

We know cinema as a public projection of moving images and sound in a specially-designed space. This specific location that involves us with all our senses was crucial to establish cinema as an art form. Nowadays cinema seems all of a sudden to be everywhere, from the domestic screen of the television and the home video projector to the portable computer and other personal devices. We consume movies in our car, the train, on the small screen in the airplane and in our office.

In spite of the promise to bring the cinematic experience everywhere, it is inaccurate to use the term 'cinema' when we refer to this mass media consumption of moving images. It does not matter how high the resolution or the color quality is of our iPod screen; it has nothing in common with the real experience of cinema, which is located in the appropriate environmental context: the dark room of the movie theatre, equipped with dedicated technology for optimal sound and vision quality, a space disconnected from the outside world where the perception of the spectator is conditioned to capture and believe the illusions on the screen. This text focuses on the different transformations of cinema and artworks with cinematic qualities. It aims to define the qualities of the space to display these different audiovisual works – the black box. It questions if this specific space could be a common ground where cinema and visual art might influence each other.

The Black Box

When we think about the standardized format of an art show displaying video-related artwork, the picture that comes to mind is a small, dark room with a cheap audio system, a bad beamer and videos that are probably too long to be viewed entirely without comfortable seats. The term 'black box' is often used to designate the space for videos that do not find a place in real cinema. It is seen as the opposite of the white cube: the traditional neutral space where exhibited artwork acquires the status of art with a capital A. In both definitions the connotation is merely functional: a box roughly similar to the traditional movie theatre or a space designed for an artwork that requires no light.

The term black box was already familiar in the fields of science and technology, before it was used within the context of contemporary art. Behavioral psychology defined the black box as a specific area of the human brain in which externally received stimuli give subsequent rise to (behavioral) responses. This same definition applies to technological systems or devices of which we only know the received input and the given output, but not the internal process. In both fields it seems to be a separate closed space that excludes the possibility of a physical exploration or an intellectual comprehension.

Coming back to the art world, this definition suggests a more evocative delineation for the term black box: an environment where an event takes place and originates a mental response. As the antithesis of the black box described by science that is observed from outside, here the black box is only perceived once we enter. Inside, the spectator is disconnected from daily life and surrenders to the experience of sound and image. This is definitely similar to the dark room of the cinema where the spectator is captured by illusions once the projection starts. The analogy with cinema lies more in the function of the environment than in

the medium of the artwork presented within. Nevertheless, the status of a space for video-related artwork should not be interpreted as an evolution of the classic exhibition space – the white cube – into the renewed form of a dark container for art requiring no light. The dichotomy of white cube *versus* black box signifies the passive mode against the active mode, contemplation against experience. In other words, the black box becomes the embodiment of a space in between classic cinema and visual arts, where the artwork exists in the real moment and interacts with the senses of the spectator to stimulate a cinematic experience.

At this point the central question is: if the black box has the status of an environment reserved to experience and not merely to exhibit, what kind of works should it contain? To answer this, it might require a closer consideration of the place of the cinematic experience in the world of art and film.

First of all, I will consider the environmental immersion of the spectator as an important part of the broader research achieved by the avant-gardes in art and cinema from the beginning of the twentieth century. I will illustrate some experiments of constructed environments to immerse the spectator and other examples of experimental cinematic/audiovisual works that deconstructed the classic cinema space. Secondly I will address some contemporary artists who are located at the border of classical cinema and visual art. In their practice they consider different possibilities to expand conventional ways of producing and displaying cinema-related artwork within the art context.

The Historical Avant-Garde

The quest for a radical approach to the spectator's involvement in the work dates back to the historical avant-garde. Early examples from 1923 are *Proun Space* by the constructivist El Lissitzky and Schwitters' *Merzbau*. Around the same time, the projects of Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus led to models for a *Total Theater* (1927), a performative and displaying machine uniting theatre with the utopia of Total Art, placing the spectator in a stimulating surround-environment.

László Moholy-Nagy, who was involved as a scenographer on Erwin Piscator's projects, investigated possible ways to implement photography and cinema in a total environment of new scenic technologies. In his texts he examines the relationship between graphical and auditory elements within the context of abstract cinema, suggesting that cinematographic directors record their own sound for film (using the LPs) in order to eliminate the silent film's live musical accompaniment of the time. In the early 1930s Moholy-Nagy dedicated himself to the production of abstract films such as *Lichtspiel Schwarz, Weiss, Grau* (1930) and *Tönendes ABC* (1932), in which he utilized Rudolph Pfenninger's experiments

with synthetic sound to formulate a new musical alphabet. In his *Simultaneous Cinema or Polycinema* he experimented with new audiovisual techniques to design special screens for simultaneous, interwoven projections or a stereo-screen for greater spectator involvement.^[1]

Parallel to Nagy's spatial research, it is worth mentioning the projection setup of the French director Abel Gance's film *Napoleon* (1926), where he created 'polyvision' with three projectors forming one big image. This setup, created in collaboration with his photography director André Debrie, widened the perception and created non-linear associative narration.

Spatial Environments and Kinetic Art

Research and experiments to create a total immersion for the spectator continued after the Second World War. In Buenos Aires in 1946 the Italian artist Lucio Fontana wrote his *Manifesto Blanco*. "Art for the contemporary man is based on the dimensions of his existence", says Fontana, "in which space and time have a dominant role."^[2] The following year Fontana also wrote the manifesto of Spatialism that proposes the location of the human being in a structure with light, movement, sound and time. In 1949 the *Ambiente Spaziale* (Spatial Environment) became the physical representation of these ideas. Fontana left painting and sculpture to build a space: a black box wherein neon lights and painted elements with phosphorescent colors suggest multiple dimensions that we today might define as a virtual, mental space emerging in the observer's perception and experience.

