Cinema Spaces and Structures at the 52nd Venice Biennale

Maeve Connolly

While previous instalments of the Venice Biennale have been marked by novelty and visual spectacle, this year's international selection, curated by Robert Storr, is characterised by a relatively measured tone. The Arsenale, in particular, closely resembles a museum show in its mix of new and familiar works and emphasis on a number of core themes, including political conflict, economic exploitation and unequal power relations. Documentary photography features prominently, most often in the form of a series of colour images, such as those presented by Gabriele Basilico, Elaine Tedesco and Tomoko Yoneda. The series form also recurs in the installation of Yang Fudong's epic five-part film, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* (2003-2007), a work that employs metaphor and allegory to explore social and economic transformation. Each part is projected in a separate space, suggesting a parallel between the experience of the Arsenale and the progress of the Intellectuals through the Bamboo Forest.

Melik Ohanian's video installation *September 11, 1973 _ Santiago, Chile* (2007), is also epic in scope, combining footage from present day Santiago with commentary from *The Battle of Chile Part 2*, a feature-length documentary made by Patricio Guzman during the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973. Sound and image are separated, so that the commentary emanates from speakers opposite the main screen, beside a monitor displaying subtitles from Guzman's film, foregrounding the construction of history within both original and remake. Zoran Naskovski's *War Frames* (1999-2000), one of the few web projects at Venice, is also concerned with the representation of conflict but it directs attention towards the language of television through the assemblage of footage broadcast on Yugoslav TV during the NATO bombing in 1999. This focus on the construction of archives persists within the Italian Pavilion, most obviously in Emily Jacir's *Material for a Film* (2006). This collection of photographs, texts and clippings centres on the life and work of writer Wael Zuaiter, mistakenly targeted by Israeli intelligence in the aftermath of the 1972 Munich massacre and, more recently, misrepresented in Spielberg's *Munich*. Although it documents past events, Jacir's project is explicitly oriented towards the future, inviting speculation on the possible form that her film might take.

Mario Garcia Torres' exploration of the archive, entitled *What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax* (In 36 Slides) (2004-2006) is characterised by a whimsical emphasis on absence rather than excess. He stages and documents a reunion of a group of art students who may (or may not) have created a conceptual work while at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1969. Garcia Torres is ostensibly engaged in a process of discovery but as the absent work was conceived in the form of a shared idea never to be documented, its precise form can only ever be imagined. It is possible to identify interesting points of connection between these diverse archival projects and Gerard Byrne's investigation of the 1960s and 70s but the international selection offers only a glimpse of complex practices, withholding the kind of in-depth exploration found in the Irish pavilion (and discussed elsewhere in this issue).

Two films by Steve McQueen are presented in the Italian pavilion and the longer work, *Gravesend* (2007), centres on the mining and processing of coltan, a mineral used in the production of mobile phones. This choice of subject matter might suggest a continuation of the concern with documentary evident elsewhere at Venice but the treatment of sound signals a departure from the conventions of realism, confirmed by the inclusion of an ambiguous animation sequence evoking images of cables, or perhaps a winding river. The film closes with an evocation of cinematic and literary narrative, in the form of a sunset in the port of Gravesend, the starting point for Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.[1] Joshua Mosley's use of animation is equally ambiguous, but by combining sculpture with the moving image he directs attention towards the relationship between physical and virtual processes of representation. His film *dread* (2007) stages a mysterious encounter between the philosophers Pascal and Rousseau and various creatures drawn from Muybridge's proto-cinematic experiments, including a dog named 'Dread'. The installation also includes bronze casts of these various characters, made from models that have been digitally scanned and animated onscreen.

Processes of translation between the physical and the virtual are also explored in two installations by Thomas Demand, entitled *Grotto* (2006) and *Yellowcake* (2007), at Fondazione Prada on Isolo San Giorgio. The earlier work marks a departure from the artist's usual practice in that it features both a completed photographic work, depicting a 'grotto', and the component elements used in the research and production process. These include a vast collection of postcards, drawings and film clips as well as the physical construction

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[1] There are interesting connections between McQueen's film and Katharine Ainger's article "The Scramble for Africa", in *New Internationalist* Issue 367, May 2004, which focuses on coltan and also references *Heart of Darkness*. See http://newint.org/features/2004/05/01/keynote/

itself, complete with atmospheric lighting. This onslaught of source material stands in stark contrast to *Yellowcake*, which sets out to represent, in typically laborious fashion, the interior of the Embassy of the Republic of Niger in Rome. This is the site from which papers documenting sales of concentrated uranium ('yellowcake') to Iraq were supposedly stolen, later to be recovered and used as evidence to support the US invasion. Significantly, the *Yellowcake* images are based upon a visit to the actual site rather than archival sources, because photographs of the crime scene could not be found.

