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Films for empty rooms

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a paper I gave for the first seminar of a series organized by the AHRC Artists' Moving Image Research Network, held at Chelsea College of Art and Design in January 2011 – 'Rewriting History: Interrogating the Past and the Question of Medium Specificity'. The printed version tries to preserve the informal style of the talk, including its jumps of focus and attention. At the risk of being churlish about the 'Moving Image', which after all is embedded in the name of the Network and that of this journal, I argue against the notion of a Moving Image culture and its tendency towards homogeneity. I strongly support MIRAJ and its mission, and am glad to be part of it, but I want to question some of the consequences, as I see them, of an inclusive approach to media art in all its many shapes and forms, to which the Network is dedicated in principle and deed. In particular, I think we need more critical distinction and debate in this ever-growing area of practice. I refer to some of the seminar discussion and objections the paper led to, in the hope of stimulating still more responses. The debate goes on, in events, conferences and the art press. Originally, I was going to name this paper after King Lear's angry growl 'I'll teach you differences', but that hostage to fortune pitched it a bit high. I settled for a milder title, and I hope a milder tone.

KEYWORDS

*experimental film and
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gallery video
medium specificity
projection art
film and video exhibition
materialist film*

1. Against Moving Images

I begin with four quotations by film- and video-makers, dating from 1967 to 2011. The first is a kind of motto, and short enough to cite in full. It is from a 2002 interview with Austrian film-maker Peter Tscherkassky:

Q: And what do you think of the work of people like Douglas Gordon, for example?

A: What you can tell from those works in the first place, is the total ignorance of the fine arts community towards avant-garde film-making, because what Douglas Gordon and Stan Douglas are doing really was done before, and it was done, in most of the cases, much more compellingly by the avant-garde. And everybody says: 'Oh! How wonderful! What a revelation!' This is simply unfair, but that's the way it is; and it's our business to point out that problem with the general discourse about recent media art. (Tscherkassky 2002)

This perhaps sets the scene: the relations between experimental film and video on the one hand, and gallery video on the other. Tscherkassky voices a common complaint from the experimental sector, which is that gallery video – 'the fine arts community' and 'media art' – ignore the avant-garde, the unknown ancestors of projection art. I will say something about this in a moment, and will come back to Douglas Gordon, but first I want to comment on the key term 'Moving Image'.

With apologies to everyone who has 'Moving Image' in their academic titles or publications, it is the term in this area with which I am least comfortable. I see it as only a step away from 'motion pictures', and the film industry, and while that might not be a problem for artists and critics who embrace the wider cinema as integral to an art practice, it is a problem for me, since I am more concerned with the opposition between experimental practice and the cinema as a whole. I prefer the term 'time-based media', as pioneered by David Hall from the 1970s to include all audio/visual media and live art, but I admit that this phrase is now a minority taste, though not wholly obsolete.¹

My quarrel with the 'Moving Image' is with both of its words. In this conjunction, the 'Image' is almost always taken to be 'representational', a substitute for the thing to which it refers, or a mimesis. By definition, this precludes abstract and electronic work that does not have stable, nameable or immediately 'given' iconic imagery, or where images as such are scrutinized and put under pressure. A very short list of practitioners who negate or question the iconic image in film, video and digital media includes David Larcher, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Peter Gidal, the 'Austrian Abstracts' (e.g. Norbert Pffafenbichler/Lotte Schreiber, reMi, Maia Gusberti) and LoVid.

The representational assumption depends largely, of course, on the compelling illusion that the 'Image' is 'Moving', or appears to move, and thus directly imitates the pattern of the experienced world. This primal and powerful effect dominates most contemporary cinema and mass media, as it has done since the birth of film in the nineteenth century. Almost by definition, moving images in this sense are just 'the ways things are', in the world and in its media representation. However, this term, moving, can be questioned too. Film-maker Peter Kubelka put it forcefully in a 1967 interview:

Cinema is not movement. This is the first thing. Cinema is not movement. Cinema is a projection of stills – which means images, which do not move – in a very quick rhythm. And you can give the illusion of movement, of course, but this is a special case, and the film was invented originally for this special case

1. The term 'time-based media' usefully indicates that technologies are not identical with the media that they support. Film and video – along with performance art and sound art – are time-based arts, but they use different technologies (or, in the case of much live art, none). In turn, the technologies are used for countless other purposes, socially and industrially. 'Media' as used here is a cultural term, and is not defined by its machinery. It denotes a relation, not a thing.