From the 1950s onwards, the Kinetic and Programmed Art of artists such as GRAV in Paris, the groups T and Enne in Italy were making mechanical three-dimensional installations with mirrors, moving lights and sounds to create synaesthetic spatial optical illusions, which interacted with and altered the observer's perception. The culmination of this avant-garde movement came in the 1960s when it was marketed in the United States as Optical Art. However, it was also quickly overshadowed by Pop Art's rising commercial success, which inspired a return to marketable, exhibitable artwork to fill the traditional white cube.

Lettrist Cinema

Alongside the research of the Kinetic artists, the experimental cinema continued with an internal deconstruction of its own meaning. In Paris the Lettrist cinema initiated this process by proposing a different environmental arrangement in which to screen their experimental films. In *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (1950), the poet, critic, artist and all-things-ologist Isidore Isou deconstructed the classical narrative grammar by editing sounds and images in an illogical and disconnected way. Some years later with *Le film est déjà commence?* Maurice Lemaître destroyed the conventional two-dimensional screen by projecting on the side-walls, the ceiling and the bodies of the spectators and even hiding actors in the audience, transforming the cinema into a performative experience. According to Isou, the true cinematic experience passes through the involvement of all the spectator's senses.

In the following years, the Situationist Gil J. Wolman and Guy-Ernest Debord directed *Anticoncept* (presented at the Cannes Festival in 1952). A white circle painted on film is alternating with completely white or black frames and is projected on a spherical screen with a soundtrack of broken sentences and Lautrépoux poems. Every representational element is annulled by only presenting duration and space in which the film is projected.

Invisible Cinema

Video Art and the artistic practice of audiovisual artists led to questions about optimal spaces and display modes for their work. In the 1970s the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka designed the *Invisible Cinema*, a movie theatre built in the headquarters of the Anthology Film Archives, a New York-based centre for research and distribution of experimental and avant-garde cinema.^[3] According to Kubelka, the quality of the movie depends not only on the quality of the film, camera and projector, but also on the theatre in which it is projected: it should be a perfectly designed machine for watching films. The Invisible Cinema was therefore the perfect movie theatre, in which external inputs are totally eliminated and the spectator is solely confronted with the screen. The room was completely furnished with black soundproofed material and black seats with panels to separate each spectator. No indirect light reflections from the screen could distract the concentration. The Invisible Cinema was the best place to experience the cinematic, the perfect black box.^[4]

Display and installation of narrative video and black boxes

From the 1990s onwards, video began to dominate contemporary art. These installations normally make use of a video projector to transform the wall of a dark gallery room into a cinematographic screen. Often this format does not really 'work' well because narrative video requires time and an appropriate space to follow the complete story; that does not fulfill the expectations of a museum or art gallery visitor spending only seconds or a few minutes with a work and looking for immediate comprehension of the artistic statement.

What does not work in exhibiting video in an art context is the narrative factor. To respond to this basic setup, an option often adopted by the artists is the environmental-based video installation, playing with the physical display space in order to construct an immersive environment. In such a case, the spectator is expected to stay in the active condition of experiencing and responding, physically or intellectually, to audiovisual inputs.

The 1999 exhibition *Cinéma Cinéma* at Eindhoven's Van Abbe Museum sums up the confluence between art and cinema amongst a new generation of artists/filmmakers expanding their acquainted awareness of the classical cinematographic grammar in the fine arts context. These artists use the exhibition as a way to explore standard presentation of narrative video in order to construct more complex narrations that will find in the environment a more flexible space to be perceived.^[5] In both cases we can talk about a real cinematic experience: the result of artists re-mediating the medium of cinema, rethinking the black box where the work is showed and involving the spectator.

Some examples of such cinematographic works are the complex installations of the Finnish artist Eija Liisa Ahtila. For instance, in *The House* (2002) three juxtaposed screens form a sensory space where the spectator can follow simultaneously the actions of the protagonist from three different perspectives in space and time.

Another example is the documentary by Steve McQueen, *Caribs Leap / Western Deep* (2002), where as a spectator you become physically part of the journey into the bowels of the earth together with the South African miners. McQueen's tendency to incorporate movies within the exhibition space is manifest in a good part of his art practice, but especially in the 2005 installation, *Pursuit*. We see a dark room, in which feeble lights are projected from a video setup at the centre and reflected by mirrors that cover the walls. The spectator enters and loses spatial awareness, abandoning himself in an experience of physical alienation that is almost dreamlike.^[6]

The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist has also been building video installations since the 1990s in which space plays a central role. In 2005 she participated in the Venice Biennale with the video installation *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* in the church of San Stae. By entering the darkened nave, you are invited to go and lay down barefooted on mattresses to become immersed in the moving painting projected on the entire ceiling of the Renaissance church. Staring into the pop-oriented work *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* invokes a strong sense of floating in the plastic colors and mirror-based refractions of the video.

This kind of relocation of the cinematic effect in relation to the environment and the observer is also the objective in several new media projects and Live Cinema performances. It all suggests the promise that when contemporary filmmakers, who are working in the boundary areas of cinema and art, play innovatively with the space in relation to their work, they could realize their most radical ideas: rethinking the structures of traditional cinema and expanding the conventional formats of displaying moving images in the context of art.