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Conceptualising the Cinematic in Contemporary Art

Introduction: Conceptualising the Cinematic

In April 2014, a solo exhibition by Puerto Rican artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, titled *Post-Military Cinema*, was presented at Transmission Gallery in Glasgow. Large-scale video projections on all four walls transformed the interior of the gallery's ground floor into an immersive, and initially disorienting, play of light, shadow and sound. On closer examination, the videos resolved into more distinct portrayals of specific structures and actions, all recorded around the coastal town of Ceiba, Puerto Rico, the location of a former US Naval Base, known as Roosevelt Roads and operational until the early 2000s. In *Post-Military Cinema*, Santiago Muñoz responds to the base and its location not as a ruin, but rather as a site of becoming, attending to the reclamation of this place by humans, animals and plant species. Some of the videos depict human activity in and around the site, following the disparate practices of fishermen, beekeepers and those engaged in folk and religious rituals and at one point, Santiago Muñoz deploys a prismatic lens to obscure the image of a fisherman, seated on the edge of a deep-water dock, one of several local people to act as her unofficial guide into the restricted territory of the base.

Another video is shot entirely in the cinema that once formed part of the complex's recreational facilities. This building at first appears merely functional, with little architectural resemblance to a classical movie theatre. But its doors are open to the outside world and shifting beams of leaf-patterned coloured light play across its walls and seats, transforming it temporarily into a camera obscura, so that the forest that has now encroached upon the complex appears to project itself inside (fig. 1). Elsewhere in the exhibition, a further articulation of what might be termed the "post-cinematic", a term to which I will return, is apparent in the display of scratched and faded fragments of 35mm film, found by Santiago Muñoz on the Base and now transformed into slides for projection (fig. 2). Significantly, light that is passed through these slides does little to reveal the source film,

since remnants of the original image are visible only when the fragments are viewed at an oblique angle.

Santiago Muñoz's "post-military cinema" deliberately emphasises opacity, ambiguity and the non-visible and she is specifically interested in this complex of structures because of the Base's historical inaccessibility to those outside the US armed forces. Significantly, the abandoned cinema was never operated commercially and would have been out of bounds to most Puerto Rican residents of Ceiba. Other artists have, however, sought to explore the material and architectural properties of cinemas that were once embedded within local communities, functioning as vital spaces of social gathering. Here I am thinking particularly of *Film for an Abandoned Projector*, a site-specific work devised by the Scottish artist Lucy Skaer for the semi-derelict Lyric House cinema, located in Leeds (fig. 3). Responding in part to the city's reputation as a former centre for the production of projection equipment, Skaer produced a new 35mm film (shot on a restored Arriflex camera), which was threaded through the Lyric's old Kalee projector, and screened repeatedly for ten weeks towards the end of 2011. During this time, her film slowly acquired scratches and marks, resulting in the gradual and progressive deterioration of the image.

There are certainly points of connection between the practices of Santiago Muñoz and Skaer, in that both artists are attentive to the materiality of cinema, and to the degradation of the filmic image. Yet in my view, their works propose quite distinct understandings of the cinematic, in terms of its residue and remnants. Framing the abandoned screening space as a camera obscura, Santiago Muñoz underscores the absence of a projection apparatus, while also drawing upon the notion of the cinematic to re-imagine the complex as a kind of machine, which can play a role in the afterlife of this place. In contrast, Skaer focuses very explicitly (and perhaps more narrowly) on the technological supports associated with 35mm film and the era of analogue projection. So while these two works illustrate contemporary art's rich and varied engagement with cinema, they also suggest that the very notion of "the cinematic" is somehow resistant to definition.

The concept of the "cinematic" is in fact rarely theorised on its own – instead it used to describe particular modes and characteristics of embodiment, the image or spectatorship (Shaviri) or to specify particular articulations of time and contingency specific to modernity (Doane).¹ My interest, however, lies in "the cinematic" as concept that overflows and extends beyond the technologies,

¹ Steven Shaviri, *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993; Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002.

forms and practices so ably theorised by Shaviro and Doane, finding articulation in the activities, materialities and processes of artists (and others) that engage with but are not necessarily proper to the sphere of “cinema”. To date, much of my research on permutations of the cinematic in contemporary art has centred upon the concept of “artists cinema” - a term that in my view highlights the claims, desires and demands that are made by artists both upon and for cinema. I have focused on a variety of works (primarily realised since the early 1990s) that involve the appropriation, and sometimes restaging, of histories, technologies, physical spaces, modes of performance, and practices of display associated with cinema.

