# RE:CINEMA

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the conceptual underpinnings of the exhibition project Re:Cinema. Rather than settling around the relatively stable formal and ontological parameters of the historical forms of cinema, the moving image is addressed in terms of its fragmentation, ubiquity and volatility. Through a discussion of key examples, the very embeddedness of historical forms within the contemporary moving image-scape is examined. To this end the idea of the 'cinematic' is evoked not as a totalising system, but rather as a persistent conceptual and visual presence that informs contemporary moving image production and artistic inquiry.

**Keywords:** cinema, contemporary art, video art. curating, exhibition, moving image, digital,

By way of an introduction I would like to address the title of this essay *Re:Cinema*. It is also the title of an exhibition-based project conducted between Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney and Parsons the New School for Design in New York. Instigated and curated by the author, the project is, to put it simply, concerned with examining the "persistence of the cinematic in contemporary practice." At the time of writing the first of two exhi-



Fig. 1. Re:Cinema installation view. Sydney College of the Arts Galleries, May/June 2013. L-R Andrew Robards, Jack McGrath & Silas Darnell *The Town With No Name*, Jeesu Kim, *I'm here now*, Lillian Handley, *untitled & Image 01*, Salvatore Panatteri, *Chroma Key Red* (© Respective Artists Photo © Ryszard Dabek.

bitions has been completed in Sydney; with the second scheduled to take place in New York in December 2013 [1].

The Sydney-based exhibition featured the work of twenty-seven artists across three gallery spaces at Sydney College of the Arts. It contained a variety of work ranging from single channel video and video-based installation to sculpture, photography, digital imaging and a computer-controlled diorama. Within the curatorial remit of the project I have sought to select work that, to varying degrees of abstraction, can be identified as on some level engaging the cinematic. In this sense the very idea of the cinematic is evoked not as a purely formal entity or as a fixed referent but rather as a presence that can be recognised as operating through and upon the works in the exhibition. It is this very idea of the cinema as a persistent and pervasive formal and conceptual presence in much of contemporary artistic practice that is the crux of my investigation.

In recent times, the most poignant (and effective) example of this idea of cinematic engagement in the sphere of global contemporary art is undoubtedly *The Clock* (2011) by Christian Marclay. The work, consisting of a 24 hour cycle of film sequences purloined from the history of cinema, is deceptively simple both in terms of formal and narrative structure. Through the deft use of a recurring motif; the filmic representation of clocks and watches, *The Clock* is possessed of temporal logic that sees the time space of events depicted on the screen synchronised with the real time of the viewer.

Viewed as a work of pure montage, *The Clock* employs a range of visual and aural links to slide from one narrative space to another with often surprising and disarming effect. Even seemingly arbitrary editing decisions are subsumed by the greater design of the work as the viewer is constantly reminded not only of the passage of screen time but also the simultaneous expenditure of real lived time. It is a situation that is further complicated by the numerous narrative ellipses that litter the work as characters and situations unexpectedly return to the screen. Within *The Clock* the viewer is drawn into an increasingly labyrinthine conceptual space that at once reveals and draws upon the mechanics of cinematic engagement. While we may know what time it is, we are never really sure where we stand.

It is perhaps this sense of disorientation that is the most powerful aspect of *The Clock*. Beyond the easy pleasures that the work offers in allowing us to recognise snippets of our favourite films lies a much more profound meditation on spectatorship and our relation to the cinematic. That this is done through a collapse of filmic montage into that most contemporary of forms: the mashup, is indeed remarkable. At the very heart of the work is an acknowledgement that the cinematic itself is, in this post-digital age, an entirely negotiable and volatile entity and that art itself may just be key in understanding what it has and will become.

If we are to speak of the cinematic we should perhaps first address the time-honoured question: What is Cinema? Indeed, the answer to this question remains as elusive today as it was in 1958 when it was used for the title of a collection of essays (*Que-est-ce que le Cinéma?*) by the then recently deceased film theorist and critic André Bazin. For Bazin the cinema was a system of total representation of mythical proportions. Indeed it was his contention that the very idea of cinema existed well before its invention and that its development was guided by an insuppressible human drive to reproduce reality with greater and greater fidelity. In his words: "Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" [2]

For all Bazin's insight and lasting influence his ideas are inescapably tied to a particular technological and historical epoch. They were born to an age of cinema spectatorship that required moving images to be displayed and viewed under strict architectural and perceptual conditions. These were conditions that de-

manded that one must visit a movie theatre to fall under the spell of moving images. This classical model of cinema spectatorship is now but a mere strand of the multiplicity of ways we engage and are engaged by moving images. Rather, we must consider the ways in which Bazin's total system of cinema is renegotiated and redefined by forces arising from the conditions of ubiquity, instantaneity and malleability that are the hallmarks of the digital era. As J.Hoberman recently observed "Bazin had imagined cinema as the objective "recreation of the world". Yet digital image-making precludes the necessity of having the world, or even a really existing subject, before the camera – let alone the need for a camera." [3] As tellingly simple as it is, Hoberman's observation reveals the impact the very condition of "digitalness" has had on notions of the cinematic. However, it is not only production that is re-negotiated but also distribution and reception, as the very appearance of the spectacular undergoes a process of constant reconfiguration.

