

Future Projections

a conversation between Michael Connor and Noah Cowan

Noah Cowan: When you joined us as part of the *Essential Cinema* project, Michael, what was your first thought about including contemporary works of art along with objects and artifacts from cinema's history?

Michael Connor: I thought that aspect of the show was among the most interesting. It seems to me that artifacts of various kinds and contemporary artworks both have the potential to open up new ways of looking at cinema and its history.

NC: It also seems like the artists often seem to be drawing from the same common well of images and inspiration as filmmakers and the cinema audience.

MC: True, but I think we also indentified two distinct kinds of relationships to cinema history within the contemporary artworks. Some of the artists respond directly to individual films, re-configuring imagery from these films to reveal their inner workings. These works, which are installed in the wunderkammer section of the exhibition, could be described as "deconstructions." The other works, which fall under the Future Projections banner and are located at venues throughout the city of Toronto, bear more complex relationships to the films on the list. They often function as remakes, using the original film as a framework for exploring a broader set of contemporary concerns.

NC: The artworks in the wunderkammer also seem to share an analytical technique. The artists almost function like anthropologists, isolating segments of the original work that they believe trigger certain behavioral responses in audiences. It's as though they want to empirically test for the primary animus of the work's power. So these installations have the quality of being both a distillation of a pre-existing work and a disruption or demystification of its affective power upon the audience.

MC: Let's start with Michael Snow's *Slidelength*, which is in the wunderkammer as a representation of his film *Wavelength*. A 45-minute long film consisting of a camera zoom through a loft-style space, *Wavelength* gives viewers an intense awareness of cinematic space and time. *Slidelength* explores the film further through a slide installation with eighty still images. With stills from *Wavelength* as well as images of coloured filters such as those employed in the film's making, the piece highlights the film's content as well as its apparatus,

its means of production. Snow sees *Slidelength* as the gallery version of *Wavelength*, specific to the spatial and temporal concerns of the white cube setting.

NC: This is the oldest artwork in the show, and that alone attests to Snow's incredible impact on both contemporary art and cinema. He chose to create, at this stage of his career, two distinct methods of presentation around similar explorations of time and space. This careful parsing of form has been among his primary concerns as an artist, and this imperative is still very much in evidence in the work of contemporary artists who have found success in multiple media—Steve McQueen, for example. Let's move on to Martin Arnold. There is a constant push-pull dynamic between the analytical and the emotive for so many gallery-based artists working with cinema—a kind of desire to “make movies,” with all their immersive and emotional power, and the need to foreground those critical tools which interrogate how films achieve those effects. That's the most exciting thing about Arnold's work for me: he is so clearly a lover and admirer of the culture of cinema, and his body of work touches down at really interesting junctures in the medium's history. The work we are presenting also has the symbolic importance of representing the #1 film on the Essential 100, and I think we both thought a lot about how it should be presented and what it meant to include it in the wunderkammer. Arnold's *Jeanne* cuts together all of the close-ups of Renée Falconetti, the actress who played Joan in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. It's the most famous and devastating performance ever committed to film, reinforced by the tragic history of both Falconetti—who never quite recovered from the experience of making the film—and the film itself, the original version of which was lost for decades, only to be discovered in the closet of a Norwegian mental hospital in 1982.

MC: There is another really interesting formal move at play here. By stripping away everything but the close-ups, Arnold also creates a new temporal structure. Rather than following the film's chronology, each individual shot in the piece is played back in a random order. Instead of a loop, Falconetti's suffering plays out in ever-changing permutations, creating a virtually endless—I'm tempted to say eternal—moving portrait. A similar temporal shift is at play in Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho Back and Forth and To and Fro*, an adaptation of his famous earlier work *24 Hour Psycho*, which stretches out Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* to a full day by extending the length of time each frame appears on screen. In this version of the work, Gordon creates a mirrored, two-screen version of *24 Hour Psycho*: one screen plays the film back to front and the other front to back, the two meeting each other at the shower

scene. Not only does the structure mirror Norman Bates' split personality, it also adds an extra degree of pathos to the film's famous narrative twist: on the backwards-playing screen, we depart the infamous shower murder knowing that the film will end with Janet Leigh's Marion alive and well, returning the stolen money to her employer.

NC: I think Gordon's intent is, in part, to subvert Hitchcock's mystique. The tropes of *Psycho* loom large in the collective consciousness of the developed world, whether in the description of a murder on the nightly news or the monologue of the mad killer on a C-grade crime show. I think Gordon finds these pervasive narratives suspicious and wants to see how deeply we believe, how much we need to anticipate the shower scene. By stretching the film out to such an extent, he wants to see if its hold over us is going to break or not.

