

Public Monuments and Landmarks as Motifs in Cinema and Contemporary Art

Maeve Connolly

Paper presented at *Motifs of the Moving Image*,
IKKM, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, March 28-30, 2012

Monuments and landmarks seem to constitute exemplary cinematic ‘motifs’ both because they are designed to be recognised, and because they have served as a focal point for theorisations of cinematic signification – most notably in relation to the work of Hitchcock. *North by Northwest* (1959) has attracted particular critical attention in part for its treatment of monuments and landmarks, deployed as privileged signifiers of a shift from productive to post-productive capitalism. For example, Fredric Jameson identifies a complex spatial system at work within the film, arguing that in depicting the back of Mount Rushmore, Hitchcock reveals this supposedly open and public space to be uniquely closed by virtue of its status as ‘sheer representation’.¹

More recently, Michael R. Griffiths has theorised *North by Northwest* as a hyperreferential consumer form, which anticipated ‘the increased role of cultural forms of consumption in late twentieth-century economic life’.² Citing a trailer in which Hitchcock plays the role of a travel agent, Griffiths reads the film as an exploration of (or perhaps a knowing advertisement for) a post-Fordist landscape in which the ‘spin’ of advertising ‘effaces and supplants production, like the spectacle of a crop-duster soaring across empty fields’.³ While he acknowledges Hitchcock’s fascination with modes of ‘technological transport’ and also his interest in America as cinematic ‘motif’, Griffiths does not specifically explore the concept of the motif. Nonetheless it is clear that recurrent images of monuments and landmarks are integral to *North by Northwest*’s hyperreferentiality, punctuating both the trailer and the film in their recognisability as images.

¹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Spatial Systems in *North by Northwest*’ in Slavoj Žižek (ed), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London: Verso, 1992, pp. 47-72. Stanley Cavell’s discussion of the monument – in relation to the ‘remarriage comedy’ – is equally significant, and potentially more pertinent to a discussion of the motif, because it focuses on the use of close-ups. Noting that the central characters are depicted in the climactic scene ‘on the surface of the monument [...] as if on an alien planet’, Cavell points to a shift in Hitchcock’s worldview. In this scene, he argues, ‘earth is no longer an artifact by analogy, intimating God; it is literally and totally artifact, petrified under the hands of mankind.’ Stanley Cavell, ‘North by Northwest’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1981), p. 775.

² Michael R. Griffiths, ‘Production Values: Fordism and Formalism in *North by Northwest*’, *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 20, Number 3, May 2010, unpaginated.

³ Griffiths.

I am especially drawn to the motif's quality of recognisability because it functions temporally; an image, gesture or musical phrase must be perceived as a *recurring* form in order for it to actually achieve the status of a 'motif'. In addition, I am interested in the possibility that the motif might be linked to the experience of 'apperception', defined (by Peter Osborne) as the self-awareness of the perceiving subject.⁴ In a text addressing the contemporary conditions of reception within the gallery, Osborne seeks to understand how artists' moving image works might operate critically in relation to other image-flows, which are typically experienced 'in distraction'. According to Osborne, the 'location of reception in distraction' has shifted over time, from cinema to television in the 1960s and more recently to the 'multiplying sites and social functions of the interactive computer-display screen'.⁵ He proposes that galleries might offer a context in which to engage critically with the condition of reception in distraction, in part through the experience of 'apperception'. In order to offer a space of intellectual focus, however, art in the gallery space cannot simply reproduce the dominant mode of distraction or lose touch with it entirely by inviting contemplative immersion. Instead, Osborne advocates moving image practices that engage with duration as 'a dialectical process of continuity, interruption and beginning again', in order to 'impose new reflective rhythms of absorption and distraction'.⁶

I want to suggest that the *motif* might also be relevant to an analysis of the processes through which artists engage these rhythms and (more specifically) reflect upon the role of contemporary art in the production of space *as image*. At this point it is important to note a difference between the concepts of 'trope' and 'motif'. While a trope is often tracked across multiple texts, the motif is more usually understood to recur within a single text, or in multiple texts by the same author. It may even function as a privileged sign of authorship. While there is much to be gained by exploring the motif through reference to authorship, I want to argue that the concept is also valuable because it potentially offers a link between the temporal form of an individual work, of a practice (or oeuvre) and of the economy that structures the production, circulation and reception of this work or practice. So I will discuss the recurrence of images of public monuments and landmarks across a range of recent film and video installations, and highlight some economic and political factors shaping this recurrence, before turning in the final section to the films of desperate optimists (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor).

