

## **The Projectionist's eye**

### **Andrew Bracey**

#### Abstract

For several years I was a projectionist and this time has had a major impact on how I look and think as an artist. The projectionist has a unique and rather strange way of viewing films. As the end of the reel approaches the projectionist forensically examines the film, keeping a watchful eye out for the cue-dots. These tiny, round scratches or holes appear in the right hand corner and tell the projectionist that they must start the motor of the machine and get ready for the 'changeover'. As they only appear for one-sixth of a second, there is an enormous amount of attention focused on this point. Time slows down and the sense of heightened awareness overcomes the projectionist, this is how I feel in front of a piece of art that really 'works'.

#### Full text

Cinema is often talked about as a place that suspends your disbelief; somewhere to suck us away from everyday life and for a couple of hours give over to something else. Maybe, though, cinema can be most magical when we are jolted out from this suspension back to the reality or rather unreality of our surroundings. As a child I can clearly remember a disrupted screening where the film became trapped, a single frame out of 24 momentarily appeared on the screen and quickly caught fire; the illusion of the movie was burst and a new wonder was created. I believe my love of cinema started then and later on an interest in getting beyond what was on the screen.

For several years I was a projectionist at Cornerhouse in Manchester and this time has had a major impact on how I look and think as an artist. The projectionist has a unique and rather strange way of viewing films; peering through a scratched, dirty window, the big screen appears miniature from the booth. The clattering roar of the projectors drowns out any semblance of a soundtrack and the narrative becomes deeply fractured as you dart from projector to projector to change reels. The intensity of the projectionist's gaze at points of a film coupled with complete indifference or inability to see a film as intended, at others is in parallel in many ways with how my practice as an artist operates; caught between intensity and attention and willful ignorance or attempt to see something from an alternative perspective.

A projectionist work is best done when no one notices that they are there; their presence is only visible when an error occurs such as when the film breaks or burns. Maybe this is a little like the role of a film director, curator, or artist. We don't necessarily notice the person or people behind a film, exhibition or a painting when it is done well, we do notice them and see their lack of ability or mistakes when something is done badly.

As the end of the reel approaches the projectionist forensically examines the film, keeping a watchful eye out for the cue-dots or cigarette burns. These tiny, round scratches or holes appear in the right hand corner and tell the projectionist that they must start the motor of the machine and get ready for the 'changeover', a term also used as the time between exhibitions in a gallery. As they only appear for one-sixth of a second, there is an enormous amount of attention focused on this point. Time slows down and the sense of heightened awareness overcomes the projectionist. When the next four frames of cue-dots appears, four seconds later, the projectionist switches over the projectors, creating a seamless continuation of the film.

A projectionist for example would see the film, zoomed in and in part, like this.

As opposed to how the audience sees the film like this. When films were in celluloid form, looking out for cue dots would allow the projectionist to get to know (often forgettable) parts of a film in intimate detail and I was struck by how insignificant moments can become potent when they are removed from the narrative of a film. The more time that I spent in the cinema, the more its influence crept into my studio practice.

*Frames* (2007) is a series of hundreds of different paintings on 35mm filmstrip. Each painting features an image appropriated from a different film. There are different groups of paintings derived from lists and polls, such as the top ten most profitable films, the top 100 films of the century selected by the film critics of Village Voice or the top 250 rated films by the public on [www.IMDB.com](http://www.IMDB.com). Each single image was taken from the approximately two hundred thousand possibilities that appear during a film. Previously to the ability (inherent in digital technologies) to satisfactorily pause a still image, the projectionist was perhaps the person (along with the editor) who was most aware of the potency of the single image within the film.

The choice of each image in *Frames* came from a long running interest in non-places and by extension non-moments. Each still image is essentially unimportant to the viewer within the overall narrative. For example in a film there might appear a brief shot of an aeroplane in the sky, which visually tells the viewer that the narrative has moved from one city to another, or a shot of a sandwich which pulls the audience away from the brutality of a war scene momentarily, but are unmemorable as an isolated moment. The paintings of these isolated moments are shown directly on the wall and are positioned in lines that directly correlate with the film's original placement on the lists. In this way new hybrid narratives can be created in the viewer's mind, from the relationship of the single still images/paintings to one another.

Then quote Mulvey page 27

I want to briefly show two artists I have previously included in exhibitions who I believe use the idea of the projectionist eye brilliantly. Dave Griffiths' work foregrounds the projectionist's cue dot. If the keen eye of the projectionist misses

these vital 4 frames when the near invisible circle appears in the top right hand corner, then the audience is made aware of the film-strip and projectionist as the film reel finishes and the countdown numbers appear. Griffiths isolates these cue dots to create wonderful collages manifested in diverse media including short films, microscope slides and another 'lost' medium, microfiche. Fragments of the films the cue dots come from are visible and the frame is manifested. The easily missed cue dots are here isolated and magnified by repetition and amplification by Griffiths.

Gebhard Sengmüller's Slide Movie reveals and breaks this illusion in an equally effective manner. A scene from a celluloid print of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* is cut frame-by-frame and placed in slide mounts. In the gallery, 24 slide projectors each show one frame every second to create a flickering recreation of the cinema projector, whilst also shifting attention towards the apparatus. Felix Stalder has said that this is articulated in the piece "so vehemently that's its message becomes a massage that is not only intellectually comprehensible, but can actually be physically experienced." The relationship of theory becoming practice and vice versa is perfectly articulated within the work, one that creates and explains magical facets of cinema.

My time working as a projectionist has greatly influenced the way that I look at films, art and more general everyday activities. I often observe things on the periphery or outside of the main point or focus, as a projectionist does. I have long been struck by something painter and film critic, Manny Farber, wrote about Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. He writes how Howard "Hawks in another spatial gem, gives the spectator *just enough* to make the scene work. One of the fine moments of the 1940's film is no longer than a blink: Bogart, as he crosses the street from one bookstore to another, looks up at a sign."<sup>1</sup> He says how this has more power (he uses the word charm) than in whole sequences of other films. For me this gesture by Bogart and how it can seemingly effortlessly portray meaning or a feeling, is aligned to the projectionist's attention put onto the cue dot.

To return to my beginning, of cinema somehow being more magical when something goes wrong I want to end with an extract from Theodore Rozak's cinephile triumph of a novel, *Flicker*. Somehow this extract fulfills, for me, perfectly the idea of looking harder, paying attention and so on and also of this idea of detail being entangled with an idea of collage, of shunting 2 things up against one another. Near the end of the book the main protagonist Jonathan Gates has been stranded on an island with magician-like film director Max Castle who has been on there alone for years creating things from film strips that are turning to dust.

p652

---

<sup>1</sup> Manny Farber, 1998, *Negative Space*, New York, De Capo Press, p6

this idea that the films are on one hand so inventive, but also fall apart as soon as they are shown requires an attention that goes beyond what is perhaps humanly possible, but creates a mindset certainly worth striving for