n an interview in 1999, Isaac Julien responded to the question of why so many artists are using cinema as subject matter by saying: ‘It was as if so-called cinema has replaced huge paintings such as Julian Schnabel’s. Artists like Stan Douglas, however, seem interested in making work that has cinematic interest beyond the textual surface of the image – or its deconstruction. Yet in his show at Dia Center for the Arts he seemed concerned with something more old fashioned and Brechtian – with changing the rules of representation for its own sake.’ It is the latter part of this statement that interests me here. If this ‘Brechtian’ impetus could be considered ‘old fashioned’ back then, it is surely more so now, yet artists working with the moving image continue to invest in strategies that foreground the mechanics of the apparatus and underscore the illusion of performance. Of course there are exceptions to this, even within individual artists’ oeuvres, but perhaps it is time to move on from the predominance of this 1990s sensibility. Contrary to underscoring the illusion of film performance, what is more pertinent today is the creation of believable fictions in order to create what Hito Steyerl described in a recent article in Frieze as ‘an audiovisual politics of intensity’.

I want to begin my exploration with a classic example of foregrounding the mechanics of performance from the 1990s, Pierre Huyghe’s Remake, 1995, a video reproduction of Hitchcock’s Rear Window, 1954. In this piece, the actors perform ‘the acting found in the original film rather than the actor’s role’, leading the critic Jean-Christophe Royoux to state in his 1999 essay ‘Remaking Cinema’ that Remake is an updated version of Brecht’s alienation effect where the performance of an actor is put in parenthesis by the karaoke effect of quoting Hitchcock’s film by memory. While such work is interesting and clever, and coincided with 1990s death knells being sounded about cinema, the

Believable
Fictions
Deconstructive approach to cinema in moving-image work by artists often misses the extent to which classical film worlds – for example Hitchcock’s – are already littered with what we might now call reflexive moments but without foreclosing on the pleasures of imaginary identification. Jimmy Stewart’s view from his apartment of the apartments in the building opposite is already a staging within the film of the position of the cinematic voyeur and, in Vertigo, Hitchcock plays with intra and extra diegetic worlds by giving the spectator knowledge about the film world that is unknown to the film protagonist, again played by Stewart, who remains unaware he is being duped by Kim Novak for a large part of the film. These reflexive moments are integrated with the continuum of the film world and its performances in ways which allow us to access a range of emotional flows and rhythms rather than simply presenting ideological stereotypes of the machinations of desire.

I visited ‘Unspooling – Artists and Cinema’ currently at the Cornerhouse, Manchester (Reviews AM941), with this in mind and experienced a sense of déjà vu. Most of the works could be aligned with the two main strains of work that characterised a key exhibition from the 1990s in which Huyghe’s Remake was shown, namely ‘Cinéma, cinema: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience’ at the Stedelijk van Abbeumuseum, Eindhoven: artists who re-use or appropriate material from pre-existing films to examine components of the film medium, and those who use the techniques and grammar of cinema to create work in different media such as photography and installation. However, two works in ‘Unspooling’ offered me some reflections on film performance and film worlds that went beyond any ‘Brechtian’ impulses: David Claerbout’s Bordeaux Piece, 2004, and Ming Wong’s Life and Death in Venice, 2010.

At first glance, Wong’s installation might seem to fit well into the genre of citation that characterised much art in the 1990s in that the artist plays both characters from the Visconti classic Death in Venice. Two screens, suspended from the ceiling, face each other in the middle of the space with a nearby wall-mounted monitor featuring Wong in a white suit playing the Mahler soundtrack on piano. Conceptually, the piece is a clever staging of components of ‘primitive’ cinema, not only the piano accompaniment, but also in the Asian body’s acting-out of an encounter with European cinema, alluding to the global distribution networks of western cinema prior to Hollywood domination which, in turn, allows Wong in this ‘re-enactment’ to point to the global distribution of art in biennales such as Venice. In previous work, Wong, who is from Singapore, has acted out all the roles from Douglas Sirk’s Imitation of Life as well as Piero Paolo Pasolini’s Theorem, inhabiting characters that complicated their on-screen representations of racial and sexual identities. Life and Death in Venice is 16 minutes in duration and, as the citations are easily read from the work, there seems initially to be little reason to linger. However, the affective dimension of Wong’s performance is strangely captivating. The fact that he intentionally inhabits the screen personas of Dirk Bogarde and Björn Andrésen while obviously maintaining his own identity sounds almost ‘Brechtian’, yet Wong’s miscasting by age and race lends a curious resonance to his performance. The performance is continually threatening to unravel – he has not used ageing make-up and his blonde wig sits uneasily with his Asian features – yet Wong’s unfurling gaze and the contour and rhythm of his own performance invests it with belief and desire.