[...] Cinema is not movement. It can give the illusion of movement. Cinema is the quick projection of light impulses. These light impulses can be shaped when you put the film before the lamp – on the screen you can shape it [...] Hit the screen – this is really what the frames do. The projected frames hit the screen. (Kubelka 1967: 290)

In an essay entitled ‘The Sound of One Line Scanning’, Bill Viola takes up the issues on behalf of video in similar terms:

The image we see on the surface of the cathode ray tube is the trace of a single moving focused point of light from a stream of electrons hitting the screen from behind, causing its phosphor-coated surface to glow. In video, a still image does not exist. The fabric of all video images, moving or still, is the activated, constantly sweeping electron beam [...] The divisions into lines and frames are solely divisions in time, the opening and closing of temporal windows that demarcate periods of activity within the flowing streams of electrons. Thus, the video image is a living dynamic energy field, a vibration appearing solid only because it exceeds our ability to discern such fine slices of time. (Viola [1986] 1995: 158)

I was surprised to find this coming from Viola, a major figure in the rise of gallery video, and of the immersive/iconic trend rather than the materialist one, but in the mid-1980s he was not yet making that kind of work. His view that ‘in video, a still image does not exist’ might seem to contradict Kubelka’s statement that film is the projection of ‘images that do not move’, but it seems to me that the way of thinking is the same. The underlying principle is that film and video – each in its own way – are constructed by and in material phenomena, and that illusionism is not inherent in either.

‘Film frames’ and ‘phosphor-coating’ may sound archaic here, but of course the film frame has become encoded in the lore and language of digital video, as have the electronic scanning processes that Viola describes.² My final quote is from a younger artist, Simon Payne, who works wholly in digital media, generating colour and shape directly from the computer (i.e. without a camera). He picks up the dialogue in an online essay published in late 2010:

Unlike the medium of the filmstrip, the video signal is colourless. In fact a video signal is not only colourless but invisible. (The amplitude of a video signal can be measured but one cannot exactly see a video signal). The difference between colour in film and video and where it seems to inhere reflects one of the most significant differences between the two mediums [...] Looking closely at a video image on a cathode ray tube, or a flat screen monitor, one can clearly see the clusters of small closely spaced red, green and blue cells that make up its surface. (Payne 2010)

Payne’s essay is about colour, and is therefore more specific in focus than Kubelka’s and Viola’s discussions, but I was struck by the shared emphasis on signals and surfaces, and also intrigued by the physical embodiment in the call to ‘look closely’ at the monitor, to detect the colour particles, a bit like peering at a painting to see how the thing was done. But more importantly, it participates in this dialogue about material: Payne’s ‘invisible’ video signal echoes Viola’s ‘trace of light’ and Kubelka’s ‘quick projection of light impulses’, just as they all share a rhetoric of fabric and surface: Kubelka’s ‘screen’, Viola’s ‘fabric of video images’ and Payne’s ‘clusters of small closely spaced cells’. The intermittent and interchangeable flow

2. For a recent account of frames and phosphors, see Cubitt (2011: 21–35).

of signals invoked here is the core structure of digital video. A vital aspect here is that the argument is not 'medium-specific' in the usual sense, that is to say it is not about technologies. My citations are from a film-maker, a video artist and a digital artist, respectively. Each of them casts doubt on the apparent stability of image and illusion in 'Moving Image' media, and seeks to decode their hidden effects or to deploy them as an alternative to mimesis as the source for art.

