



Review of Theorizing Film Through Contemporary Art: Expanding Cinema

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Book Review

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The anthology *Theorizing Film Through Contemporary Art: Expanding Cinema* is a timely contribution to the growing body of research around the intersection of the cinema and the art gallery. It compiles a productive range of scholarly approaches to the subject, from emerging and established scholars based primarily in Europe (with the exception of two scholars from the United States). The essays consist of theoretical discussion and close readings of case-study artworks by renowned artists that create contemporary media art for gallery environments, who incorporate the traditions and materials of cinema into their practice.

The editors, Jill Murphy and Laura Rascaroli, outline the intentions for the volume as an exploration not just of the materiality of cinema object, but rather an intervention into cinema “theory.” This includes narrative or experiential staging of space, presence or absence, production and consumption processes, technologies, and temporality. Yet, while the title of the book indicates a theorizing of film through art, I would argue that what is actually happening might be the opposite—that the texts in this anthology largely theorize contemporary art through film studies. It is refreshing to see a shift of analysis about this kind of work incorporating the traditions of film theory rather than focusing on an exclusively visual art perspective; however, most of the texts generally draw on fairly common film theory concepts, which may not challenge more specialized

readers. That said, the essays apply the ideas to a range of compelling artworks, and the book offers rich analyses of several fundamental figures including Tacita Dean, William Kentridge, and Douglas Gordon, alongside less obvious artists such as Runa Islam, Clemens von Wedemeyer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, David O'Reilly, Camille Henrot, Kevin B. Lee and more.

The book opens with a foreword by artists Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder. In this fragmented manifesto they outline their interest in the materiality of cinema and how the entry of cinema into the gallery creates a kind of ontological shift that affects both the cinema and the gallery. An editorial introduction later explains that the texts are a compilation of artist statements from exhibition catalogues, which offer a kind of poetic entry point into their work. Many of the ideas that the artist raises in their writings—light and darkness, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality—are issues that arise throughout the other essays in the book and are also a snapshot of how gallery-based-cinema is commonly discussed in academic discourse.

After the introduction where Murphy and Rascaroli explain the theoretical underpinnings of the book—emphasising that their intentions are not about “expanded cinema but expanding cinema” (38)—the book separates the essays into four thematic sections: Materialities, Immaterialities, Temporalities, and The Future of the Image. These themes create a very coherent structure around the conversations that unfold in the individual texts. All of the essays connect

logically to the themes and have obvious conceptual similarities that allows the reader to consider them as a “curated” set. The sections make it easy to navigate the logic of the anthology and choose essays that would be appropriate to one’s interests, and many of the essays also reference the specific artists under discussion in either the title or introductory abstract. Although this book is not one of the Amsterdam University Press Open Access publications, the Table of Contents, Foreword, and Introduction are available for preview on the AUP website. This accessibility, alongside the clear and concise writing style of most of the essays within the book, would likely make this a great teaching resource.

Beginning with the theme of Materialities, the first four essays focus on the way that the gallery turns spectatorial attention towards cinema as an object. The section opens with “Cinema as (In)Visible Object: Looking, Making, and Remaking” by Matilde Nardelli. Here, the author articulates how British artist Runa Islam’s “Cabinet of Prototypes” (2009-10) shifts the apparatuses of cinema—projector, screen, film etc.—to the gallery plinth in order to consider both the obsolescence and future potential of cinematic display. Following this paper, Alison Butler’s “Objects in Time: Artefacts in Artists’ Moving Image” explores cinema’s indexicality as it documents or re-visualizes galleries, museums, studios, and other architectures of visual art in the films of Tacita Dean and Elizabeth Price. In Butler’s discussion, these museum films go through

a process of dematerialization and re-materialization in order to create new ways of looking at objects.

In the latter half of the Materialities section, the authors turn our attention towards performance methodologies as a way to consider material forms at the intersection of the gallery and cinema. Maeve Connolly's "Materializing the Body of the Actor: Labour, Memory, and Storage" underscores the intermedial connections between the cinema, the gallery, and performance art. Connolly's essay considers how memories and scripted actions are embedded into performances, as the gallery visualizes the labour of acting which would ordinarily be effaced by the cinematic flow of time. Her examples include works by Clemens von Wedemeyer, Nathaniel Mellors, and Cécile B. Evans that further complicate the "acting body" with animatronic, digital composites, and prop-like objects. The final essay in this section takes on a similar performative focus, as Volker Pantenburg explores "How to Spell 'Film': Gibson + Recoder's Alphabet of Projection." This time, the author brings us back to the event of projection as a material experience, and the ways that the artists structure their sculptural objects to reference the temporal conditions of cinema by freezing them in place—in effect breaking the system of cinema or "rendering them dysfunctional so that the complete complex 'film' is invoked" (113).