Claerbout’s Bordeaux Piece is a meditation on time, but it also raises questions of cinematic film performance. The whole piece is 13 hours 40 minutes long, which, given the constraints of gallery viewing, points to the work’s conceptual dimension as an idea about time rather than its embodied nature. The film consists of an approximately 12-minute scripted ‘drama’ that has been repeatedly filmed in ten-minute intervals over the course of a day, the separate sequences edited together, so that while the ‘drama’ remains pretty much the same, the light ‘dramatically’ changes. On the one hand, we have allusions to what for purposes of brevity I have been referring to as ‘Brechtian’ disjunctive effects: the soundtrack is separated – in the gallery space, you hear the on-screen sound of wind and birdsong which belong to the film’s performative temporality, while on headphones you can listen to the dialogue and the emotive music, the repetition of which supposedly deadens their dominance in order for the background sounds and sense of time passing to come to the foreground. However, while Claerbout says that the scripted drama could have been anything, the fact that it is based on an infamously moving piece of dialogue from Jean Luc-Godard’s Le Mépris – in which Brigitte Bardot’s character asks Michel Piccoli if he loves her arms, her hair, her buttocks, fragmenting her body to probe the existential question of love – imbues the mini-drama with a sublime cinematic memory that overrides the banality of the repeated performances in Claerbout’s transcription of the Godardian scene into a modern day Oedipal scenario involving a film producer, his son and an actress who is involved with both of them. Given also that the gallery context somewhat reduces Claerbout’s conceptual intentions, making the film seem more like a loop than a sequence, it is worth recalling the philosopher Stanley Cavell’s dictum – from his 1976 book The World Viewed – that projections of movie performers, which he classes as moving
photographs of the world, are such ‘in which human beings are not logically favoured over the rest of nature’. Claerbout’s desire to make what is usually relegated to the background of the narrative film come to the foreground is also at work in Le Miroir itself as a film world in which, as directed by Godard, neurotic performances between men and women are already being stripped away by the sublime illumination of cinematographic lighting. Perhaps after 13 hours and 40 minutes the intensity of Claerbout’s melodrama and its evocation of other cinematic performances might be dulled if one could bear to remain with the piece for its duration or if one could drop in at various intervals throughout the day, a luxury not many gallery-goers can enjoy.

Partly because the peripatetic nature of gallery space can be so unaccommodating to audience reception and attention, many artists have abscended to the cinema. Recent successes such as Steve McQueen and Sam Taylor-Wood have largely accepted the conditions of what we recognise as narrative cinema, but more relevant to my exploration here of how the strategies used by artists to deconstruct the illusion of film performance can instead engage affective truths of human experience are two films by artists in the New British Cinema section of the 54th BFI Film Festival: Clio Barnard’s The Arbor, an Artangel/Jerwood Foundation Open Commission, partly funded by the recently disbanded UK Film Council, and Gillian Wearing’s Self Make, also funded by the UKFC, as well as Arts Council England and Channel 4. Both of these doco-drama type films engage less with the cinematic than with the televisual, but both are premised on deconstructing their respective film worlds. This might be called their ‘art’ components, which undoubtedly bring novel elements to the cinema screen but which become so much less important than the affectivity generated by the film world’s performances.