2. Dark Rooms and Light Spaces

I now want to jump to exhibition and publication, and to a single year: 1996. In March, the Arts Council published a *Directory of British Film and Video Artists*, with over 120 entries, including many installation and gallery projection artists, such as Susan Hiller, Isaac Julien and Mona Hatoum. The word 'Artists' (rather than 'film- and video-makers') in the title picked up the new usage of this term (as in 'Artists' Film' and 'Artists' Video'). However, with the telling exception of Tacita Dean, it entirely omitted those who came to dominate gallery video in the next decade: Douglas Gordon, Steve McQueen, Gillian Wearing and the yBas in general (Curtis 1996). These exclusions were not the result of any policy – the new artists' work was emerging in the couple of years it took to produce the book, and many contributors (including me) did not know enough (or, in some cases, anything) about them.

That same year, almost to the month, Ian Christie and Philip Dodd curated the path-breaking exhibition 'Spellbound: Art and Film' at the Hayward Gallery, which did indeed have Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), and films by Steve McQueen, alongside established artists who made films and installations (such as Peter Greenaway), feature film-makers (like Terry Gilliam and Ridley Scott) or artists who reflected cinema in other ways (such as Eduardo Paolozzi and Paula Rego).³ Its US parallel and contemporary was 'Hall of Mirrors' in Los Angeles, held in the same year of 1996, which similarly put art and cinema under the same roof (Ferguson 1996).⁴

It was indicative and even apt that a divide appeared at this point. First, along with the young British artists (yBas) and similar art phenomena internationally, 'Spellbound' showed that you could be a film artist without passing through the avant-garde mode (whose relation to 'fine art' was always problematic). Sometimes this was a deliberate choice, but soon it became a regular happenstance as gallery video grew, in denial or ignorance of earlier movements, during the decade after 1996. Second, it validated the gallery (in this case the Hayward) as a more-than-accidental site for film and video projection, at a time when developments in technology, especially in projection and playback, were making this more possible. Third, it folded art and cinema together in a new way, with a more positive embrace of the cinema-institution than was ever shown by the classic avant-gardes, the structural film and the video-art movements, most of whom were critical of cinema and TV spectacle, ideology, modes of identification and cultures of display.

Of course, this account may be too sanguine, and it was challenged as such, in the seminar discussion, by the co-curator of 'Spellbound', Ian Christie. He pointed out that, while it may have seemed

possible to do things more seamlessly, in fact *Spellbound* was a transitional, hybrid affair that included some pretty harebrained schemes. I think it was pointing towards notions of the cinematic not necessarily involving the presence of film, as in Greenaway's installation. It was gesturing towards a concept of the cinematic that didn't involve showing bits of film, but it did bring elements of it onstage. (Christie 2011, discussion)

3. The artists in 'Spellbound' were Fiona Banner, Terry Gilliam, Douglas Gordon, Peter Greenaway, Damien Hirst, Eduardo Paolozzi, Steve McQueen, Paula Rego, Ridley Scott and Boyd Webb. Of these, only Peter Greenaway was included in the Arts Council 'Directory' (see Christie and Dodd 1996).

4. Exhibition organised by Kerry Brougher.

Christie pointed out that ‘Spellbound’ remained unmentioned by the Hayward in its celebration of its 40th anniversary (2010), along with the exhibition ‘Film as Film’ (1979), and he concluded that ‘the Hayward does not see itself as the proud launch pad of moving image culture’.

The culture of ‘transitional’ and ‘hybrid’ times was similarly invoked by Michael Mazière, who rightly reminded the seminar that in the same year, 1996, the LUX event ‘Pandemonium’ at the ICA included Mark Wallinger, Gillian Wearing, Jackie Irvine, Keith Tyson and Sarah Lucas. They all showed work, he said:

in the context of an artists’ film and video festival. We tried to bring together these two factions, taking over the ICA in what was quite a chaotic, but significant event, which proposed a third position, suggesting that there could be a dialogue between those two areas of work. It brought them together physically in space. For an artist-run organisation, it was important to look at a new strand of work that was coming out. We weren’t at all close to it and I don’t think that LUX is now. But I don’t think it is good to polarise them. (Mazière 2011, discussion)

