

The subject of 'the cinematic experience' is one that I spend quite a lot of time thinking about: the circumstance within which one experiences the moving image. Primarily my thinking about this subject is in the context of non-narrative or experimental cinema, a form that interests me as both a filmmaker and as a curator.

To me, the cinema is such a good place to meet up with people, to experience events together in a world that is increasingly atomized by ambient media – television programmes on demand, drop in – drop by gallery situations. To me, the physical place of the cinema symbolizes the crucible of debate and progressive ideas. It's an arena where you can think, the focus is on the film, or images, not the surroundings. To have this space away from the world, away from outside culture, to me, is very precious.

When I sit down in a darkened cinema, it takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the light. After ten to fifteen minutes, the world is temporarily excluded from thought and all my visual attention is focused on the screen. By the time the film begins, if I am comfortable enough in my seat, the only senses I am using are my eyes and ears. In this state I am able to discern the subtleties of whatever film or video I am there to see. For me, the best condition in which to watch a film is total darkness – all the constituent elements of a cinematic experience can then work in concert. Sitting in the cinema allows us to take the strain off our other senses and concentrate our eyes and ears.

I can confidently say that I prefer a cinema setting for watching an artists' work. I like a darkened room with seating, I am drawn to an environment where I can close off my senses as much as possible to heighten sight and hearing. It is not a purist standpoint, it is a neurological one. It is not that I do not like the contemporary set-up of installation art with good video projectors and computers in modern galleries, but I think that watching a moving image can be at best a truly immersive activity, and at worst a casual, ambient experience with little engagement.

Conventional narrative film usually follows the theatrical tradition of storytelling. We all know this from being immersed in this form since childhood. When we watch a conventional narrative film, we are drawn into the story through words and pictures. The expressions of the actors are the main focus. A situation is set up, a place and time is framed where the actors play out theatrical interactions. Films like this have a grammar inherited from a long tradition, and often there are pop cultural cues with references to past films and remakes. When we watch a narrative film on television, we don't necessarily feel that the experience is spoilt by advertising breaks or pausing the DVD. In fact this demonstrates our focus on the plot, the characters and the theatrical elements of the film. We are not really attending fully to the images; it is just another vehicle for the extension of theatre. Indeed, these moving images don't usually let us in as a participant to make up our own minds or have many of our own thoughts, it is generally not an interactive experience.

In experimental film and video a mode of first-person cinema can open up the image to interpretation. When celluloid is used, the very substance of the medium can be scratched, painted, repeated and over- or under-processed. The structure of narrative can be explored. Theatrical conventions can be dispensed with; the possibilities for the representation of time or experience are opened up. Artists' films can explore the peculiarities and the nature of the medium itself.

The particular strand of experimental film named, (for want of a better title): Structural Film was a movement prominent in the United States in the 1960s and which developed into the Structural/materialist films in the UK in the 1970s. The term was coined by P. Adams Sitney who noted that film artists such as Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, George Landow (aka Owen Land), Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr, Kurt Kren, and Peter Kubelka had moved away from the complex and condensed forms of cinema practiced by such artists as Sidney Peterson and Stan Brakhage. Structural Film artists pursued instead a more simplified, sometimes even predetermined art. The shape of the film was crucial, the content sometimes peripheral. Sitney identified four formal characteristics common in Structural films, but all four characteristics are not usually present in any single film: fixed camera position (an apparently fixed framing), flicker effect (strobing due to the intermittent nature of film), loop printing, and re-photography (off the screen).

Within the realm of Structural Film, makers such as Taka Iimura, Ernie Gehr, Michael Snow and Tony Conrad contributed to an extended and well documented dialogue on the aspect of duration in film. The work of Anthony McCall (recently re - instigated by the artist after a hiatus of nearly thirty years) almost exclusively deals with an audience's or an individual's experience of light as both an image and sculptural form over time. Tony Conrad's many films, musical performances and expanded cinema performances deal with these issues in a variety of ways. Conrad's recently re-exhibited *Yellow Paintings* originally made in 1973 take these concerns to a conceptual extreme: large pieces of paper featuring the round-edged outline of the 'cinema frame', painted with an 'emulsion' of household and industrial paints that fade (yellow) over a very long period of time – years, decades.

To make the duration of the cinematic experience the subject of a film could also be interpreted as an oppositional force against the bourgeois control of time by the state, as becomes clear in David Larcher's six hour long *Monkey's Birthday* (1975) and Ken Jacobs' ongoing projects: *Star Spangled to Death* (2004, 400 minutes) and his open-ended *Nervous System* performances. All these experiences would need a day to experience in their entirety – to spend such an extended time in a cinema surely would have an effect on your state of mind, and question 'norms of the form'.

A good example of this kind of work to look at in more detail is *Barn Rushes* (1971) by the American filmmaker Larry Gottheim. *Barn Rushes* consists of a series of shots of a rural barn. The camera passes the barn in such a way that it retains its position in the centre of the frame. It is a cyclical, repetitive work that opens your perceptions over a period of time. Recently, Gottheim made some notes about this film that reflect what he was trying to achieve:

"A state of consciousness where one is lulled into an absorbed visual groove, analogous to listening to music – but at the same time there is a rewarding call to attention – the shape of the barn within the frame, changing within each section, and from section to section. Contribution of the road that curved past the barn, creating a complex changing shape that moves in and out of consciousness.

- Relation of foreground to background

- Opacity/transparency

- Color, and memory of color from one section to the next

The stately dance of the foreground grasses as they play with the slats of the barn and the shape of the barn. Preoccupation with the immediate sensual field of experience, while sometimes being called to the more difficult task of memory. The intellect vs. the immediate absorbed sensual experiencing."

