

Essential Cinema in the Gallery

Noah Cowan

The medium of film has traditionally been associated with a specific environment. People expect to gather in a dark black box with controlled sound and watch light projected through a translucent material (or, more recently, through a large format digital projector).

Museums increasingly show films and film fragments on monitors in their galleries. While these reproductions have illustrative appeal, they rarely acknowledge the crucial specificity of cinema presentation to a film's aesthetic success. These digital reproductions of films meant for the cinema should be acknowledged as having the same relationship to the medium of film as photographs and postcards of paintings do to the original works of art.

And yet the gallery has a unique and important role to play when we want to think about film culture. Since the medium's invention, filmmaking has spun off an immense outpouring of works—drawings, photographs, maquettes, etc.—which uncannily echo or parallel advances in the visual arts. Whether or not they can truly function as autonomous, fully achieved artworks in their own right, they stand as suggestive examples of near-art or “possible art,” implicitly blurring or questioning the boundaries between craftsmanship and art-making. Conversely, there has been a long history of visual artworks proper that draw upon, criticize or laud both film imagery and technique, arguably dating from the Cubists' engagement with early silent cinema, recently chronicled in Pace Wildenstein's *Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism* exhibition curated by Bernice Rose in 2007, and Arne Glimcher's documentary *Picasso and Braque Go to the Movies* that followed a year later.

We believe that films made for the cinema, the secondary artifacts they produce and artworks that have drawn from or comment on the medium of film offer a triangular relationship that illuminates social and aesthetic trends of the century just past, and points us forward to possible trends in new media and media yet to come. For these reasons, the opening programme of TIFF Bell Lightbox takes place in both the gallery and the cinema.

We began with a list. Motivated by a desire to share the key moments of film history and to provide substantial contextualization around them, we sought a method to create an institutionally-specific Top 100. We did so by merging a list of 100 films created by our internal experts and a 100-film list compiled from a large-scale stakeholder survey. This became the Essential 100, with “essential” defined as somewhere between “best” and “most influential”.

As we sought to transpose this list from the cinema to the gallery, we faced a difficult challenge: considering the abundance of material from the production and marketing of films, what would be our criteria for judging those items worthy of display? We decided to seek out those representative objects that spoke most clearly to the respective films’ “essential” status, that could most successfully encapsulate their iconic quality. To begin with, we delved into the production process, seeking out those subsidiary elements (notes, designs, correspondence, etc.) that revealed key germinating influences on the realized films. We asked if the films contributed to a larger cultural discourse, whether through their purely aesthetic properties or their particular socio-political resonance. We also looked to the development of celebrity culture (especially relevant for the American cinema) and to the dark arts of marketing, whose various engines of iconography—photos, posters, and other ephemera—also happen to lend themselves effectively to gallery-based display.

We chose to organize this material in a section we have dubbed the *wunderkammer*, adopting the name of the eclectic cabinet of curiosities popularized by scholars and collectors from the Renaissance forward. The *wunderkammer* functions as both a tool of scientific and cultural inquiry and a playful, highly subjective collection of assorted phenomena, a chamber where the museum meets the funhouse. We like the lack of pretension such a concept suggests, as well as its intimations of multiple personality—particularly apt as the film medium has variously (and often simultaneously) functioned as art, a technological showcase and escapist entertainment.

These multiple entry points into cinema appreciation are reflected by and celebrated in the immersive, non-hierarchical structure we elected to use for the design of the *wunderkammer*. By obscuring the ranking of our list, we allow visitors to find their own organic pathways through the history of cinema, inviting them to create their own personal groupings of filmic icons—in effect, to create their own canon. We imagine their process will reflect that of our expert panel in the making of our list, which saw a constant play between a studious weighing of influence and achievement and that passionate emotional investment that drew us to the medium in the first place.

Several visual art and film commissions presented within the *Essential Cinema* exhibition explore this fluidity, subjecting both the list itself and certain films on it to close and sometimes critical scrutiny.

In *Hauntings I* and *Hauntings II*—a series of projected film fragments—Guy Maddin imagines an alternate list all his own, a parallel universe where the lost or abandoned films of great filmmakers live on as spectres of their unmade selves. Atom Egoyan's *8 1/2 Screens*, which fragments a key scene from Fellini's *8 1/2* into a prismatic collage of viewers and viewed, questions whether we have the critical distance to create a list of essential films at all. He sees the relationship between audience and film as an eternal present of shared complicity, a perpetual state of wonder that intrinsically resists dispassionate analysis.

Barr Gilmore and the team of James Andean and François Xavier Saint-Pierre isolate and manipulate a certain element of filmmaking—film sound for Andean and Saint-Pierre, film titles for Gilmore—to go deeper into this powerful, often subliminal relationship between films and their audiences. Exploring the often inexpressible sensations created by seemingly minor phenomena—the typeface on a title, the timbre of a voice, a brief snatch of music—they reveal how deeply our cinematic experiences have penetrated both our conscious and unconscious memory, and how the sparks of recognition they elicit can yield revelatory experiences when those elements are suddenly placed in new contexts and combinations.