The point is well taken, even in my own polarizing, that it is not always a choice between the closed cinema and the open gallery, the much-vaunted ‘black box’ versus ‘white cube’. Experimental cinema and video have often enough operated in a liminal space between the two. Although commercial galleries were largely off-limits to most London Filmmakers’ Co-op structural film-makers, as far back as 1972 Malcolm Le Grice had argued that expanded cinema needs gallery-scale space to activate film experience, despite and beyond its always problematic relationship with fine art (see, e.g. Le Grice [1972] 2001: 55–63).⁵ For earlier US artists (notably Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Stan Vanderbeek and Carolee Schneemann), and others in Germany and Poland, galleries – in the sense of open spaces for multi-projection and live art fusions – were highly desirable venues. A simple contrast between single-screen or single-channel experimental film/video (then) and multi-projection gallery video (now) has no foundation. Video artists in the 1970s and 1980s regularly showed in gallery or warehouse spaces, with monitors as quasi-sculptural components of the installation. These were rarely seen or heard in complete darkness. Sound was as important as image. The issue was not the space as such, but who owned or controlled it, and here the non-commercial nature of film and video art did not endear it to most fine art private galleries, while public museums were similarly disdainful.

In a 2010 essay for *Millennium Film Journal* (Rees 2009/2010), I tried to trace the ‘hidden history’ of UK 1970s multi-projection art.⁶ I also documented the exclusion, willed or not, of the experimental lineage from most recent critical writing about gallery and projection art, including the decisive role of collectors, notably Pamela and Richard Kramlich, in promoting an almost exclusively American and post-1990s point of view about video. I lamented the fact that even when Le Grice, Gidal, Hall, Rhodes, Raban and others are mentioned in books and catalogues from this milieu (which is rarely), it is as if they only made some work in the 1970s and then disappeared – which they have not – and/or had no influence at all on any later work. This despite the continuing appearance of younger talents (notably here, in the United States, and in Germany and Austria) who take their cue from the Co-op/London Video Arts type of experimental traditions. I concluded that it was not simply a matter of acknowledging historical predecessors, but also that current gallery video is a different phenomenon from the experimental route and has little to do with it. In that sense, the exclusions can be expected. I may have set off a red herring in arguing that many contemporary gallery video artists know or care little about the experimental tradition, but it is important, I think, whether or not artists identify with that tradition. Certainly, the

5. Le Grice also wrote consistently on this topic in his regular reports for *Studio International* during the 1970s.

6. More fine detail can be found in *A History of Artists’ Film and Video in Britain* by David Curtis (2007), and in an excellent close-up investigation of the so-called ‘Filmaktion’ events by Lucy Reynolds, *Defining Filmaktion*, British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection, www.studycollection.co.uk/filmaktion/index.html.

critical debate, such as it was, from c. 1996 for a decade afterwards, roundly ignored the film and video avant-gardes and treated gallery video as wholly unprecedented.

Opinions differ about this, and I can see that my argument is somewhat Manichean, but I think it is borne out by gallery artists themselves, notably Douglas Gordon and Tacita Dean, who graduated from the Slade in 1990 and 1992, respectively. Douglas Gordon, the avatar of experimental film for my present purposes, says that he first experienced film through its 'televisionization' on the VCR. Later, at art school, he '[...] learned that there had been a previous generation who were looking at film frame by frame in order to exercise the desire for the truth of a movie. It was the same process, but with an entirely different motive.'⁷ That 'different motive' seems to me to encapsulate the difference between the two spheres, although Gordon is here perhaps talking about film analysis rather than film-making as such. He adds that this is 'perhaps not a generational issue, but an experience issue', marking a difference in ideas rather than just in age group. In another statement, Gordon goes further in drawing the lines between his own practice and that of experimental film: 'Cinema is dead, going nowhere. Nobody can break out of the narrative structures demanded by mainstream audiences, except avant-garde film-makers, whose films nobody wants to watch anyway [...] I'm looking for something that might replace cinema, not film' (cited in Fried 2011: 20).⁸

Redrafting the boundaries in a different way, Tacita Dean has often affirmed that she is 'an artist who makes films', rather than a film-maker per se, a strategy she formulated as a student at the Slade, where she opted to study in the painting department rather than the media studios. When asked at her entrance interview whether she was going to make films, she recalls that she lied and said no. Given her later career, this seems as decisive a statement as one can get about her intention to situate her work as a gallery artist independently of the traditional networks for the dissemination of experimental work via London Video Arts and the London Filmmaker's Co-op, these two institutions later amalgamating into the LUX.⁹ But while I was revising this article for publication, along came a new work by Dean – *Film* (Tate Modern Turbine Hall, 2011) – that seemed to refute my views on this distinction, and indeed her own former ones, and to support the many objections about this issue expressed at the seminar.