In part, I have drawn upon Mike Sperlinger and Ian White’s important analysis of art and film practice across the spaces of cinema and museum, developed in the curatorial and publication project *Kinomuseum*.² My approach, however, more strongly emphasises the claims – political, social, cultural and economic – made upon, and about, cinema by practitioners and institutions of contemporary art. For example, I have identified the social history and material form of the movie theatre as a particularly important resource for artists, curators and commissioning organisations seeking to engage with the past, present and future of urban space, and related concepts of the public sphere.³ My research also suggests that artists are often particularly interested in occluded histories of cinema, which can serve as a reference point for new models of practice. For example, Jesse Jones’ *12 Angry Films*, a public art project staged in Dublin in 2006, took the form of a temporary outdoor cinema modelled after a 1950s US drive-in. Rather than recreating the programming associated with a commercial drive-in cinema, however, Jones instead collaborated with a group of locally-based labour activists to curate selection of overtly political feature films exploring themes of labour, migration and social justice, shown along with newly-produced videos, made by the group. The screening programme very deliberately included works subject to censorship and blacklisting at the time of release, such as *Salt of the Earth*, directed by Herbert J. Biberman in 1954.

I have also been drawn toward the analysis of works that engage with the cinematic without necessarily exhibiting the moving image and I am particularly interested in Jonathan Walley’s discussion of “paracinema”. Walley uses this term to describe the exploration of “cinematic properties outside the standard film apparatus” in the work of Anthony McCall and others during

² Mike Sperlinger and Ian White, *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists’ Cinema*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008.

³ Maeve Connolly, “Temporality, Sociality, Publicness: Cinema as Art Project”, *Afterall* 29, spring 2012, pp. 4-15.

the 1970s, focusing particularly on McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975).⁴ As Walley explains, this work "consisted of an empty Manhattan loft, its windows covered by diffusion paper, lit in the evening by a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling".⁵ In the absence of a film, or even a projector, *Long Film* instead directs attention to the properties of the loft as both site and space, and the interplay between (changing) natural and (unchanging) artificial light.

Walley is specifically interested in paracinema as a transitional response to the shifts towards a post-medium age that were ushered in by Minimalism and Conceptual art. His work is helpful in differentiating the cinematic from the filmic in art, since he suggests that by embracing *cinema* as their medium, filmmakers such as McCall could explore the conceptual dimensions of cinema without being limited to the medium of film, so that they did not need to "reiterate the materials of film again and again."⁶ I have found the concept of paracinema useful in understanding contemporary artworks that seem to engage with the historical moment theorised by Walley.⁷ In this article, however, I am especially interested in whether this very expansive understanding of cinema without the moving image may actually be integral to conceptualising the cinematic in art.

The Cinematic and the Uncinematic

Evidence (if any is needed) of cinema's significance for contemporary artists can be found in David Campany's *The Cinematic*, a collection of texts published as part of the ongoing series "documents of art". Yet although this book draws together a number of valuable perspectives, Campany does not attempt to distinguish between the "cinematic" and "cinema" in his introductory essay. Instead, his text focuses primarily on the relationship between film and the photographic image, movement and stillness. Reflecting upon the relationship between art and film, in a brief survey that extends from the historical avant-garde through to the 2000s, Campany notes a move away from speed (and the shock of movement) and toward slowness, emphasising the lure of "the base quality of photographic stillness embedded in the moving image".⁸

⁴ Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film", *October* 103, Winter 2003, p. 18. My discussion here is revised from Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago, Intellect Books and University of Chicago Press, 2009.

⁵ Walley, p. 20.

⁶ Walley, p. 28.

⁷ See, for example, my discussion of Aurélien Froment's *White Balance* (2007), in *The Place of Artists' Cinema*, pp. 210-2011.