At this point I should note that not all the twenty-seven works included in *Re:Cinema* are immediately recognisable as "cinematic", at least not in the common sense of the term. As an adjective, cinematic is often and seemingly indiscriminately applied to a range of contemporary visual productions; from advertising photography to graphic novels. Its use denotes an affinity to the narrative and spectacular forms of classical cinema, and as such is bound to an idea of the cinema that is historically defined and conceptually ossified. While the twin motors of spectacle and narrative are certainly present in many of the

works I have included in the *Re:Cinema* project, I would argue that the idea of the cinematic can admit a much wider range of formal strategies and effects; approaches that do not simply reinforce a particular historically prescribed understanding of the cinema but rather engage the splintered shards of cinema that are embedded in the ever expanding field of technologies and relations that the digital engenders.

Within the *Re:Cinema* exhibition this idea of the cinematic as a point of engagement is overt in the case of some works. In others its presence is like that of a trace element that none-the-less directly informs the formal and conceptual constituency of the artwork. I offer a brief inventory of these 'cinematic' traces by way of orientation:

spectacle/hallucination
spectatorship/participation
projection/light
materiality/immateriality
medium/genre
narrative/performance
document/fiction

In each case I have sought to present these traces as pairs, not to set up binaries but to hint towards the unstable and fluid nature of the cinematic in the contemporary moment. In doing this I acknowledge those often vertiginous and undetectable moments when spectacle becomes hallucination, where the real collapses into its own image.

Indeed, such is the sheer fluidity of forms and effects that the moving image now engenders that one could just as easily recombine these pairs to effectively map its efficacy. For example the in-

timate relationship between document/performance established by filmmakers like Errol Morris and Werner Herzog has in recent times been pushed to astonishing ends in films like Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* [4] where the performative acts as both an enabler and generator of the revelations of the document.

It is this very space between performance and document that a number of works included in *Re:Cinema* interrogate. In each case the moving image is employed not merely to document a performance but also as an element that is integral to its realisation in actual and represented form. It is a cinematic logic that ultimately informs these works: without the over-riding imperative of disclosure through representation there would be no performative act. In Robert Hickerson's *Debasement Triptych* (2012) the artist directs his divorced and estranged parents through a range of performative tasks that were designed to explore and question their relationship as members of a family. However, what is played out in these performances owes little, if nothing, to traditions of cathartic expression. Rather we are made acutely aware of the status of these troubled relations as a type of representational impasse; a series of interpersonal exchanges that are wholly directed and enacted for the benefit of the camera. The work is infused with a representational logic that simultaneously rests upon the realness of the characters portrayed and the artifice of the situation they are placed in. It is logic that lies at the heart of cinematic illusion and the tension between performance and document that exists at all levels of produc-

**Fig. 2. Robert Hickerson, Debasement Triptych, production still, digital video, 5 min 12 sec, 2012. (©Robert Hickerson)**
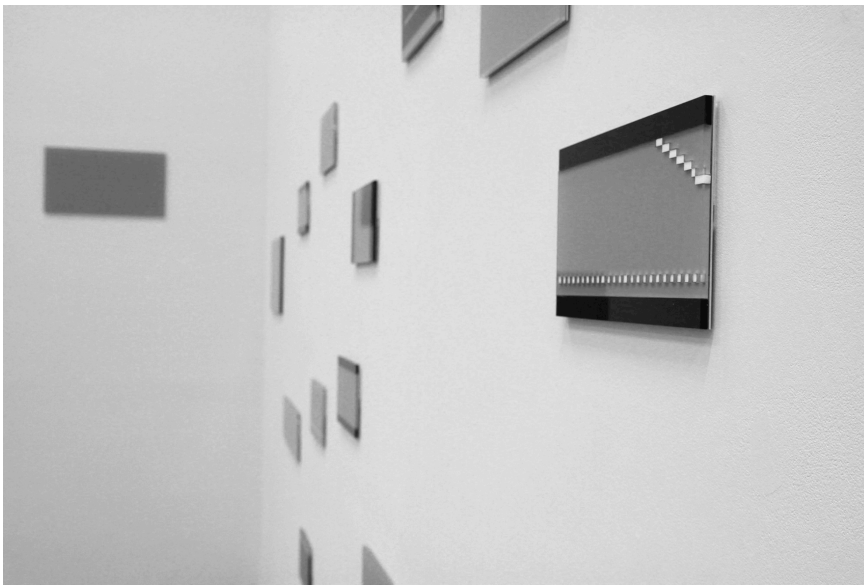
**Fig. 3. Salvatore Panatteri, Chroma Key Red.**
**Untitled [CKR 01-03] Plexi Glass / Acrylic, Chroma-Key Red, Aluminium.16:9 aspect,**
**each measuring approx. 33.6 x 59.7 cm. 2013.**
**Untitled [CKR 01-16] Plexi Glass / Acrylic, Chroma-Key Red, Aluminium.16:9 aspect,**
**each measuring approx.16.75 x 29.8 cm. 2013**
**(© Salvatore Panatteri. Photo © Ryszard Dabek.**