Film is a large-scale installation, shot on 35mm with a Cinemascope lens on its side, so that it is seen in monolith-style portrait format rather than widescreen, alluding to the architecture of the exhibition space. Significantly, it adopts the tropes and traits of the abstract film avant-garde: montage, the filmstrip, multiple exposure, repetition, alternation. For Dean it is in 'the wonder space that is experimental film', an authored work 'about film' that was 'made in the camera'. Nonetheless, its production was far from the classic procedures and stance of the avant-garde cinema evoked here. The catalogue, or 'book of the film', lists no less than three Directors of Photography and four camera assistants, together with a panoply of other technicians, production staff and a caterer. Signalled by design-cliché visible sprocket holes – an image of them, not the actual ones that drive the projection – *Film* is a simulacrum of experimental cinema, or a tribute avant-garde film rather than the genuine article. Its ambition is undermined by facile and loaded images, and its materialist claim by romantic overstatement. I am intrigued by the artist's intention to align with experimental cinema, but doubt that this is achieved by piecemeal imitation of its visual language.¹⁰

Film seems to me to underline my argument rather than to explode it, and to imply that there are two worlds in projection art, roughly film/video experimentalism as against fine art film and video, admittedly with many overlaps between these realms. The question is not determined by the machines that artists employ or by whether or not they use celluloid. I suggest that the key differences are in the holding of quite distinct notions of subject matter, process, identity and identification, the placement of the spectator and the critique of the medium. I do not believe that this has anything

7. 'The Expansive Lens, Douglas Gordon, Peter Campus and David Ross in conversation', Tate Modern, April 2008, <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue4/expansivelens.html>

8. Gordon's statement is taken from *Douglas Gordon: Superhumanatural*, Edinburgh 2006, in the essay 'Cinema is Dead! Long Live Film! The Language of Images in the Video Works of Douglas Gordon' by Holger Broecker.

9. Tacita Dean's account of 'negotiating the divide between painting and film' was given at the Black Box Projector seminar in 2010 and is also found in her interview with Simon Schama (Dean 2011: 30–33): 'Dean was admitted to The Slade, on condition she promised never to make films. "You lied." I say. "I lied", she concedes'.

10. The quotes are from the wall panel at the entrance to the installation at Tate Modern. These are expanded in the substantial and impressive catalogue 'Tacita Dean *Film*' (Cullinan 2011).

to do with technology as such. Plenty of gallery video artists use 16mm film, while others make work for projectors-as-objects – but this does not equate with the experimental approach of ‘expanded cinema’, for example, whichever media are used.¹¹

3. Revisionism

Now, a mea culpa. I have sometimes been criticized for assimilating experimental film and video into art history, when really it is part of cinema history in a broader sense. I think I actually did try to emphasize the art history aspect in my BFI book *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, for reasons of perspective and propaganda (Rees [1999] 2011). But recently, especially after listening to William Raban at a 2010 Royal College of Art seminar, I have thought about it again. Raban argues that the cinema – defined as a collective space where we see the whole work in its entirety, not sampled, not walked through – is the main site of experimental practice, not the gallery (though he has himself made many gallery works).¹² Given the power of the cinema institution, and its lure for much current gallery art, this makes a good case for saying that this is where the projected (and yes, moving) image should be challenged. One guide for me here is Le Grice’s expansive notion of ‘the cinematic’ (Grice [1972] 2001, 2011). Another is a recent essay on ‘media-specificity’ by Nicky Hamlyn, which casts doubt on the post-medium condition to show that a specific medium can indeed shape a work, and not be interchangeable with another (all the examples he details are from new works by mostly younger makers).¹³