⁸ David Campany, "Introduction: When to be Fast? When to be Slow?", in David Campany (ed.) *The Cinematic: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press and Whitechapel, 2007, p. 11.

Campany is also interested in the spatial and material orchestration of photographic images, whether as publications or as sequential displays, citing projects that range from August Sander's *The Face of Our Time* (1929) to Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986). He too is drawn toward the notion of "para-cinema", but uses this term (with a hyphen and without reference to Walley's discussion of McCall) to conceptualise the qualities of the photographic series. So, for example, Campany cites Moholy-Nagy's concept of the series as "vision in motion"⁹ and emphasises that "photography [...] Spread rapidly through a multitude of forms – books, albums, magazines, postcards, posters and all the rest".¹⁰ He goes on to suggest that photography provides a model for cinema's more recent dispersal beyond the movie theatre, now that the "large auditorium takes its place alongside television, computer screens, in-flight entertainment, lobbies, shop windows, galleries and mobile phones".¹¹

Here Campany is specifically invoking Victor Burgin's concept of the "cinematic heterotopia", an expanded space that encompasses "advertisements, such as trailers and clips seen television or the internet [...] Newspaper reviews and theoretical articles [...] *Production* photographs, frame enlargements, memorabilia, and so on."¹² Burgin is not the only theorist of art-cinema intersections to emphasise dispersal and expansion. Investigating the recurrence of cinematic tropes and conventions in contemporary art, primarily since the 1980s, Erika Balsom's *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* also emphasises "heterogeneity and variability"¹³, stating later that "the cinematic has been scattered – its legibility as a coherent object fractured".¹⁴ Again, however, there is no particular attempt to specify how "cinematic" (as distinct from cinema) is manifest – or exhibited – in contemporary art.

Others have, however, suggested that it is possible for artists working with the moving image to engage with cinema without necessarily producing "cinematic" artworks. Burgin, in fact, explicitly frames his own moving image installations as *uncinematic*. He notes that according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary* the cinematic is defined as "relating to" or "having qualities

⁹ *Idem*, p.13.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p.16

¹¹ *Idem*, p.16.

¹² Victor Burgin, "Interactive Cinema and the Uncinematic", in Gertrude Koch, Volker Pantenburg, Simon Rothöhler (ed.s) *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, Vienna, Austrian Film Museum and SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012, p. 93.

¹³ Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 95.

characteristic of” motion pictures, but his discussion suggests that these qualities are not necessarily linked to the medium of film. Indeed the dictionary definition also identifies video as potentially having a “cinematic feel”.¹⁵ The implication here – not explored by Burgin – is that the cinematic might not be integrally linked to filmic “motion pictures”. Elaborating upon the distinction between cinematic and uncinematic moving image works encountered in the gallery, Burgin goes on to suggest that film and videos are cinematic when they presuppose or interpellate the spectator as a subject of *knowledge*¹⁶, familiar with cinema.

Burgin frames his own moving image installation works as uncinematic, because – he argues – they interpellate the viewer as “a subject of the *signifier*”¹⁷, rather than a subject of knowledge. Expanding upon this distinction, he describes an ideal situation in which the work is presented in the gallery as a loop, enabling repetition or reprise, with its component elements “equally weighted and autonomously significant” so that “viewers may see what is present to perception not only through the recollection of previous elements of the work but also through own personal memories and fantasies.”¹⁸ In this situation, the organisation of materials is “paratactical”, privileging “gaps, absences and silences”, encompassing “places [...] Where you may close your eyes, follow individual trains of association”.¹⁹ If we follow the logic of Burgin’s discussion, cinematic works might be thought to lack an associative quality, operating instead within the more prescribed and bounded territory of “knowledge”.

Cinematic Associations

Yet the term cinematic is sometimes used precisely in order to *emphasise* the associative, particularly in relation to works that lack a conventional moving image component. Chris Fite-Wassilak has identified the affect of the cinematic in Dennis McNulty’s (*Anti-tours* 2006), a series of improvised music concerts realised in cities such as São Paulo, Brazilia, Porto Alegre and Rio De Janeiro²⁰ and subsequently (as in the case of *La Ladera*, 2007) on the rooftop of a public library in Medellin, Colombia. In each instance, McNulty produced a live electronic soundtrack, devised to accompany the setting of the sun, and experienced from a vantage point such as a high rise apartment, or rooftop, that would allow a view of the horizon (fig. 4). These performances were

¹⁵ Burgin, p. 102.