⁴ Peter Osborne, 'Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology', *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, eds. Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (London: Tate, 2004) pp. 66-83.

⁵ Osborne 2004, 67.

⁶ Osborne, 73.

Imaging Public Monuments and Landmarks in Contemporary Art

Since the late 1990s, images of monuments and landmarks seem to have proliferated within contemporary art, especially in film and video installation. I am going to mention numerous moving image installation works and discuss a small number in more detail. Most of my examples feature images of sculptural monuments, memorials or buildings celebrated for their cultural, aesthetic or architectural significance. Some still exist, while others have been demolished. When considered together, these structures tend to complicate the distinction between ‘monument’ and ‘landmark’.⁷ While some of these monuments were designed to memorialise specific events or figures others have only subsequently acquired a memorial function in relation to histories of urban modernity, socialism or architectural modernism, which may be contested. Also, while several of these moving image works include establishing-type shots that exploit and emphasise the ‘recognisability’ of these structures, others explicitly avoid this strategy by offering only a play of details or fragments.

My selection begins with Tacita Dean’s 16mm films *Fernsehturm*, 2001 and *Palast*, 2004. These are just some of the many works by Dean that explore the relationship between memory, experience and technological obsolescence through the imaging of structures slowly falling into ruin. Monuments are not simply a ‘motif’ in *Palast*, however, as the work consists *entirely* of details of the exterior of the Palast der Republik. Instead of offering an establishing shot, Dean highlights fragments of other (perhaps even more recognisable) monumental structures and landmarks that are reflected in the surface of the building, commenting obliquely on the Palast’s symbolic function.

David Maljković’s *Scene for a New Heritage*, also dates from 2004. It is the first part of a trilogy of films set in the future, depicting Petrova Gora Memorial Park in Croatia. Images of a monument designed by modernist sculptor Vojin Bakić, erected by the communist government in memory of victims of the Second World War, recur in the trilogy and provide the principal point of orientation in time and space. Deimantas Narkevičius has also made several films focusing on the production and subsequent removal of monuments, sometimes working with footage drawn from the film and television archives of former socialist states. For example, *Once*

⁷ Within the context of cultural studies, the practice of *landmarking* is often associated with the production of sites as heritage, in the form of monuments, and it is generally understood as a process that evolves over time. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Heritage, History*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998: 156-157.

in the XXth Century from 2004, incorporates Lithuanian television footage of the removal of a statue of Lenin in Vilnius.

A subsequent project *The Head* (2007), shown at Sculpture Project Munster, is assembled from archive footage and it includes scenes of the construction of a monument to Karl Marx at Chemnitz, created in 1971 by Lew Kerbel in a Socialist Realist style. Like Dean's *Palast*, Declan Clarke's film *We'll Be This Way Until the End of the World* (from 2008) consists entirely of details of a monument in Dublin. It focuses on two bullet holes visible in the winged female figures on the base of a monumental sculpture, erected in 1880 to the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell. The bullets are remnants of the Easter Rising insurrection that took place in 1916 on the street where the monument is located and which was named after O'Connell eight years later, following the War of Independence and the Civil War.

Cyprien Gaillard has also produced numerous works depicting well-known architectural landmarks and monuments. But his films include images of demolitions as well as slow decay. These concerns converge in *Crazy Horse*, a video projection and performance event devised by Gaillard for the Berlin Biennale in 2008. The video component, which was projected on the side of a building in the Skulpturenpark in Berlin-Mitte, depicts the ongoing (and environmentally destructive) process of constructing a memorial for the Native American Chief Crazy Horse. Located in the Black Hill mountains of South Dakota, the memorial was commissioned by the Sioux and intended to surpass Mount Rushmore in scale. Gaillard has also produced a photographic installation, *Geographical Analogies* (2006–2009), consisting of a series of Polaroid photographs displayed in vitrines and featuring aestheticised and decontextualised architectural fragments – including a marble slab in front of the Seagram Building in New York.⁸

I also want to mention two other works depicting celebrated examples of architectural modernism. Ulla Von Brandenburg's *Songspiel*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2009 takes the forms of a journey through Corbusier's Villa Savoye, which is depicted as a space for an ambiguous social gathering. More recently, in *Points on a Line*, from 2011, Sarah Morris films a variety of architectural landmarks, including Philip Johnson's Glass House and two structures designed by Mies van der Rohe – the Farnsworth House in Illinois and the Seagram building.