MC: True. Also, by slowing the film down so radically he's turning a cinematic experience into an almost sculptural object, allowing us to walk around it and contemplate it, granting to the viewer that sovereignty of time which the film usually reserves for itself. It reminds us of the reasons behind the ongoing war between art and cinema: ever since cinema first automated the process of image-making, it did the artist's job 24 times a second.

NC: That war seems to have settled down into a kind of rarified campfire sing-along, though. I think that the critical stance, embodied by artists who deconstruct Hollywood language and aesthetic codes to determine how the medium functioned as a force of repression, has given way to a curiosity as to how the cinema moves and inspires, and its central role in creating 20th century culture. There is also a felt sense of an intensely personal relationship between the artist and the films they work with, films they either grew up with or that they feel track their own work in interesting ways.

MC: The off-site projects really do give evidence that the role of the artist in relation to cinema has evolved, with the artists often inhabiting the role of the filmmaker themselves. One example is William Kentridge's *Journey to the Moon*, an imaginative remake of Georges Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la lune* which features Kentridge performing for the camera as the artist/astronaut, his studio standing in for the cabin of the rocket ship, large-format charcoal drawings standing in for lunar landscapes and the Milky Way. Kentridge mixes live-action and stop-frame animation to make the drawings seem to come to life, erasing and re-drawing them, and leaving behind traces and smudges as his images change. I think it's important that Kentridge chose Méliès as a figure to inhabit, because Méliès was there at the first public demonstration of the Lumière cinematograph, and he had the same reaction that all great cinema artists have had: he looked at these moving images and said "I want to do that."

NC: Agreed. That complex relationship between “movie love” and the desire to retain critical detachment feels just as strong in the works by Ming Wong. In *In Love for the Mood* he shoots the same scene from Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love*—a kind of rehearsal for a confrontation between husband and wife—three times, with a Caucasian actress who doesn’t seem to understand Cantonese playing both parts. In *Angst Essen*, the artist himself acts out all the parts in a condensed version of Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, delivering all his lines in a kind of approximated German. Even though there is something ridiculous and absurd about the two works on the surface, they also precisely evoke the same emotional responses in the viewer as the originals. While Kentridge uses the original film as the starting point for a new imaginative journey, Ming Wong’s work reinforces the credibility of our emotional engagement with its sources.

MC: Although Ming Wong retains the spirit and structure of the films, he replaces one element—the characters—with a substitute that is somehow “wrong”: the gender is wrong, the race is wrong, the language is wrong. With their fast and loose play with cultural codes, Ming’s re-enactments shatter the illusion of realism behind the original films, while somehow retaining their affective power.

NC: The strategy of retaining a film’s overall structure and replacing certain elements is also employed in two works that both take as their subject matter Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*. The famous composer Michael Nyman, in his film *Nyman with a Movie Camera*, replaces each image of the original film with footage that he has shot, somewhat randomly, all over the world, but maintains Vertov’s pattern of montage and combines it with his own original score. This move aggressively foregrounds Nyman’s music, drawing our attention to its mood-altering effects and reversing the cinema’s traditional hierarchy between image and score.

MC: In a related work, artist Perry Bard set up a website where members of the public are invited to re-interpret single shots from the same film, adding their work to an ever-growing database of possible remakes. Each day, the website compiles clips from this database of images into a new, collaborative version of *Man With a Movie Camera*, co-directed by participants from all over the globe. This extends Vertov’s idea that cinema should capture and organize the entire visible world to the age of the pocket camera phone—not just a man with a movie camera, but millions with movie cameras. It highlights Vertov’s prescience in his understanding of cinema as an image-making system.

NC: I think it’s really exciting that in both cases the artists find the Vertov model a useful and appropriate structural vessel, a kind of grid for sorting

through and making understandable our daily observational life and the barrage of images that characterize our age. This idea of using a filmmaker-inspired grid to help organize complex narrative and sociopolitical ideas is expanded in Stan Douglas' *Klatsassin*, which applies the famous template of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*—a story told through multiple, unreliable points of view—to a markedly different cultural and historical locale. Set on Canada's west coast around the time of the gold rush, *Klatsassin* takes its name from a Tsilhqot'in chief who led attacks to disrupt the building of a road by intruding settlers. The event at the heart of the story is the killing of a white deputy while escorting a prisoner, one of Klatsassin's men.