¹⁶ Burgin, *ibidem*. Italics in original.

¹⁷ Burgin, *ibidem*. Italics in original.

¹⁸ *Idem*, pp. 103-4.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 105.

²⁰ Chris Fite-Wassilak, “The Cinematic Condition”, in *Dennis McNulty: Obscure Flows Boil Underneath*, Dublin, produced in association with IMMA Associated Press, January 2012, pp. 11-15.

timed and framed through reference to the notion of magic hour (sometimes known as golden hour) used by cinematographers to describe the period, either shortly after sunrise or before sunset, when sunlight becomes warmer and softer.

Fite-Wassilak prefaces his account of McNulty's project with a discussion of spectacular lightshows in the southern US, involving the projection of laser light onto man-made rock formations at sunset, accompanied by a medley of patriotic rock songs, like *Georgia on My Mind*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, and *Proud to be an American*. But he also draws attention to the cinematic properties of more everyday situations, in which sound and music are experienced separately from the moving image. So, for example, he references both the radio play, which conjures events and actions in a "private cinema of the mind", and the experience of viewing a landscape from car, sound-tracked by music.

Noting that McNulty "instigated a set of conditions that bound his audience to that time and place, where they anticipate providing their sustained attention", Fite-Wassilak identifies a number of "formal parallels with cinema", emphasising in particular a "collective encounter within a designated architectural space".²¹ These performances – even when staged in private, domestic spaces – always involved a gathering of listeners (sometimes invited by residents selected as hosts through the use of electronic mailing lists). Yet for Fite-Wassilak, the *Anti-tours* acquired their cinematic feel primarily a result of "associative relationships we create between what is heard and what is seen". He states:

*What remains is for each individual member of the audience to turn to their own perceptions and associations, to weave their own meaning from the situation created. Here, drawing from radio's cinematic imagination, McNulty reclaims the mundane as the site of the active audience. As a result, the Anti-Tours created an experience that was profoundly, and primordially, cinematic.*²²

It's worth emphasising that there two different modes of "association" at play in this account. One is social, involving the bringing together of individuals – who may or may not know each other – into a physically shared space. But the other involves the interplay between perception and memory, precisely the dynamic privileged by Burgin, and understood by him as definitively *uncinematic*.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 14.

²² *Idem*, p. 15.

Elsewhere, in an essay on the work of public art agency Artangel, Claire Bishop has invoked the notion of the cinematic – or at least the “quasi-cinematic” – to describe the rituals that shape the experience of art outside the gallery. Bishop likens the journey towards an Artangel project to a “pilgrimage”, but also proposes a less loaded – and more secular – framework for thinking about expectations and experiences of site-specific art. She suggests that the process of preparing to visit a site-specific work, such as sourcing directions and maps, produces a “quasi-cinematic charge”.²³ Bishop’s text was published in 2002, by which time Artangel had already produced two works for exhibition in disused cinemas: *Coronet Cinema* by Melanie Counsell (1991) and *Carib’s Leap/Western Deep* by Steve McQueen (2002). But for Bishop the quasi-cinematic is not a function of the specific form or location of the commissioned work; instead it seems to reside within the journey toward a site, in the imaginative and cognitive processes that constitute advance preparation, when temporal and spatial coordinates are known only abstractly.

Concepts of the cinematic also figure within the realm of exhibition-making, and particularly in theorisations of the exhibition form developed by curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud. According to Jörn Schafaff, Bourriaud is interested in “the cinematographic model”²⁴ specifically because it offers “a plan of action”, implicitly oriented toward the future. This orientation is apparent – Schafaff argues – in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, one of the first artists to explore the relationship between film and the exhibition form. In 1974, Broodthaers set up a winter garden in a room of the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels as part of a group exhibition, making a film of this garden, titled *Un Jardin d’hiver (A B C)*, which included scenes of visitors to the exhibition. Several months later, Broodthaers presented his film in a second version of the winter garden, again exhibited at the Palais des Beaux Arts. For Schafaff, this constitutes a “cinematic activity”, through which Broodthaers “transformed seemingly autonomous exhibits into the props of a set and thereby gave them use value in addition to exhibition value.”²⁵