The Arbor is a 90-minute drama documentary based on the life of the deceased playwright Andrea Dunbar who, before her sudden death in 1990 aged 29, gave us three plays, the most famous of which was made into the feature film Rita, Sue and Bob Too, 1986, for which Dunbar wrote the screenplay. The film is set on Brackenhill Arbor, a street on the notorious Buttershaw Estate in Bradford where Dunbar lived, which is used in the film to reflect on the social conditions of Britain’s poorest estates during the Thatcher years of the 1980s and their aftermath. A description of the film makes it sound like a typically self-conscious neo-documentary, which uses archival footage and talking-head interviews, but which underscores its own condition as representation. Scenes from Dunbar’s play The Arbor are ‘staged’ using sitting-room furniture on the estate green with locals comprising part of the audience, some actors play more than one part and, most importantly, the stories recounted by Dunbar’s family members being lip-synched by actors; a fact announced in the film’s opening credits – a strategy Barnard used in a previous short film Random Acts of Intimacy in 1998. The scripts of the talking heads are derived from live interviews that Barnard conducted with Dunbar’s family and friends prior to the shoot; the resulting 90 hours’ worth of interviews being edited to create an audio script. While mostly there is little delay between voice and mouth, the knowing divorce between the actor’s bodies and their voices at times creates a disjunction for the audience that is evocative of ‘Brechtian’ alienation effects. But as one gains familiarity with the rhythms and dialects of the voices, the on-screen bodies become strangely aligned with them so that one invests in the fakery. And, more importantly, the minute gap between the actor’s body and voice opens a space of reflection for the viewer that would not be available if body and voice were
signature masks, is here the technique of Method acting, which enables an actor to play a character by examining an element of their own personal experience. Seven respondents to the ad were directed to work with Method coach Sam Rumbelow in a series of improvisational workshops to release energies and personal experiences that would enable them to make films of their choosing using characters based on these experiences. Astonishingly, during the course of Self Made, the participants are paradoxically transformed into themselves. I am not asserting the truth of identity here – and certainly Wearing’s contextual references stem from the fabrications of reality TV makeovers and their Warholian 15-minutes-of-fame aesthetic – but, just in the way that some of Warhol’s staged performances occasionally revealed the truth behind the mask, although minus the Warholian sadism, the Method process here reveals that the trappings and suits of identity form around something that can be called a core self – that is, a trauma which all the participants possess in varying degrees.

In a workshop encounter between Rumbelow and one of the participants, Lesley, leading up to her choice of film, the coach enables her to reveal a core sadness at the heart of her being which she then taps into to project herself as a 1914 heroine who rejects the attentions of an admiring man rather than trust him although she longs for companionship both in ‘reality’ and in the ‘film’. Describing Self Made as a documentary about the Method-acting workshops which includes ‘end films’ from four of the participants, straddling genres from stage and TV-like scenarios to more cinematic scenes that are then commented on by the participants, makes the film sound as if its goal is to reveal the mechanics behind the artifice, but it is so much more than this. In an interview with Michael O’Pray in 2000, Taylor-Wood said that she was interested in asking questions about whether someone is acting because that is how they act or whether an experience is real because that is how they act. In showing how we can access the real of experience through fiction, Self Made takes this question to another level. In fact, the annoying parts of the film are the shots of the camera and crew that follow each participant’s ‘end film’. This underscoring of the fictional by revealing its process of construction seems somewhat condescending to an audience which, in this day and age, cannot but be aware of the signifiers of fiction and the real. The only ‘end film’ sequence where this underscoring works is in relation to the final ‘end film’ in which the participant, Ash, was having difficulty charming the old woman after he felt he should feel after a pregnant woman in the stomach. Rumbelow is called on set to help him reconnect with the emotional places they explored in the workshops. This is fascinating because the display of the construction does not destroy the magic of the construction, which is happening in two worlds at the same time and in both cases is equally compelling and true to form.

Film performance is a very powerful mechanism for enabling us to inhabit bodies and spaces that we would not normally enter into. Artists’ moving-image work generally tries to deconstruct identification with on-screen personages, situating them in self-reflexive scenarios that suspend the fascination a character’s performance might hold for us. But fascination does not mean we don’t realise it is a performance. Projected performances enable us to explore imaginative understandings of what it might be to be human. While ‘Brechtian’ strategies might inspire formal innovation, the projected photographs of the moving image emit performances whose energies and rhythms resonate with the core selves of captivated audiences.

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