While *Grotto* is among the more elaborate creations on show at Venice this year, it is paralleled by various ambitious architectural constructions, most notably the wooden cinema designed by Tobias Putrih and installed on Isolo San Servolo as part of the Slovenian representation. The screening programme for this space includes retrospectives by the Slovenian group OHO and the British filmmaker John Smith and various works exploring the relationship between film and architecture (by Rosa Barba and Ursula Mayer among others). But in many respects the structure itself is the main attraction, surrounded by trees and ornamental wooden curtains that are ceremoniously opened and closed by ushers during intervals. This fascination with the space of cinema recurs across a range of national representations, most obviously Andreas Fogarasi's *Culture and Leisure* (2007) in the Hungarian pavilion. Consisting of eight video works, this project documenting the remnants of social and cultural institutions developed under the Communist regime. Each video is projected into a large box on legs, faced by a bench of similar construction and, as with Putrih's cinema, the design (and specifically the acoustic properties) of these structures invites a kind of collectivity that is relatively rare within the realm of moving image installation. Similar themes are explored in work of Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas at the Lithuanian pavilion, through reference to an array of cultural spaces, extending from the Villa Lituania in Rome to the Lietuva Cinema in Vilnius.

A more explicitly personal response to the space of cinema can be found in *It's a Dream* (2007) by Tsai Ming-Liang, in the Taiwanese pavilion. This film, which unfolds within a darkened movie theatre, is framed as a dream about the protagonist's mother, suggesting an exploration of the scenarios of narrative identification conceptualised by psychoanalytic theorists during the 1960s and 70s. The film is projected within a facsimile of the onscreen world, so that visitors must take their place within the same red leather seating occupied by characters in the dream. Elsewhere, within the Estonian pavilion, Marko Maetamm also employs the moving image to investigate familial relationships and forbidden desires. But his video work, *No Title* (2006) is devoid of images and instead consists of a projected text that

spells out an unthinkable, but darkly comic, solution to the conflict between artistic ambition and the duties of husband and father. Images rather than text dominate in Haris Epaminonda's video installation in the Cyprus pavilion, oriented towards a mobile rather than seated viewer. Here, sound is used to direct attention between three projections that combine appropriations from popular culture (promoting femininity and domesticity) with elements of original footage. Resisting interpretation, these sequences evoke half-remembered scenes from the films of Hitchcock, or perhaps Powell and Pressburger, as well as subsequent re-workings of this imagery within the realms of art and advertising.

Rosalind Nashashibi's 16mm film, *Bachelor Machines Part 1* (2007), part of the collateral exhibition from Scotland, is also concerned with the dynamics of observation and voyeurism. The narrative charts the journey of an Italian cargo ship called the *Gran Bretagna* and seems to progress methodically through 25 sequences. These are identified onscreen as 'scenes', and depict fragments of the exterior, the surrounding sea and various un-translated interactions between the crew. Very little is revealed about life onboard, however, as attention gradually shifts towards the relationship between filmmaker and subject and, ultimately, the practice of representation itself. This focus on voyeurism is sharpened in 'Citizens and Subjects', Aernout Mik's presentation in Dutch pavilion, consisting of three linked video installations. While one video (entitled *Convergencies*) is composed of found footage documenting law enforcement techniques, the others (*Mock Up* and *Training Ground*) depict fictional training exercises involving the detention and management of suspects. The movements of the participants are uncertain, however, suggesting improvisation or re-enactment and recalling strategies employed by Peter Watkins as well as aspects of 'reality television'. Visitors to the pavilion are invited to observe these scenarios from a distance but are denied the darkness of a cinematic installation. Instead, they remain visible to each other as they move around the brightly-lit building, the interior of which has been redesigned to resemble a series of institutional waiting areas. Although Citizens and Subjects is clearly concerned with the architecture of spectatorship, it provides a counterpoint to the various cinematic constructions already highlighted. In place of the utopian collectivity that is sometimes associated with cinema, Mik proposes a model of reception that is characterised by fragmentation and disorientation, staging an experimental scenario in which the investigation of power relations seems to extend beyond the screen and into the space of exhibition itself.