Schafaff also discusses the extension, particularly in the work of Philippe Parreno, of the “Broodthaersian principle of conceiving an exhibition as a ‘mise-en-scene’, which involves using it as

²³ Claire Bishop, “As if I was lost and someone suddenly came to give me news about myself”, James Lingwood, Michael Morris and Gerrie Van Noord (eds.), *Off Limits: 40 Artangel Projects*, Merrell Publishers, London, 2002, p. 25.

²⁴ Jörn Schafaff, “On (the Curatorial) Set”, *Cultures of the Curatorial*, Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff and Thomas Weski (eds), Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2012, p. 137. The Bourriaud text cited *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland, Dijon, les presses du réel, 2002.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 138.

a lieu de tournage, or filming location”.²⁶ His analysis suggests that the cinematic can be articulated in the staging of an exhibition as “mise-en-scène”, in which art objects become props, or are otherwise bound to technologies, personnel and activities of production, so that the gallery is imagined as the location of a film shoot, with visitors potentially cast as extras. He cites several potentially cinematic examples of exhibition-making, including *Les Ateliers du Paradise: Un film en temps reel* (The Studios of Paradise: A Film in Real Time), 1990, by Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno and Philippe Perrin, which involved the use of Galerie Air de Paris in Nice as a filming location.

Significantly, in this instance, the gallery was framed “not only as a set for a possible film or one already shot but rather as the film itself”.²⁷ Schafaff notes that this was precisely in order to engage the visitor’s knowledge of cinema, so that walking through the exhibition would resemble “breaking a scene down into individual shots”, enabling visitors to “step out of ordinary reality for a while [...] but also observe in the process”.²⁸ Here we are closer to the definition offered by Burgin, in which the cinematic is manifest in an address toward a knowledgeable viewer. Crucially, however, in *Les Ateliers du Paradise*, there is another form of “knowledge” at stake. This is because references to film and television stand, in the light of Debord’s critique of the spectacle, for “a generally alienated relationship to the world, for perception that is allegedly one’s own, for the false impression of an immediate participation in the events of the world”.²⁹ So the visitor is invited not only to draw upon their own knowledge of cinematic convention and form but also, implicitly, to engage in a process of reflection upon this knowledge.

Conclusion: Locating the Cinematic

Ultimately, even though it appears to elude definition, the cinematic in contemporary art seems to gesture toward an experience that is located outside or beyond cinema. It is very specifically associated by Bishop with anticipation and expectation, produced by the activity of thinking about or moving toward an artwork rather than necessarily being bound to the work’s own properties. For Burgin, however, it is more closely aligned with the past and perhaps also with authority, since it is linked to knowledge and prior experience of cinema. In the case of Schafaff’s analysis, the cinematic manifests itself in exhibition-making both through process of staging and planning (perhaps

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 138.

²⁷ Schafaff, 138. My discussion of Schafaff’s position here is revised from Maeve Connolly, “Trailer Time: Cinematic Expectations and Contemporary Art” in François Bovier and Adeena Mey (ed.s), *Cinema Expose/Exhibited Cinema*, Zurich: JRP Ringier, (forthcoming 2014).

²⁸ Schafaff, *Idem*, p.139.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.139.

suggesting an orientation to the future) and through the eliciting of knowledge on two levels, relating to cinema experience and crucially to reflection upon this experience, as a form of spectacle.

Further evidence that the cinematic in contemporary art leads us somehow outside or beyond cinema may be suggested by the fact that many artists (even those who value collaborations with actors, cinematographers and others embedded within the film and television industry as collaborators) are interested not in cinema's present but rather in its past, whether actual or imagined. Finally, while I have cited several examples of art practices involving film and video, it is clear that the cinematic in contemporary art is not limited to works involving the moving image. Instead, as evidenced by Fite-Wassilak's analysis, the cinematic can come into play in a variety of special and everyday circumstances, through the interaction of imagination, memory and association.