My simple contrast between gallery video and experimental practice is, of course, a crude one, and perhaps represents a phase that is now ending – or mutating – again. Whereas the 1990s gallery generation were often reluctant to refer to themselves as ‘film-’ or ‘video-makers’ – as opposed to ‘artists’ – many current practitioners no longer hold to this, perhaps because so much gallery video now references or reproduces the conditions of cinema, which is arguably another reason to challenge it. In two recent *Art Monthly* articles, Sophia Phoca (2010/2011) and Maria Walsh (2010/2011) seem to confirm this trend by arguing for the ‘return of the film-maker’. Phoca makes a clarion cry for restoring funding to artists’ film beyond the gallery, and criticizes the ‘haptic viewing’ of films in white cubes, in order to affirm instead that ‘disruptive spatial and temporal continuity challenges the possibility of complacent viewing’.

Walsh takes a different line, against ‘strategies that foreground the mechanics of the apparatus and underscore the illusion of performance’, which she sees as latter-day Brechtianism. Instead, she proposes ‘the creation of believable fictions’ and ‘an audiovisual politics of intensity’. Like Phoca she is lukewarm about artists who have ‘absconded to cinema’ by making mainstream-style features, and she critiques those artists who restage or recycle feature films – notably Hitchcock – without realizing that classic films ‘are already littered with what we might now call reflexive moments’, and are complex entities long before artists get to them. Rather, she favours ‘the fascination of performances [...] whose energies and rhythms resonate with the core selves of captivated audiences’. This call for more identification with the screen image is the opposite of my own view (I would prefer less identification rather than more, and therefore I do not believe in ‘believable fictions’), but it is an interesting shift away from gallery dominance.

Finally, a word about the title of this article: ‘Films for empty rooms.’ It comes from looking in reviews and catalogues at installation shots of gallery film and video that show a projected image on a screen and a row of empty chairs or benches in front. In the gallery itself, especially when there are only a few visitors present, there is a sense of ‘the film-being-projected’ rather than of the film itself. Watching video projection

11. Maxa Zoller is similarly polemical about the recent rise of artists’ ‘film labs’, which actually coincides with new threats to the medium, the first of which stems from the art industry where – a few exceptions apart – more polished, costly, pristine and tame films survive the commercial pressure of the art world. Film not only has to be ‘sculptural’ in order to produce commodity value, but most importantly there seems to be a strong safety net on the level of content’. Zoller cites ‘currently celebrated contemporary works’ by Rosa Barba, Ben Rivers (*This is my Land*) Rosalind Nashashibi (*The Quality*) and Daria Martin (*Harpstrings and Lava*), which ‘repeat theoretical and formal clichés, such as the installation of the projector as sculpture (Barba), the use of duration as a purely formal method (*The Quality*, *This is my Land*) and materiality as a strategy of sensual seduction (*Harpstrings and Lava*)’. She concludes that ‘these artists operate miles from the difficult and risk-taking images that can be created within a hands-on experimental lab where the artist is engaging directly with the apparatus of production, such as hand processing, and reworking their images on 16mm optical and colour printers appropriated or rescued from a dying film industry to disrupt the commercial aesthetic’ (Zoller 2012).

12. William Raban’s talk was given in a series of seminars (Black Box Projector) on film and the gallery held at the RCA between 26 May and 2 June 2010, organized by Andrew

in these circumstances is often a solitary experience, even – or perhaps especially – when there are others present. In the gallery, the habits of the museum take over, and viewers tend to ignore each other. It is a very different phenomenon from the collective screening space of the cinema, with its possibility for dialogue. The absence of the audience in the documentation of this work seems to me a sadly emblematic but authentic image of the gallery as a viewing space for media art.

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Vallance. Other speakers were Mark Nash, Karen Mirza, David Curtis, Maxa Zoller, Lucy Reynolds, Nicky Hamlyn, Tacita Dean and Neil Henderson.

13. 'Medium practices', presented at the Toronto International Media Centre in 2010, is published in the journal *Public*, 44, 2011, Toronto, Canada.