MC: Douglas takes the *Rashomon* structure to its logical endpoint, using special software to endlessly reshuffle the sequence of his film. He calls this ever-changing structure "recombinant narrative." As you watch, you quickly become familiar with the characters and the basic framework, but to watch all of the possible combinations would take about 70 hours. This structure highlights the unreliability of your own memory and your own interpretation of the events. In one scene, two characters walk into a clearing, and one exclaims, "We were just here!" The other replies, "No, we were somewhere else." Viewers of *Klatsassin* might experience a similar uncertainty about what one has already seen and what is new.

NC: For a lot of these artists, Douglas included, I think there is a sense of something missing in cinema history, a gap to be filled in. It's not that they want to police the filmmakers; rather, it's as if they feel that filling in these perceived gaps will help move the project of art along more efficiently, that it makes the narrative of art-making more complete somehow.

MC: That feels really explicit in The Otolith Group's *Otolith III* and Chris Chong Chan Fui and Yasuhiro Morinaga's *HEAVENHELL*. Both works find moments of frustration around unrealized projects, or aspects of projects, that have specific meaning for the artists themselves. *Otolith III* is based on an unrealized project by Satyajit Ray, *The Alien*, which told the story of a good-hearted extraterrestrial arriving in a remote Indian village. Ray's script was itself perhaps a revisionist history, a re-imagining of colonialism as a benevolent force. If realized, the story would have cemented Ray's place in Hollywood and staked a strong South Asian claim to the sci-fi genre. The Otolith Group did not try to make the film—they did not try to fill the gap itself—but to explore the imaginative possibilities that are opened up by the fact that the film was never made.

NC: And then there's the Chong/Morinaga work, which remakes a scene that Kurosawa wanted to shoot in a notorious slum for his thriller *High and*

Low but couldn't for reasons of crew safety. Chong's film work before now has in part focused on re-imagining ideas of community, in one case through architecture (*Block B*) and another through communal song (*Karaoke*). So it's natural for him to gravitate to this compromised moment of social realism and test its possibilities in the present. It's also interesting that these projects have such specific social and political contexts: *Otolith* seems to be drawn to the continuing contentious language of social development, while Chong/Morinaga question the cinema's frequent ellipsis of class representation.

MC: These questions really come to the fore in Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*. The piece looks back to the early film shot by the Lumière brothers with their cinematograph, showing workers leaving the family factory in Lyon. In an essay-style video installation, Farocki traces this motif through cinema up to the present day. Unlike other artists in this section of *Future Projections*, Farocki does not employ the strategy of the remake. Instead, he looks to how this image has been remade by others, both consciously and by chance, throughout cinema history.

NC: The idea of serial replication is also at the fore of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's *Suburban Horror Pt. 1*, although they deal with class identity in a more oblique way. There is this sense of perpetual surveillance throughout the work that eerily suggests shadowy hierarchies at work.

MC: Yes, and the act of replication itself seems to reinforce those hierarchies. The work recreates a *Blue Velvet*-esque suburban setting as a miniature tableau surrounded by video cameras. The cameras feed live images in sequence—a one-minute loop—to a large nearby video projection. The whole thing could be seen as a machine for making movies, an automated film set that traces the image on screen back to its original referent. In doing so, the pieces expose their artifice: the uncanny, life-size images on screen are actually produced from a tiny subject.

NC: Those projected images somehow feel like they should be part of *Blue Velvet*, but in fact aren't. They resonate with Lynch's film—they sometimes feel like a school project trying to remake *Blue Velvet*—yet they are not exact replicas. I think that somehow makes us more comfortable entering their worlds. There's something of cinema's ability to take you on a journey to the unknown that feels like part of the artistic motivation in these works.

MC: Yes, when you watch film, it's a strange, partially disembodied experience that I think inspires all of the artists in *Future Projections*. We constantly inhabit multiple spaces: the spaces of our bodies, of our minds, and of the many screens that surround us. Cinema is the modern origin of this state, the origin of this ability to be in multiple places at once. What's happening through these

projects, which are distributed throughout the city of Toronto, is a reflection of the fact that as we navigate our daily lives, we are partly living in this imaginary cinematic world.

NC: I agree. I think the Future Projections programme can be seen as a kind of immersive reminder of the medium's value. The history and culture of cinema provides such a powerful imaginative framework and sense of inspiration and wonder—not only for the artists profiled but for everyone—that by its very nature it sets the conditions for multiple waking dreams. •



still image from Michael Nyman's *NYman with a Movie Camera*, 2010 courtesy the artist

This conversation between *Essential Cinema* co-curators Michael Connor and Noah Cowan took place on July 10, 2010 in Toronto.