Artist’s cinema

By Laura Allsop

The future of artist’s cinema is pregnant with possibilities. The last decade has seen a marked increase in the numbers of artists using film in their work, with some making the leap and producing feature films for general release. Though artists have been working with film for decades, it is in recent years that it has become more and more embedded in artist’s practices, and increasingly accepted by institutions and public as an integral part of art production. Gillian Wearing whose film Self Made was premiered as part of the festival Abandon Normal Devices festival, and of which UnSpooling – Artists and Cinema is a part, has likened this to the way video art rose up in the 1990s to achieve the ubiquity it now has in artistic production.

In pondering the future of artist’s cinema, we might also ponder the future of cinema entirely. For artists are undeniably recharging some of the more tired aspects of filmmaking and pushing the bounds of what film can be. The past is very much present, however, in the current crop of filmic experimentations. The influence of film art pioneers such as Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol can be felt in much current artist’s film. Film’s archival nature also makes it an essential rootling ground for artists of all stripes, while its durational aspect allows artists to use it as a way of exploring memory and the past.

Not long before Self Made was first screened, I spoke with Wearing about the film and more generally about artist’s cinema. With rising numbers of artists not only working with film but also creating feature films for cinematic release, I asked her what she thinks they bring to the process of filmmaking. She said: “As an artist watching other people’s films, coming from an art background, I can see the potential that comes from slight naivety, and just trying, and being ambitious with the form.” Experimentation, coupled with rising ambition, is producing a dizzying array of results. Increased funding, along with an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the latest technologies, has allowed artist’s film to breach the gallery space and be disseminated into the wider world. It currently takes myriad forms, from big budget, high production features to lo-fi shorts, and can be viewed in an array of venues from multiplexes to museums and galleries. It can even, with the UK’s Jarman Award, make it onto television.

The work that has resulted from this boom in artist’s cinema resists easy categorisation. Unlike regular commercial cinema, which can often be compartmentalised by genre, artist’s cinema is disparate, heterogeneous. The title of the exhibition at Cornerhouse, UnSpooling—Artists and Cinema, is therefore apt. The diverse work on show from 19 international artists shows that there are no rule books for what constitutes artist’s cinema and the possibilities are endless. Rather than one dominant idea emerging, instead a multitude has the potential to unravel. When asked to define artist’s cinema, complications and caveats arise; how to define artist’s cinema in relation to film, for example; whether a feature film made by an artist can be classed as art of film; where video art sits in relation to all this. But it makes for a medium that is alive with potential, and hampered by few constraints.

One of the effects of artists such as Steve McQueen, Shirin Neshat and Sam Taylor-Wood making films for the cinema screen is a critical re-think of the relationship between the work and the audience. Viewers of Hunger, Women Without Men and Nowhere Boy behaved in exactly the same
way as typical cinema-goers, and submitted to the normally sedentary experience of watching a film. Yet even in the gallery space, viewers are being asked to submit to artist’s films in their entirety, rather than allow them to come and go as they please. The traditionally itinerant experience of watching film and video art is shifting into something much more focused. Some artists now make a point of demarcating screening times for their works. McQueen’s film *Giardini* (2009), for the 53rd Venice Biennale, required audiences to reserve seats at the British pavilion, which was transformed into a cinema, for timed screenings.

The change suggests a new level of control on the part of the artist to subject the viewer to a complete experience. It also suggests a changing relationship to narrative, with some artists producing the sorts of sequential narratives that require -- rather than simply advise -- sedentary concentration. But with artist’s film, movements inspire counter-movements. *UnSpooling* looks at how some artists negotiate this relationship between artist and viewer; German artist Harald Smykla, for example, turns the normally passive consumption of a film narrative into an activity with his ongoing *Movie Protocol* series, a form of live translation that scatters the attention of the audience rather than focusing it, and emphasising materiality over illusion. Others, meanwhile, take inspiration from Andy Warhol’s films and push to extremes what can be expected of an audience. Film works as long as David Claerbout’s 13-hours-and-40-minute-long *Bordeaux Piece* (on view as part of *UnSpooling*) or Christian Marclay’s 24-hour film work *The Clock* (currently on view at London’s White Cube gallery), push the viewer to the very limits of concentration.

Artists frequently raid the film canon for themes and ideas in their work, often using footage as a kind of found material. Re-enactment – which has been a feature of recent performance art – is now allowing artists to enter into the very stuff of films past and make them their own. Ming Wong’s re-filming of Luchino Visconti’s film *Death in Venice* – entitled *Life and Death in Venice*, on view as part of *Unspooling* -- is a loving re-enactment that shows the artist as both lead characters, as the angelic Tadzio and the middle-aged von Aschenbach. Two films are relayed on two adjacent screens, with a third showing footage of Wong playing the original score on a piano. Wong’s piece prises apart the interlocked narratives of these two characters, almost allowing the audience to make an edit based on which narrative they feel takes precedence at any given moment, challenging the authority of the original director’s cut.

*Life and Death in Venice* is part of the artist’s wider practice of adapting and re-interpreting films. He is currently working on a five-screen adaptation of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1968 film *Teorema*, in which he again plays all the parts himself. Small transformations in the original script take place, as one character – originally an abstract painter – becomes, like Wong, a video artist. With small tweaks like these, Wong makes a space for himself in a much-loved film, as well as making film fans sit up and start. In this way, he shows just how culturally embedded films are, and how certain images, scores, and bits of dialogue can stay burned in our memories.

In his 2008 book *Photography and Cinema*, David Campany discusses the relationship between these two very much related media. It becomes clear as the book progresses, though, that film is the dominant media. Even in the gallery – a haven for photography – film is beginning to dominate. Campany describes artist’s films comprised of painfully slow, single frames which manage to successfully ape photographs, as an example of the way film is out-trumping photography in art as
well as other channels, particularly news. It seems that film’s cultural ascendancy makes it a medium few artists can ignore.

Whether or not artist’s film will become a dominant feature of art production, however, remains to be seen. What is certain is that its future is bright -- a locus for experimentation and fresh ideas, but invariably with an eye to the past.