This year the Toronto International Film Festival's cross-media Future Projections programme has become part of the *Essential Cinema* exhibition, and we sought out works from well-known and emerging artists which addressed the films from the Essential 100. Like the works by Gilmore and Andean/Saint Pierre, the artists within Future Projections use similar techniques of isolation and deconstruction, stripping away a film's many visual, aural and performative layers to locate a crucial gesture at the core. However, rather than addressing the list as a whole or the film medium in general, they focus on specific films within the Essential 100 and interrogate the mechanisms through which they connect so powerfully with audiences.

In *Jeanne*, Martin Arnold reassembles the many close-ups of Renée Falconetti from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, reinforcing the otherworldly force of this most famous of screen performances. William Kentridge's *Journey to the Moon* utilizes Georges Méliès' pioneering science-fiction epic as an engine for his own escapes into the world of imagination. Through fantastical homage, both artists encourage us to find deeper personal meaning in the original films.

Other projects complicate our relationship to films from the Essential 100 even as they pay them homage. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy reinvent David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as a tabletop diorama that self-generates infinitely repeatable images of suburban horror, extending the original film's reach beyond its specific characters and locale. Harun Farocki meanwhile connects the Lumières' single-shot film of workers leaving a factory to other films that evoke that same famous shot, inscribing the brothers' seemingly arbitrary *actualité* into a wider discourse of 20th century labour sociology.

Other artists echo Guy Maddin's impulse to seek out the lost or forgotten in cinema's history and remake the original films. Rather than phantasmagoric homage, however, they use the results as an analytical tool to explore specific cultural and sociopolitical contexts, whether in the urban reclamation of Chris Chong Chan Fui and Yasuhiro Morinaga's *HEAVENHELL* or The Otolith Group's Pirandellian empowerment of the protagonists from Satyajit Ray's abandoned science-fiction screenplay. Composer Michael Nyman substitutes his own found images for Dziga Vertov's and so privileges score over image in his remake of *Man With A Movie Camera*. Ming Wong's replays of Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* meanwhile explore whether the films are able to retain their affective power when shorn of their original signifiers of language, gender and race.

Issues of time and space, perhaps the greatest points of differentiation between the gallery and cinema, loom large for the remaining artists. Douglas Gordon's excruciatingly slowed-down and doubled version of *Psycho* sabotages the film's narrative thrust and intensity, while inviting speculation about the relationship between photography, sculpture and cinema. Perry Bard, who also remakes Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, disseminates the film's kaleidoscopic vision into ever-multiplying dimensions of space and time, discovering new possibilities, new connections and new image-makers through the vehicle of Vertov's original conceptual conceit. Most fascinating of all is Michael Snow's *Slidelength*, which uses slide images to ruthlessly deconstruct the spartan simplicity of his own masterwork *Wavelength* while still reinforcing the innate magic of the projected image.

There is one connective idea that the *Essential Cinema* exhibition demonstrates above all others: film matters. It matters to artists and audiences, to experts and multiplexers. It matters if you care about the recent history of our world, and about the principles of narrative and design through which we frame our daily experiences. Most of all, it matters that film not only allows us to relive moments of great joy (or great sorrow) in our own lives, but that it again and again reinvents itself to better or differently evoke those ineffable emotions that might otherwise go unexpressed. •

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Guy Maddin's *Hauntings*

The ghosts of cinema loom large in Guy Maddin's body of work. *Hauntings* is a series of very short films commissioned for the opening of TIFF Bell Lightbox. Both a cheeky commentary on the idea of an essential films list and a harrowing exploration of the regret and weakness felt by cinema's great masters, this is both Maddin's most expansive work in terms of the sheer size of its palette and his most personal. For years, he has been collecting tales of unrealized, half-finished or abandoned films, potential masterworks doomed to oblivion as they slipped out of their creators' control. This impulse rhymes remarkably well with Maddin's thematic obsession with regret and the perils of wild abandon found in both his film and installation works.

Noah Cowan

Cinema is a haunted medium, a projection of people, places and things not really present. As we know a film can summon before our eyes, like ghosts invoked from the beyond, performances from the past, performances by actors no longer with us, in settings changed forever. But when a movie is lost, as so many great works from the medium's earliest years are, it is a double haunting, for a misplaced film is an artwork consigned to limbo, a narrative with no known final resting place. It wanders over unconsecrated ground, an unhappy spirit. Out of concern that the sensational TIFF Bell Lightbox might be too spanking new for the sad ectoplasms that really should be a movie venue's luminous principal denizens, I have offered to haunt the joint. I present then, to the facility's first throngs, projected resurrections of film history's most mourned-after lost masterpieces, remade as wispy fragments conjured in my own private studio seances. I hope these long-beleaguered spectres feel immediately at home in the TIFF BLB, and set themselves to the entrancing task at hand: haunting!

