

**Volker Pantenburg:**

**»Post Cinema?« Movies, Museums, Mutations, in: SITE magazine 24 (2008), S. 4-5.**

# “Post Cinema?” Movies, Museums, Mutations

## Volker Pantenburg

### I. Expand/Resist

Two years ago, the independent section of the Berlin Film Festival, Berlinale (International Forum of New Cinema), launched a new initiative called Forum Expanded. Updating and terminologically modifying the “expanded cinema” movement of the sixties, Forum Expanded tried to fathom the possibilities of what one of its curators described as “Showing different films differently”.<sup>1</sup> Installation work by filmmakers and other cinema-related artworks were to be shown at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art as well as at the Arsenal cinema, which traditionally hosts the Forum. At the same time, a “black box” was installed at the cinema to complement the two existing conventional movie theaters. The aim was an alliance of different spaces and different forms of presentation, a combination of differing concepts of time and space.

This way of adjusting cinema to a specific challenge is one of the various modes of reacting to the contradictory, flexible and yet unclear “battle of the images” that Raymond Bellour has described and analyzed on numerous occasions during the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> Depending on your set of assumptions and on how you understand the rhetoric of “expansion”, Forum Expanded can be interpreted as a signal of compromise, a sign of defeat or a straightforward attempt to not let the art world take over discussions and presentation of cutting-edge film practice.

To give an impression of the variety of the field, let me just name some of the artists and filmmakers involved in the Forum Expanded section that has since become an integral part of the Festival: Michael Snow, Harun Farocki, Morgan Fisher, Hollis Frampton, Isabella Rossellini, Yvonne Rainer, Sharon Lockhart, Tony Conrad, Olaf Nicolai, Steven Dworkin. The list shows how parts of the heritage of experimental cinema that has recently resurfaced in contemporary art spaces try to be “recuperated” by this cinema-based initiative. As luck would have it, Matthew Barney, an emblematic figure for the opposite movement by visual artists who start producing blockbuster art-movies, was a member of the Berlinale-jury that same year and a documentary on his *Drawing Restraint 9* was shown in one of the other sections of the festival.<sup>3</sup>

The year 2006, or, a little more generally, the middle of the present decade, is a good vantage point to inspect the field somewhat clumsily described by the words art and cinema. Even if we consider only its latest stage with DVD or video-based multi-screen projections and “cinematographic installations”<sup>4</sup>—which means: the time since the “narrative turn” of video art—we are looking at a history of nearly two decades that justifies some historiography.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the last few years have seen several interesting and divergent suggestions as to how to conceptualize the forces at work. Each of these suggestions implies a certain ideology of cinema and art, and each of them is involved in questions of production, distribution and the consumption of movies.

I would like to discuss two opposing approaches to negotiate the differences and deal with the conflicts that appear whenever moving images are exhibited in art spaces, particularly those traditionally connected with the cinema as a mode of presentation. The first is the comprehensive exhibition *Le Mouvement des Images*, shown throughout the year 2006 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, curated by Philippe-Alain Michaud.<sup>6</sup> The second proposition was made by Alexander Horwath who was responsible for the cinema program at documenta 12 in Kassel, the world’s biggest exhibition of contemporary art that takes place every five years. It is significant that both approaches have been made within art contexts rather than within the discourse of the cinema.

### II. Le mouvement des Images, Centre Pompidou, 2006

One way of tracing the tensions and various encounters between cinema and museum would be by attempting a historiography of crucial institutions and individual curators, as well as the rise of the curator as such. During the last fifteen to twenty years, the Centre Pompidou has been paramount in developing strategies to exhibit and theorize the various transfers between different image-systems. More recently, Hitchcock et l’art. Coincidences fatales (2001), the Godard-exhibition *Voyage(s) en utopie* (2006), and the recent *Erice/Kiarostami. Correspondances* (2007) show that the project of the Centre comprises the adaptation of classic cinema positions, as well as a broader perspective of moving images.

