he dances in Top Hat to the cheery Puttin’ on the Ritz.

EAGLE KINO EYE // When viewing a film our thoughts can often wander from the plot or become fixated on one incidental moment, whilst the film mechanically continues at 24 frames a second. Something is triggered in the mind by the images onscreen that evokes a long-lost memory; something niggles and dominates our experience. Just one scene, shot or gesture can make us focus on the mystique inherent within film. There are of course different viewpoints, and to position our gaze into alternative standpoints can also allow us to view movies in different ways. The projectionist’s viewing perception is a strange one; the soundtrack is replaced by the deafening roar of projectors, the image is far away and only visible through a small, scratched window and the narrative

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13 Tornator originally saw his film as an obituary to the movie theatre and the industry in general.
14 Examples include Kerry Laitala, Sally Golding and Roman Kirchner.
16 Paracinema was coined by Jeffrey Sconce to discuss a variety of films outside of the mainstream, it is used in experimental film studies to cite expanded cinema figures such as Tony Conrad and Ken Jacobs.
17 I was a projectionist for many years.
is disrupted by the projectionist’s duties. But for a few minutes there is a concentration onto the film that is unparalleled, as the wait for cue dots and the precise changeover of reels takes place before the audience’s unknowing eyes.

Manny Farber viewed movies with an eagle-kino-eye, seeing what others could never glimpse or interpret. The legendary critic would often stray from a holistic review, favouring incidental moments to grandiose objectives, and in turn would re-invigorate movies. Memorably Howard Hawks’ The Big Sleep was reduced to a eulogy over a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment, where Bogart looks up at a sign as he crosses the street. In film we often find a strange self-reflective mirror; we passively consume narrative reality, but what can lie beneath the surface layer is cinema observing and commenting upon itself. Slavoj Žižek suggests in The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema, that what appears, in a scene from Clarence Brown’s Possessed, as the reality of a woman standing near a slowly passing train is a metaphor for the viewer observing the magic of cinema. Beyond the veneer of storyline and action, films can contain, reflect and expand upon so much more. This is perhaps an attitude and approach akin to how some artists use and view cinema, in finding an elusive signifier to expand outwards from what the mass audience passes off as incidental.18

IT’S A WRAP // We can see that artists use cinema as inspiration in an infinite number of ways. They utilise the digital, not for its own sake, but as part of something more interesting. Often older technologies are referred to and used; content and concept are symbiotically connected in a wonderful engagement with process. Increasingly there appears to be an art world focus on the interweaving of contemporary practice and film, with a number of major survey books and exhibitions in recent years.19 This amplification of focus is conversely opening up complex questions about why artists are so intrigued by cinema. Rather than suggesting explanations that offer closure and conclusions, a Pandora’s Box is being opened.

We are now viewing films in new and previously unimaginable ways. No longer imprisoned within the movie theatre we flick through movie clips on YouTube - portable cinema as iPod shuffle. Barry Schwabsky20 has discussed how an audience only really wants the highlights of a film and merely puts up with story. But what are the consequences when goldfish audiences only skip to the best bits and filmmakers put a focus on spectacle over content? Hollywood, and consequently movie theatres are full-to-bursting with pointless re-makes, superfluous 3D content and mindless sequels - digital-candy- corn for the masses.

So what is the future of a cinema using technologies that only existed in science-fiction films a few years ago? The clues are all present and correct and yet excitingly there is no black and white answer. Maybe we have to take the

18 The approach of artists such as Wayne Lloyd, Ming Wong and Stefan Zeyen might fit here.
19 In 2010 alone there have been 2 major, multi-site, city-wide festivals, art berlin contemporary: Light Camera Action 7-10 October and art & film 6 May–5 June.
technology and, like the eight year olds of 1966 (or indeed today), be innocently playful in order to test the limits, rather than seeking precision and control. Or maybe we have to abandon the auteur concept and form filming and editing cooperatives that use shareware programs across cyberspace and make democratic films. Or perhaps we just have to take time to slow down, to reflect and scrutinise like Godard, Manny Farber or indeed Jonathan Gates. Or like Max Castle’s example, could it be a case of assembling what is already there, adding a little bit of the unknown and unexpected, and then coming up with something better.

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