tion regardless of genre. As Jean Luc Godard observed of the actors' performance: "I just want them to be in a situation which is not a real situation for them – a fiction situation – but I want them to be in this fiction exactly as they would be in life". [5]

Indeed it can be asserted that this idea of "cinematic performance" persists as a point of engagement across a range of ubiquitous (mobile devices/ YouTube) and rarefied forms (video-art) of the moving image. However, as I have shown, it is one of many points of engagement for artists working with or through the cinematic. Traces of the ematic can be detected in a wide range of secondary forms that engage different pictorial orders or are materialised through ways and means other than the moving image. In the same way that the still images of advertising can be read through the lens of the cinematic meaning so too can a range of artistic practices traditionally tied to the formal concerns of painting and sculpture be seen to be infected by this elemental cinematic trace. Within the exhibition *Re:Cinema* I have sought to include a number of works that engage the language and concerns of minimalism. In each case the presence of the cinematic comes a complicating and problematising force.

For the industrially produced acrylic/aluminium wall works of Salvatore Panatteri the cinematic is both a formal pre-condition and a point of pictorial ground zero. Using a series of dimensional constraints based on cinema aspect ratios (1.33, 1.78 etc.) Panatteri plays out a system of minimalist abstraction that at once references the history of the moving image and alludes to its sheer ubiquity. That he chooses to do this in Chroma Key Red further implicates the digital in this state of ever-multiplying pictorial abundance. Here is the image before the image, the starting point of the re-composition and reconstitution that has become the modus operandi of contemporary moving image production. Only the odd stray glitch of simulated pixels upsets the perfection.

A similar rejection of iconography marks the work of Berlin-based Australian artist Jai McKenzie. In her *Space Oddity* (2012), Mckenzie projects a slowly-morphing colour field through a hand woven net onto the wall behind it. The resulting work has a visual effect that is as ephemeral as it is materially tangible. The gridded presence of the net makes explicit the structured nature of our very gaze and the often-transparent apparatus of cinematic projection. As one approaches the net it becomes more difficult to behold as its form enters into a visual confusion with its shadow on the wall directly behind it. Through this deceptively simple arrangement the work implicates both the viewer and the cinematic apparatus in an irresolvable play of appearances. I am reminded of Sean Cubitt's discussion of Erwin Panofsky's writings on perspective. Here, Cubitt contends that for Panofsky the very conditions of perspectival representation enable the "perceiving self" to externalize its "visual perception as a field" that invariably activates "the irruption of strangeness into consciousness"[6]. For Cubitt this process goes some way to explaining the inherent strangeness of realist cinema, the gap between the viewer and the world as represented. It is this very gap between seeing and representation that McKenzie's work so astutely traverses.

Up to this point my discussion has been primarily concerned with examining the ways that artists have engaged the visual and conceptual mechanics of cinematic experience. By doing this I have sought to show how a range of techniques and material responses have

**Fig. 4. Jai McKenzie, *Space Oddity*, metal tubing, cotton rope, video projection. 200 x 300 cm, 2012. (©Jai McKenzie. Photo © Ryszard Dabek.)**
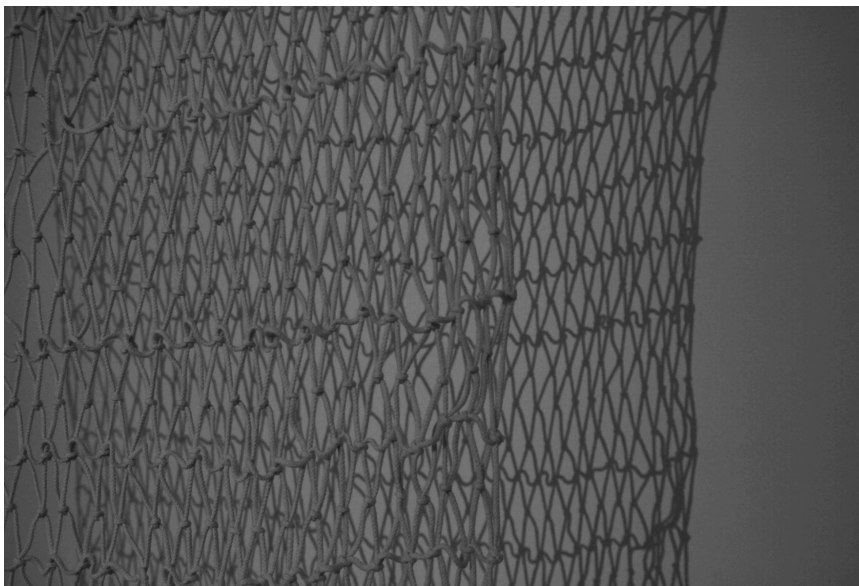
Fig. 5. **Clare Ferra,** *Love Oscillation,* **production still, digital video, 7 min 50 sec, 2012. (©Clare Ferra.)**