1991’s *Passages de l’Image*, curated by Raymond Bellour, Christine Van Assche and Catherine David, is one of the exhibitions that will retrospectively be remembered as a potential starting point for a genealogy of canonical exhibitions. It displayed work by Jeff Wall, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Thierry Kuntzel, amongst others, and put them into a broader perspective of image transfers. In Bellour’s introduction to the catalogue, “The Double Helix,” video has the utopian potential of embodying the “betweenness” that characterizes the field of what Bellour baptised “centre-image”: the intermedia-mixtures, migrating forms between photography, cinema, visual arts and text.<sup>7</sup>

Fifteen years later, *Le mouvement des Images* looks like a sequel to *Passages de l’Image*. Some changes, however, can be grasped from its title: the specific “passage” has become a generalized “movement,” the idea of a coherent concept of an “Image” has turned into the plurality of “Images”. Yet the argument remains more or less the same, as curator Philippe-Alain Michaud writes in the catalogue: “Nowadays, at the dawn of the 21st century, while we are witnessing a massive migration of images in motion from screening rooms to exhibition spaces, a migration borne along by the digital revolution and prepared by a twofold phenomenon of dematerialization of works plus a return to theatricality

of the art scene, it becomes possible, not to say necessary, to redefine the cinema beyond the experimental conditions which governed it in the 20th century—that is to say, no longer from the limited viewpoint of film history, but, at the crossroads of live spectacle and visual art, from a viewpoint expanded to encompass a general history of representations.”<sup>8</sup> Michaud’s diagnosis is typical: it combines a general reference to the “digital revolution” with the demand for different forms of distribution and presentation. In line with notions of “visual culture” and the academic habit to speak of images rather than of specific image-regimes like cinema, photography or painting, Michaud opts for a general notion of the image. What is at stake is an assimilation of cinema to both Mitchell’s “pictorial turn” and the “performative turn” of the visual arts.

Yet the advantage of matching cinematic expression with other forms of image production has its flipside. One of the potential problems revealed itself right from the start when entering the exhibition, which was subdivided into four sections: Unwinding, Projection, Narrative, and Montage. In the Montage section, Len Lye’s film *Rhythm* (to be more precise: its DVD-loop-version) was shown face-to-face with Matthias Müller’s *Home stories*; Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* provided a bridge between the two.

No doubt that these examples of repetition and alternation allowed for a smooth passage between Montage and Narration. Yet to do this, Len Lye’s film (as most of the works displayed) had to remain silent. Its sound (which in this case really makes up the structural backbone) found itself exiled to ridiculously small speakers. Emphasizing the image-part of cinema at the same time means neglecting or ignoring the prominence that sound and sound design have always had, especially as they have become more and more important since the seventies. In a broader perspective, this hints at the problem of “noisebleed” that affects all sorts of sonic installations, with or without moving images.<sup>9</sup> The desire to establish a simultaneous interaction between different artworks and to make the visitor part of that interaction involuntarily means privileging the loudest, or else it forces the curator to reestablish the unloved cinema-principle via the black box.

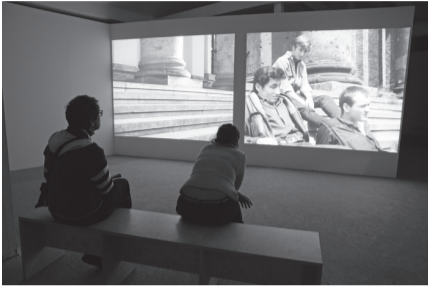
The second problem was that the choice of works implied a kind of re-canonization of modern experimental and auteur-cinema. Not a trace of high-concept films, comedies, blockbusters, etc., let alone TV-series that have had a major impact on movie aesthetics over the last decade. Even more problematic: the exhibition did not even include one single feature film, which made the *Cahiers du cinéma* speculate that the move from cinema to the museum was only possible at the price of making it disappear.<sup>10</sup>

### III. What spectator?

The privileging of short formats was surely a reaction to the exhaustive time-budgets

that gallery-goers are often forced to bring to exhibitions showing video and installation art. Yang Fudong’s 260 minute-piece at the Venice biennial in 2007,<sup>11</sup> David Claerhout’s *Bordeaux Piece* (2004) that evolves and mutates slowly over a period of thirteen hours; Douglas Gordon’s appropriation of *The Searchers* that stretches John Ford’s classic to the five years that the film narrates: there are countless examples for installation work that deliberately overstrains the capacities of every visitor and thus entangles her in an awkward struggle for attention and concentration.<sup>12</sup> The challenge of being confronted with movies that are far too long to be watched in their entirety can evoke two opposing reactions: you are either annoyed and frustrated to glimpse just a short extract of “the whole thing”. No matter when you leave the installation, you will always have the impression that it was the wrong moment. Or else the sheer length of the piece makes you abandon the concept of integrity and you can start to stroll freely without caring too much about the length. This attitude of flexibility and deciding for oneself is often associated with a deliverance from the static and rigid experience of cinema.

