Exhibitions

Unspooling: Artists & Cinema
Cornerhouse Manchester 2 October to 9 January

When the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm declared cinema the pre-eminent art form of the 20th century, thereby relegating painting to the 19th, one wouldn't have expected visual artists to agree quite so readily. Even with those whose practices generally steer clear of video or film, there has been a willingness to engage with the perceptual conditions that accompany the medium. The art gallery seems to have been renovated into another type of cinematic space, transforming the white cube into a black box. And in the exhibition 'Unspooling: Artists & Cinema', one finds concerns more familiar to the film theorist than the art critic: the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator, the disruption of narrative, and an abiding interest in a certain kind of cinema (namely, arthouse, independent and foreign-language).

While the centre of Jean-Luc Godard inspires reverence in many a film buff, there is hardly a flood of directors following in his footsteps. However, in this exhibition alone, there are three separate works that directly refer to Godard's films (and I can think of several others not included here). Sheena Macrae's Alphaville, 2008, shares both its name and content with the 1965 original, juxtaposing a snippet of the film with the negative image of the same footage. The protagonists, engaged in an elusive, typically Godardian conversation in a lift, appear doomed to remain in limbo, endlessly circulating from screen to screen without agreement or resolution. Like Stefan Zeyen's outdoor posters, lining the road outside the adjacent cinemas and echoing the traffic jams in Godard's 1967 film Weekend, Macrae's appropriation of a specific sequence from the film emphasises the inherent open-endedness of the director's practice and his refusal to conform to conventional narrative structures: 'A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.' David Claerbout's Bordeaux Piece, 2004, takes this approach to its illogical conclusion. In this film, a brief scene based on Godard's Le Mépris (Contempt) portrays a man, his son and a woman seemingly caught between the two. Claerbout, though, films and replays this encounter repeatedly, at different times of the day, so that the ambient light of the setting subtly alters within each recurrence. There is still a narrative at work here: though Bordeaux Piece runs throughout the day, allowing the 'real' time of the filming process to overtake the 'fictional' time of the scenario and thereby rendering the structure of the process visible. One sees an accrual of unsatisfactory takes and an endless rehearsal of the characters' complex, irresolvable differences.

Oedipal dramas also surface in Mario Rossi's The End (Untied), 1999, a painting of the closing frame of Hitchcock's Psycho. Although part of a larger series, the selection of this particular work is paramount. Hitchcock recognised the potential of title sequences in his frequent collaboration with Saul Bass (who also designed the typography for Vertigo and North by Northwest) and, in Psycho, the director even pre-empted 'the end' by abruptly dispatching the lead character prior to the halfway mark of the film. One is jolted by this occurrence, suddenly made aware that the storyline being followed is merely a prelude to another, unexpected narrative. (This disruption of the viewer's expectations recurs in Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's 2007 film Grindhouse, where they employed B-movie genre characteristics such as fake movie previews and a double bill of two separate stories. The conceit failed, with audiences confusedly leaving after the first feature, and the film was eventually re-released in two parts.)

There is a Brechtian quality to this urge to dispel illusionism, to fracture narrative in order to reveal the mechanics and tactics that make film 'work'. Such an approach also seeks to puncture the hermetic space of the cinema itself. Michael Borremans's The German, 2004-07, presents a diorama of a movie theatre, with miniature figures gazing at the close-up image of a man performing a sleight-of-hand trick. The (gallery) viewer is granted access to the recesses of the auditorium and the figures peering upwards, to see the screen within the screen. At the same time, they are implicated. The arrangement recalls Roland Barthes' recognition of the dual 'fascinations' of the cinema, the way that the spectator's submission to the film's narrative is echoed in the self-conscious awareness of their position, 'ready to
fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies. One suspends disbelief while, simultaneously, realizing the necessity of this suspension in order to 'enjoy' the film.