Guy Maddin

Clockwise from top right: Louis Negin in Louis Chaudet's lost *The Devil Bear*; Suzanne Pringle in Josef von Sternberg's lost *Woman of the Sea*; Tattiawna Jones and Udo Kier in Fritz Lang's unrealized *Lilith & Ly*; and Cynthia Wolfe-Nolin in Victor Sjöström's lost *The Divine Woman*. Photographs by Jody Shapiro.

Titles and descriptions of each film in Maddin's *Hauntings* installations are provided in the List of Works on pp. 58-60.

Atom Egoyan's *8 1/2 Screens*

Atom Egoyan's discomfort and fascination with the relationship of viewer and viewed finds a perfect match in the famous projection room sequence in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*. Egoyan reverses the relationship between projector, audience and screen in this bravado deconstruction of our Cinema 4 theatre space. A projector stands on stage, boldly spewing out light. On screens spread throughout the venue, Fellini's various audiences—some angry, some in love, some bored, plus a freaked-out director—occupy their own spaces, their own screens. The audience is left to work out their own place in this upside-down world. Gradually we feel their interconnectedness and reconstruct the act of viewing films through Fellini's eyes. This composite, non-linear experience also gently critiques the Essential 100 list itself by making clear the powerful subjectivity of the film-viewing experience and our consequent unreliability as judges of the work.

Noah Cowan

A virgin cinema is a tempting place for an installation. A room dedicated to the viewing of films is full of promise and anticipation. In this room—Cinema 4—there will be myriad private experiences formed between future filmgoers and artists. This work is about watching. The original idea was to compile a selection of classic images of characters viewing films; a mosaic of screens from such diverse sources as *Taxi Driver* (watching porn), *A Clockwork Orange* (watching horror), *Cinema Paradiso* (watching old movies), *Sunset Boulevard* (watching oneself)... The list is long and full of possibilities. When I came across the screening room scene near the end of Federico Fellini's masterpiece *8 1/2*, the original concept shifted. Here was possibly the single densest sequence of collective watching ever staged. The complexity of the relationships between the viewers (a director, his frustrated producer, his luminescent muse, his alienated wife, her bemused friend...) and the screen auditions they were viewing (for the part of an alienated wife, a frustrated mistress, an idealized prostitute...) was overwhelming. Rather than a compilation of clips from various sources, the installation became a deconstruction of a key scene from one of the greatest films about filmmaking (and film watching) ever made. By the end of this scene, as the director's wife Luisa leaves the theatre, the marriage is effectively over. Marcello is metaphorically hung out to dry, and so the billowing sheets—a recurring motif in Fellini's cinema—became an essential part of the installation. *8 1/2 Screens* is a fantasy fuelled by one of the greatest imaginations of cinema's golden age. I offer it with deep respect, more than a little nostalgia, and tremendous excitement about the opening of this magnificent new home for a cherished institution.

Atom Egoyan



Barr Gilmore's *Essential Titles*

Essential Titles is a 6-minute looped motion graphic projection from former General Idea studio assistant and Bruce Mau Design senior designer Barr Gilmore. As part of his ongoing fascination with typographical representation, he isolates and recreates only the title and director's credit from the opening sequences of all of the films on the Essential 100 list, mimicking their transitions and time on screen and layering all of them in real time to create an environmental graphic at the entrance of the *Essential Cinema* wunderkammer. The work has an immersive quality that reinforces how ingrained these title sequences are to our overall cinematic experience, and how slight alterations—a director's name preceding the title possessively, or the cheeky substitution of *movie* for the more dignified *A film by...*—can subtly but powerfully affect our comprehension and reception of the film.

Noah Cowan

As a graphic designer, I have always been drawn to the opening title sequences of films and have on occasion had the opportunity to design/create them for clients and for my own Super 8 shorts. When I received the Essential 100 list last year and was asked to think about the environmental graphics for the first exhibition *Essential Cinema*, my thoughts immediately went to researching the history of motion graphics through the opening title sequence. I couldn't think of a better way to do it—and get some hands-on experience in the process—than to recreate the opening title sequences from all the films on the Essential 100 list. To this end, I decided to isolate only the title and the director's credit from each film, recreating them as vector-based graphics, importing them into motion graphic software, mimicking their time on screen, and adding effects and filters in order to create a motion graphic mash-up of film history's essential titles. From Saul Bass' Bauhaus- and Russian Constructivist-inspired title sequences (*Vertigo* and *Psycho*; #38 and #68 respectively on the Essential 100) to the more recent title design innovations of Kyle Cooper (*Se7en*, *Spider-Man*, *Mission: Impossible*), a new art form is emerging.

Barr Gilmore