⁸ For a useful critique of this work see Lanka Tattersall, 'Romancing the stone: On Cyprien Gaillard at Galerie Sprüth/Magers, Berlin', *Text Zur Kunst*, March 2010. <http://www.textezurkunst.de/77/lanka-tattersall-uber-cyprien-gaillard-der-galerie/?highlight=television>

Finally, Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 3*, 2002, features scenes set and shot in several New York architectural landmarks such as the Chrysler building and the Guggenheim. It also incorporates sequences filmed at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, a natural geological formation that has acquired the status of a tourist landmark partly because it resembles a man-made structure. It is clear that images of landmarks and monuments pervade contemporary artists' film and video. There are important distinctions between these works, which I cannot address in this paper, and in my view some of these works exploit (rather than examine) the 'mediality' of these structures.⁹ There are, however, some artists who have directly addressed the issue of recognisability in ways that are relevant to our discussion of the motif and I will now discuss two examples.

Theorising the Monument/Landmark as Motif

Matthew Buckingham's *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.*, features a wall text exploring both the history¹⁰ and future of the mountain range known to the Sioux as the Six Grandfathers, which is also the location of Mount Rushmore. Buckingham's text addresses the Sioux claim on the land, noting that the monument was partly the work of a sculptor known to be an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. The other component of the work is a digitally altered photograph depicting an imagined future moment when the portraits of the four U.S. presidents carved on the mountain have eroded. As Buckingham's text demonstrates, Mount Rushmore was initially conceived as a means of promoting tourism in South Dakota, supported by federal funding during the 1920s and completed in the late 1930s.

So while it took claimed the status of a memorial, its development was at least partly informed by the tradition of spectacular urban architectural construction associated with events such as the various Worlds' Fairs of the nineteenth century. But unlike structures such as the Crystal Palace or the Eiffel Tower, Mount Rushmore was not conceived as a display of advanced industrial technology. Instead it sought to exploit the material, topographical and symbolic properties of

⁹ Hal Foster is one of several critics to highlight the relationship between architecture and Post-Fordist practices of city-branding, most recently in *The Art-Architecture Complex*, London: Verso, 2011. Yet the 'mediality' of architecture was also evident in an earlier era, as noted by Beatriz Colomina. See Colomina, 'Media as Modern Architecture', *Architecture Between Spectacle and Use*, edited by Anthony Vidler, Williamstown, Mass., Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008, pp. 58-73.

¹⁰ Mark Godfrey discusses this work at length in an important analysis of Buckingham's practice and a broader turn towards the 'historical' in contemporary art, specifically moving image and photographic works. Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October* 120 (Spring 2007):140-172.

the mountain site, naturalising historical and territorial claims that are revealed in Buckingham's work as violently imperialistic. By digitally removing the faces of the four US presidents, Buckingham imagines a future moment when the Six Grandfathers will be seen differently. But through this strategy of effacement he also draws attention to the persistence of Mount Rushmore as image.

The next example I will discuss uses a different strategy – *addition* rather than removal – to explore the lived experience of objects, and environments, as image. *L'Ellipse* is a three-channel installation made by Pierre Huyghe in 1998, which explores the 'gap' (or narrative ellipsis) between two shots that are joined, or separated, by a cut in Wim Wender's *The American Friend* (1977). As Thomas Elsaesser has noted, *The American Friend* features numerous scenes in which the central character (a picture-framer, who becomes entangled in a criminal world populated by art forgers and porn film directors) is positioned on a 'threshold' both dramatically and metaphorically. Played by Bruno Ganz, he is repeatedly pictured entering or leaving buildings, standing in doorways or at windows.¹¹ Much of Wenders' film was shot and set in Hamburg and Huyghe's installation was also produced for an exhibition at Hamburg Kunstverein, called 'Fast Forward'. In *L'Ellipse*, however, Huyghe focuses on a section of *The American Friend* in which Ganz's character travels to Paris, where he is tricked into becoming an assassin.