Sure enough, the film is pretty much as Gottheim describes it: *Barn Rushes* is projected at 18 frames per second (old silent speed) and is a very slow, meditative experience. It is an exploration of an extended look at something. As the film progresses and a cycle sets in, there is a tangible shift: the repeated subject of the barn falls away and your own perception becomes the subject of the film. It is a Rorschach test-like experience. This film could not be experienced in the same way in any location other than in a very dark cinema, sitting down and feeling relatively relaxed.

Just because digital media frees up and networks media, we should not forget that there is media specificity involved in certain works. Some works were made for a video monitor, some for projection as film in a cinema. With the invention of cinema, we inherited a new form that corresponded to the eyes and the ears, and all sensations that those combinations of senses can provide. Some works do necessitate being watched in a dark room with seats, because that is integral to how they work. Artists' films do not seem to make the transition too well to video; they are too subtle an experience to survive on video. Artists' films that survive the journey from darkened room to gallery are often of the conceptual kind: 'got-it' kind of work.

I suspect that for economic reasons curators sometimes deploy the installation presentation of work that is really not suited to it. To put on a work in an installation takes away the responsibility to have proper screenings: to hire a projectionist, to have decent seating. It is easy: you just block book the gallery to show something on a loop for a month. It is like going to see a concert of music and just getting a bad tape recording of it to listen to instead. Cinema has the power to present a series of events over time. This temporal nature of cinema can be lost when there is a 'drop-in' mentality to the work, where people can come and go as they wish.

Perhaps it is useful at this point to look back at the history of artists' film. In the past, some artists have physically manifested ideas about the conditions of the viewing of cinema. The Invisible Cinema was conceived by the Austrian artist (and cook) Peter Kubelka in 1958. It was first realized as the screening room for Anthology Film Archives, which was the film museum institution founded by Jonas Mekas, P. Adams Sitney and Jerome Hill, in discussion with Kubelka and Stan Brakhage. The Invisible Cinema is described as having black walls, black ceilings, black floors, and black chairs with little black side flaps that kept the

vision focused on the movie. This recognition of the need for 'special conditions' to enable the ideal transmission of images and sound from the artist to the viewer is an extreme, but perhaps it is a moot point to emphasize in this day and age.

The temporal and communal experience of moving images is also important. In this respect Peter Kubelka's ideas about parallels between cinema and other human ceremonies should perhaps be remembered. In his lectures, (Kubelka refuses to write his ideas down), he draws comparisons between the length of films and length of religious meetings or ceremonies. He also reminds us of the archaic precedents of what we call now call cinema, the things that we always did traditionally in groups, the objects we created to fulfill our needs for symbolic communication. Kubelka points out that cinema is an extension of our communication as humans, a combination of senses, and cinemas are social spaces where ideas and sensations can be shared.

From one viewpoint, the current, nostalgic fascination with Structural Film and live film events could be compared to the spectacle and the wonder of autopsies during the Enlightenment: we see an autopsy of the image, live in front of an audience. At a time when the original Structural film events were done, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 'autopsy' of film contributed to the overall cultural critique of official media in all its forms. It contributed to the general overhaul of and questioning of thinking in the West. It aimed to disassemble film, the medium that was instrumental to the creation of cultural myths. This untangling was imperative to thought and theory in a new era.

Of course, the past is the past and we must live and operate as modern people, modern artists and come to terms with the materials we have developed. But perhaps we can look back at Structural Film that deals with duration and the situation of past live events, perhaps we have things to learn, and plenty to reflect on in terms of our current plight as 'makers and receivers'. There are many questions: has our concept of temporality been irrevocably changed by technology? Have we capitulated to the time constraints of modern media and life? Have we still the stamina or capacity for social change? Can we sit still? Do we want to make a space for things that take time? Do we want to be 'centred'? Is there a 'centre'?

When we look at these performances now, perhaps we should bear in mind that at the time the projector, as an analogous 'living organism', and its methods were demystified and questioned (perhaps in the manner of a cadaver) in front of an audience. One could say that we are drawn to it now, again, because it appeals viscerally to our senses. The liveness of the projector signifies a risk, the messiness and unstableness of the medium, which is not present within the realm of 'hidden' digital technologies – in short, people pressing buttons on laptops.

To me, nowadays in art, a critical attitude toward the image seems to have been superseded mostly by an acceptance of commercial cinematic forms. Artists have taken to appropriating the modes of conventional narrative cinema as if it is a cool mode to take, as if they are making some great post-modern statement. To me, this can be a cop out from the real work on the frontiers, reporting back from the complexities of depiction; it is a retreat into the codes and conventions of referentiality and theory.

We do not really need a new technology. We have enough of it, perhaps too much, and only very few artists are deploying it critically. In VJ-ing and much 'live digital' cinema I see just software and rarely communication. I am not impressed with software, in the same way that I am not simply impressed with cds, minidisks or even vinyl records. Digital technology opens up a whole new archive of material for artists but it is a leveler of images. Whereas we might all have many cultural differences, and many different reference points, we do have one thing in common: our nervous system. In fact to get into a situation where we question our perception is a great commonality, one that is achieved in many experimental films. At this moment in time, to return our view to the real world is a breakthrough. To re-discover the act of looking and a space for looking at something is a crucial and political act for artists to undertake.

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Anthony McCall:

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Greg Kurcewicz is an artist who also works as an independent curator of artists' film and video. Since 2002 he has co-curated programmes of artists' film and video for the Evolution festival, Leeds, UK which has focused on historical and contemporary single-screen and expanded cinema work. He has also organised and collaborated in the presentation of many artist's film programmes in the UK and Europe, and was co-curator of *Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!*, a major internationally touring exhibition of film highlighting the work of the London Filmmakers' Cooperative 1966–76.