been employed by contemporary practitioners to work through what I have termed the splintered shards of the cinematic. In each case these shards (montage, performance, projection etc.) have acted as points of engagement that set in train varyingly complex propositions regarding subjectivity and representation. Each artist intrinsically understands that the moving image is now defined as much by fragmentation, ubiquity and volatility as by the relatively stable formal and ontological parameters of historical cinema.

But what becomes of the image under this ever morphing and multiplying economy of representation? If, as I have contended, the cinematic in the contemporary sense is a fragmented and pervasive presence, how do we approach the image and its relationship to both time and movement? As we survey the mediascape and the dizzying array of content and delivery mediums that constitute the field of the moving image, it is resoundingly apparent that no singular approach can account for the multiplicity of operations at play. However, what we can do is attempt to consider the image and its attendant poetics as being in a state of play with the very conditions of its production.

Indeed, the very idea of playing the medium against itself has in many ways become a defining strategy of the age. Here I am thinking of the rise of the mashup as a dominant mode of cultural production and the endless stream of remixes, redos and remakes that make

YouTube the participatory force it is today. It is mode of production, that under the networked conditions of video sharing platforms, replaces accepted notions of authorship with an aesthetic of the "unfinished"[7] that simultaneously acts as homage and critique. It is a strategy that draws the image into a play not only with the medium, but also with its own system of poetics.

The video work *Love Oscillation* (2012) by Clare Ferra included in *Re:Cinema* consists of moving imagery that has been intensively reworked and reimagined. The original footage, which pictures extended moments of ecstatic pleasure/performance was sourced from lo-res pornographic videos gleaned from the internet. Like all camera-based imagery there is a surprising resilience to this source material. Processes of layering and data corruption at once liquefy and reinstate the authority of these images. Through these processes Ferra infuses her base source materials with a sense of temporal and pictorial suspension. In *Love Oscillation* the image is constantly on the threshold of unbecoming, falling apart under the sheer weight of representation and the stresses of its digital volatility.

It is this process of oscillation between representation and abstraction, animation and stasis that is key to understanding the poetic possibilities of Ferra's work and its ability to generate affect. As Steven Shaviro contends: "Films and music videos, like other media works, are machines for generating

affect and for capitalising upon, or extracting value from this affect." [8]

In a very real sense the artist's role is increasingly one of finding ways to generate and amplify affect from the fragmented mediascape that endlessly unfolds before them. As Brian Massumi has observed: "There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information - and image - based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered." [9]

If we are to consider Cinema itself as a master narrative that has not so much foundered but has replicated and fragmented then the function of *Re:Cinema* as an exhibition that tracks this movement is especially timely. As I have argued the moving image is increasingly defined by its sheer multiplicity and potential instability. As an exhibition project *Re:Cinema* seeks to not only pay witness to this contemporary phenomena but also signpost the often pervading sense of irrationality and new, barely graspable forms of affect that are generated through this new post-cinematic mediascape.

**References and Notes**

**1.** The website for the Re:Cinema project can be accessed at: http://www.recinema.net

**2.** André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1,* Hugh Gray trans. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,1967) p21.

**3.** J.Hoberman, Film After Film (London, U.K.: Verso, 2012) p4.

**4.** Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing* (2013), film.

**5.** Jean-Luc Godard, "Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema" an interview with Gene Youngblood 1968, in David Sterritt ed., *Jean-Luc Godard Interviews* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi) p32.

**6.** Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004) pp 140-1.

**7**. Here I am referring to the essentially unfinished state of digital products as discussed in Peter Lunenfeld's essay "Unfinished Business." Peter Lunenfeld, "Unfinished Business" in *The Digital Dialectic*, Peter Lunenefeld ed. (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2000) pp 6-23.

**8.** Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, Zero Books, 2010) pp 2-3.

**9.** Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2002) p 27.