Huyghe's 'addition' to the film occurs following a phone conversation between Ganz's character, who is staying in a hotel on the left bank of the Seine, and his Paris contact. The latter lives in a penthouse apartment clearly visible on the other side of the river and from which he waves a white towel, as though to confirm his physical presence in the city. After this phone conversation, there is a rapid and slightly disorienting close-up of a digital display in an elevator and then Ganz reappears in the penthouse, again looking out over the Seine but from the opposite side. In Huyghe's 'version', however, Ganz is depicted walking across the bridge from the first location to the second, now twenty years older and no longer wearing a moustache

Huyghe's work amplifies this focus on the 'in-between' already apparent in Wender's film, leading Thomas McDonough to identify in *L'Ellipse* 'a doubling of certain allegorical procedures' already at work within *The American Friend*.¹² Amongst other issues, he suggests that by depicting

¹¹ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Wenders and the US: "The American Friend"', *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity 1945-95*, eds. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (London: BFI, 1998) 150.

¹² Thomas McDonough, 'Production/Projection: Notes on the Capitalist Fairy Tale', Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon (eds), *Art of Projection*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009, 132.

Ganz's journey across the Seine, Huyghe emphasises that human subjectivity (like the urban landscape) has been radically altered by contemporary (post-Fordist) forms of capital. So while Ganz's character looks out from his hotel room in 1977 on a city in which skyscrapers have replaced the former industrial neighbourhoods located near the Seine, Ganz *the actor* physically enters into this space twenty years later, occupying a border position between 'the fictional diegesis of the movie and [...] extradiegetic space and time'.¹³

Although he notes that in the new footage, the Eiffel Tower looks 'like some picture postcard version of itself', McDonough does not elaborate on the 'in-betweenness' of this object or its function within *The American Friend*. In fact the Eiffel Tower appears in the background of many scenes shot by Wenders in Paris. So Huyghe's addition in 1998 draws attention not only to Wender's prominent use of this landmark but also to the fact that Ganz and the Tower both occupy a border position – suspended between image and physical presence.

By focusing on landmarks and monuments, it may be that artists are seeking to explore the altered relation between people, images and objects implied by McDonough's analysis of the transition to Post-Fordism. But the recurrence of these motifs is itself also a privileged *sign* of this same transition – as it situates these works within an overtly 'locational' economy of production and circulation.¹⁴ As already noted, several of the artworks I have cited were commissioned for a specific exhibition and so effectively 'premiered' within this context. Some were first shown within Biennials, which are often (although not always) devised and resourced partly as tourist attractions and so oriented towards audiences that include not only visiting artworld professionals but also tourists, and residents.

Such events often involve a repurposing of structures or spaces formerly associated with industrial production, and also lend visibility to the activity of artistic production through the commissioning of works that engage socially, materially or conceptually with aspects of the local context. But artworks commissioned in this way are *also* required to signify and circulate outside what Claire Doherty has described as the 'originating' context.¹⁵ They may circulate either

¹³ McDonough, 133.

¹⁴ My discussion of locational approaches to the production and commissioning of art is informed by Miwon Kwon in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004). I explore locational aspects of the market for artists' moving image in *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 37-60.

¹⁵ Claire Doherty, 'The New Situationists', *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004) 8-9.

physically or via the various forms of publication, documentation and discourse through which the art world is continually – and temporally – constituted. Moving image artworks that engage self-reflexively with the imaging of monuments and landmarks are perhaps especially well-suited to circulate within this economy because they are integrally concerned with issues of legibility and recognisability.

Motifs and Motives

In my final section, I want to look more closely at the monument/landmark ‘motif’ in a specific practice. Over the past decade, Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (also known as desperate optimists) have written, directed and produced an extensive series of short films collectively titled *Civic Life*, shot in various cities across the UK and Ireland. All were public art commissions involving local residents as performers. This mode of financing often allows artists or filmmakers to explore alternatives to the conventional script-based model of production. But it introduces other constraints as the artists are usually required to demonstrate a recognisable engagement with the ‘site’, which may be understood in terms of physical location or more discursively – through reference to social, historical or economic context.