In the second section on Immaterialities, editor Jill Murphy opens the discussion with “The Magic of Shadows: Distancing and Exposure in William Kentridge’s *More Sweetly Play the Dance*.” Kentridge is well known for his interest in Plato’s allegory of the Cave, and here Murphy outlines the artist’s deployment of concealment and distance alongside the sensuous tactile design of his installation spaces, which structures a form of spectatorship that straddles the viewer’s own subjectivity as well as the conceptual space of the installation. Sarah Cooper’s essay “Douglas Gordon and the Gallery of the Mind” similarly takes up the tension between embodied experience and the “mind’s eye” in Gordon’s “Phantom” (2011)—a work that is literally a large-scale projection of a blinking, tearing, crying eye. Cooper argues that the layered self-referentiality in this work contributes to a sense of blind spots and doubled vision within the viewer’s imagination. Imagination also plays a role in Kirstie North’s essay “A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance: Tacita Dean’s *Section Cinema (Homage to Marcel Broodthaers)*” as the author dives into moments of contingency and chance in Dean’s work, which are then linked to the material qualities of celluloid filmmaking.

Temporalities is the focus of the next session, as Ágnes Pethő, Stefano Baschiera, and editor Laura Rascaroli all take up still photography as a means to deconstruct cinematic time. In “The Photo-Filmic Diorama” Pethő discusses the diorama-like installation of staged photography

by Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson. Although “installed” as traditional photography, Pethó notes that both artists leverage cinematic staging processes, which develop self-contained worlds that do not seem to care about the spectator in a kind of Freudian gesture of the uncanny. In “The Cinematic *Dispositif* and Its Ghost: Sugimoto’s *Theaters*” Stefano Baschiera analyzes how Hiroshi Sugimoto’s time-lapse photos of cinema architectures reflect on the cinematic apparatus by compressing the duration of a film into a single image. These worlds are empty of spectators, with the screened film blurring into a white void, representing both everything and nothing about the film experience. Rascaroli wraps this section with discussion of Stan Douglas’ staged photograph “Ballantyne Pier, 18 June 1935” (2008) and Eric Baudelaire’s video “Sugar Water” (2007) in “Time/Frame: On Cinematic Duration.” Her discussion of the frame outlines the way that both artists enable the Derridean “parergon” to destabilize the frame and its subsequent meaning.

The final section on “The Futures of the Image” offers the most creative application of film theory to the analysis of media objects that move quite significantly away from the traditional single-channel film. In “Interactivity without Control: David O’Reilly’s *Everything* (2017) and the Representation of Totality,” Andrew V. Uroskie considers processes of control and panoptic visualization in animation, which is then applied to an experimental video game. He argues that through the use of an interactive game, O’Reilly disrupts traditional notions of agency and models

a version of the universe (and media images) that refuses anthropocentric mastery. In the next essay Lisa Åkervall explores “Post-Cinematic Unframing,” where artworks such as Camille Henrot’s *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) and Kevin B. Lee’s *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) mutate the cinematic frame into a computer window and collapse the stable relationships of space and time—as well as on-and-off screen—that we would normally associate with the cinematically-framed image. Through these slippages, Åkervall argues the works construct dynamic knowledge networks. D.N. Rodowick offers the final word in this volume, with the essay “Absolute Immanence” tackling the problem of the “Real,” in contemporary media imagery. This chapter is less grounded in case studies than the other readings and is subsequently more philosophically dense. In this text Rodowick posits that the unstable essence of the image ruptures our intersubjective relationship with the world, separating us from what is “Real”—which he defines as a kind of agency or open-ended possibility. For Rodowick, the future of images requires a renewed sense of autonomy or self-determination and a sense of criticality about the capitalist systems of technology that structure them.

In her book *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Erika Balsom questions the gallery’s ability (or indeed the necessity) to “save” cinema in the face of technological change (31). Although some of the essays in this book occasionally fall into the pitfall of presuming that

cinema needs saving, it is increasingly important to consider how the history and traditions of cinema can enter the gallery—because as this anthology demonstrates—artists are taking up intermedial forms to produce works that straddle the boundaries between art, cinema, performance, video games and other creative practices. These disciplines have their own histories and ways of practice that are often not fully explored in discourse around work placed into a visual art setting. This book provides a solid introduction to scholars who wish to pursue interdisciplinary scholarship—and more than that—this book is a pleasure to read, with mid-length, well-written texts, and concepts that are articulated clearly and comprehensively.

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