In stripping back the curtain to reveal the artifice of the medium, there is only a series of further illusions, other fictions. In place of some unattainable reality, one finds mediated representations. This might explain why so many works here function as a sort of homage to certain genres, techniques and scenes or the artist's formative experiences as a cinematic viewer. In the visual transcriptions of specific films by Wayne Lloyd and Harald Szymkla, there is a sense of the artist-as-intermediary, relaying the picture's narrative through language, painting and drawing, while the ephemeral figures in Juliana Moisander's projections refer back to both the technological origins of cinema - magic lanterns, zoetropes, stroboscopes - and the particular anecdotal history of its location, which is based on the artist's collection of memories and stories from gallery staff. However, it is Ming Wong who most radically intervenes in his source material. His three-screen installation Life and Death in Venice, 2010, puts the artist in the place of the central characters in Visconti's film of the (almost) same name. In the guise of the much older Gustav von Aschenbach, the artist longingly strolls across the city at night, as Tadzio, the young object of his affection. A separate monitor shows Ming clumsily performing Mahler's Symphony no. 5, the composition that scores the original film. Yet this is a very different Venice, filmed during the artist's involvement in the 53rd Biennale as the Singaporean representative. The main characters wander through galleries and installations, against the backdrop of world by John Baldessari and Tom of Finland (appropriately, given the story's homosexual themes), evoking the on Ragnar Kjartansson's durational performance in the Icelandic pavilion. In this film, Venice is a globalized hub of activity, and it is the loss of geographical and cultural specificity that informs Ming's wider practice, where Hollywood and Hong Kong, Fassbinder and Douglas Sirk, intermingle and amalgamate. As he once stated, in reference to the colonial history and the assimilation of immigrants in contemporary Singapore: 'I don't even know what a Singaporean is.' For Wong, cinema is a possible answer to this dilemma not simply a form of entertainment but a medium that is able to make up the very fabric of the viewer's identity.

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Julian Rosefeldt: American Night
BFI Gallery London 10 September to 6 November

German artist Julian Rosefeldt's American Night, 2009, is the kind of inter-textual homage to cinema that so fittingly resonates with the history of the British Film Institute. Filmed on a Sergio Leone film set in southern Spain and on the Canary Islands, Rosefeldt's intricate five-screen installation utilises the stylistic trademarks of the Western genre and reappropriates them for a contemporary audience. Through subtly interwoven dialogue, the artist is able to transpose the muted conservatism associated with the American Western genre into a world where the characters speak the same satirical language as TV host Jon Stewart, as well as the comedians from NBC's long-running late-night TV series Saturday Night Live.

The narrative begins on all five screens, filling the gallery with a sumptuous light. First impressions are both awe-inspiring and physically confounding. The epic setting of these rolling landscapes is simultaneously fragmented and all encompassing, encouraging the viewer to construct a 360° portrait of this historical world. At first, it seems that this is a conventional story, and that the artist is merely experimenting with form. On the far right screen is the lone woman standing in front of her wooden house amid the desolate terrain, her hood tilted upwards like a righteous Jane Seymour in Dr Quinn Medicine Woman. Elsewhere, a group of cowboys sit around a campfire with the spark of the flames glistening in their eyes. The rest of the screens bring us closer to the immense vistas through fetishized camera movements, which juxtapose long shots with close-ups, in the tradition of Leone himself.

Gradually, the iconographic references of the American Western genre are infiltrated with a different kind of reality. As the surrounding screens dim, our attention is drawn to the cowboys round the campfire. We listen to their quiet ruminations but something seems amiss. They are talking about the conception of American freedom. But this narrative is not a conventional one. Soon, one of the cowboys is trying out a George W Bush impersonation, another is melding in revels from a rap song while shifting and shaping in front of the camera like an awkward teenager. Is another cowboy explicitly referencing the kitsch genre of musicals? As the non-linear cowboy sketch unfolds, it becomes apparent that this American tale is a subversive one. Through spoofs of US political figures and a range of non-sequitors, Rosefeldt attempts to unravel the genre's innate hypocrisy. He achieves this by overtly referencing the parochial conservatism of the genre and by emphasising the cultural imperialism, bigotry and homoeroticism that underpin it.

Pertinent to this is the use of irony. Indeed, Rosefeldt uses the so-called spaghetti Western location to present a story that is seemingly American yet told from an outsider's perspective. Equally the artist's inherent affinity for the generic conventions of the genre brings a certain ambivalence to the work. Living in a globalised economy the message couldn't be clearer: as individuals we may seem to loathe US foreign policy, yet we are inextricably locked into a position where we find ourselves supporting it as a hegemonic power. This is primarily because we find ourselves consumed by the benefits of US capitalism - American goods and cultural exports. On a thornier note, perhaps European arrogance relishes the possibility of having another nation to poke fun at.