Perhaps as a means of asserting their authorship in spite of these constraints, Molloy and Lawlor have developed a self-consciously ‘cinematic’ style, often citing the work of celebrated auteurs such as Antonioni, Tsai Ming Liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. All of their films are shot on 35mm cinemascope, involving ‘long takes’ of up to ten minutes with highly choreographed action sequences involving relatively large casts. Typically they process only one take, so there is no way of correcting errors during the editing process. Many of the short films involve the use of voiceover or soundtrack music, in place of dialogue and the action usually unfolds within a setting (such as a park or other public amenity) that is assumed to be well-known to local audiences. On completion, each film in the *Civic Life* series was screened to participants and other local constituencies within a cinema setting – often a multiplex rather than an arthouse screen. Following these events the films were distributed on DVD, both individually as a series published by Cornerhouse.

In 2008 Molloy and Lawlor completed their first feature film *Helen*, with funding from film and art agencies such as the Irish Film Board and Arts Council England, and with the support of organisations involved in regional development or urban regeneration. *Helen* focuses on the experience of an isolated young woman, drawn into the life and family of a classmate - named

Joy¹⁶ - who has disappeared. Set in an unspecified city, the film begins with a police reconstruction of the disappearance, in which Helen is cast as the 'stand-in' for Joy. The rest of the narrative explores Helen's sense of alienation and dislocation. Raised in state care, she works as a cleaner in an expensive hotel, and visibly covets the wealth and security represented by the missing girl's middle-class family. She is also drawn towards Joy's boyfriend – a young estate agent who sells apartments in a new urban complex devised for upwardly mobile professionals.

Helen differs from Molloy and Lawlor's shorts – as several takes were processed and edited to create a conventional 'character arc'. But in other respects it is less conventional because, it was shot in four different cities – Birmingham, Dublin, Newcastle-Gateshead and Liverpool – and in several scenes, the characters meet at self-consciously 'iconic' urban landmarks. These landmarks are simultaneously distinctive and generic, exemplifying a trend whereby cities have sought to attract tourists, workers or investment, by commissioning 'landmark' bridges, museum buildings or parks. One is the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, which spans the river Tyne, linking Gateshead and Newcastle, while another is a sculptural feature in Grand Canal Square, designed by Martha Schwartz and located in the docklands area of Dublin. The co-existence of these Gateshead and Dublin landmarks within the same (diegetic) cityscape underscores the fact that Helen, whose own identity is unstable, moves through a composite urban space.

Helen is not the only feature released in 2008 to be set in an unspecified place and shot in multiple cities. *Blindness* (directed by Fernando Mereilles) depicts an epidemic in an unnamed city and was shot in Toronto, Sao Paulo and Montevideo. Unlike *Blindness*, however, *Helen* explicitly draws attention to what Hal Foster has termed the rise of 'the city as site of spectacular spectatorship, of touristic awe', through the prominent presence of these landmarks.¹⁷ In the process, the film also reveals some of the contradictions at work in the economy of the 'image-city'.¹⁸ For example, in a study of film production in the global economy, Ben Goldsmith and Tom O'Regan note that cities often compete with each other to attract investment – sometimes by flaunting their ability as film locations to 'stand-in' for other places.¹⁹ So there is a potential

¹⁶ *Joy* is also the title of a short film in the *Civic Life* series, shot entirely in Handsworth Park, Birmingham depicting the reconstruction. It was made simultaneously with *Helen* and features the same lead actress. See Connolly, 130-134.

¹⁷ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*, (London: Verso, 2002), 41.

¹⁸ My discussion of the 'image city' is informed by Janet Ward, 'Berlin, The Virtual Global City', *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 3(2): 2004, pp. 239-256.

¹⁹ Ben Goldsmith and Tom O'Regan, *The Film Studio: Film Production in the Global Economy*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

conflict here with the assertion of *distinctiveness* that underpins much public funding for contemporary art.

Conclusion

In closing, it seems that in the earlier work of Molloy and Lawlor, the self-consciously ‘cinematic’ treatment of local landmarks provided a means of imaging place in ways that served the needs of funders while also asserting the authorial coherency of the practice. But in *Helen*, the ‘motif’ of the landmark no longer serves to guarantee the locational specificity of the work, and instead forms part of an exploration of contemporary urban experience. Further research is clearly needed to understand how the imaging of monuments and landmarks in contemporary art might contest or confirm dominant logics of city-branding. Such a study would need to address—amongst many other issues – precisely how the spaces and sites of contemporary art both differ from and intersect with various other contexts in which landmarks and monuments are encountered and recognised as images. The concept of the motif, which is experienced through recurrence and recognition, has the potential to provide a useful starting point for this research.