One of the backgrounds for this is the tendency to privilege the multiple over the single, the plural over the singular, the in-between over the central, difference over identity. “The method of our time is to use not a single but multiple models for exploration”, McLuhan propagated as early as 1967.<sup>13</sup> In a slight but remarkable generalization, the multiplication of screens becomes the multiplication of models and opinions, thus implicitly creating an analogy between multiple screens and the democratic model of an emancipated spectator. A dominant interpretation today, mainly expressed by art curators, takes up this idea and isolates it from its historical context. While the single screen-model of cinema represents an authoritarian model of command and passive reception, the multi-screen model confronts the spectator with “freedom of choice” both in temporal and spatial respect. It is probably the argument most often put forth that the viewer of an installation is not forced to endure the film in its entirety but can enter and leave the black box at his own will. Nor is she constricted to sit still in her seat, as she can wander through the exhibition space and modify her spatial relation to the screen. As Chrissie Iles, curator at the Whitney Museum puts it: “The cinema becomes a cocoon, inside which a crowd of relaxed, idle bodies is fixed, hypnotized by simulations of reality projected onto a single screen. This model is broken apart when the dark space of cinema is folded into the white cube of the gallery.”<sup>14</sup> And she goes on to say that “[t]he darkened gallery’s space invites participation, movement, the sharing of multiple viewpoints, the dismantling of the single frontal screen, and an analytical, distanced form of viewing. The spectator’s attention turns from the illusion on the screen to the surrounding



▲ Spectators of Amie Siegel's installation Berlin Remake



▲ Installation view from *Le Mouvement Des Images* at Musée National d'art Moderne, 2007. Copyright Centre Pompidou



▲ Installation view from Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2007. Photo: durga\_akv (flickr.com)



▲ The Gloria Kino in Kassel. Venue of the documenta 12 Film programme curated by Alexander Horwath. Photo: VivaUltra (flickr.com)

space, and to the physical mechanisms and properties of the moving image.”<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, this may sound like an accurate account of some of the hopes that made artists and experimental filmmakers leave the movie theater for gallery spaces in the seventies. Cinema and its (mostly male) spectator had been criticized both in theoretical and practical respect as passive and lacking participation. On the other hand, the paradigm of the manipulating and patronizing cinematic apparatus, which had strong polemical force in the theories at that time, tends to survive as an ahistorical given in the art critical debates of the nineties and into the present. This bears several ironies: first of all, it does not take into account that the question of diverging “viewing positions” has been one of the crucial issues of film theory in the last decades. Early cinema studies and new film history, feminist and phenomenological film theory have all helped to elaborate historical and analytical frameworks to adequately describe the complexities of different historical spectator-subjects.<sup>16</sup> Art critical accounts hardly take this into account and often promote a simplistic, monolithic concept of “the spectator”. Secondly, the concept of “illusion”, which was so harshly attacked in critical accounts from the seventies, has recently been reconsidered as a central element of aesthetic experience. Even the most ordinary cinema-going experience depends on a willing suspension of disbelief and implies a reflective knowledge of the fictional status of the world displayed on screen. It is therefore no use opposing “illusion” and “reflection” the way it is often conceptualized in discussions about installation art vs. cinema.<sup>17</sup> In its bluntest version, this ignorance leads to the emphatic model of the gallery space as a free, post-ideological space that has overcome the restraints of cinema. To me, it seems as if just the opposite might hold true: it would be worth testing the thought that the black box is part of an ideological framework similar to the one that Brian O’Doherty has described for the supposedly neutral “White Cube” in the seventies.

So rather than opposing museum and gallery presentations to a mythological “standard” cinema-situation, it might be helpful to align them with the commodification that film experience has undergone during the last thirty years. Today, as Anne Friedberg has shown, the “multiple”, fragmented way of being confronted with several windows and image frames, is something familiar to us from computers, television and our everyday life. And where else than at home with my DVD-player or computer could I be more in charge of deciding autonomously what to see and for how long?

It was along these lines that last summer’s documenta 12 decided to follow a different path and advocate the traditional movie theater as a strong form of presentation.

#### iv. Documenta 12, 2007

Roger Buergel, the artistic director of documenta 12, has hinted at a possible objection to what I would call “emancipation theories” of the moving image. In an article from 2001, he associated the flexibility of the spectator strolling through the galleries of the museum with the Foucauldian subject internalizing ideas of power and control rather than having to deal with imposed power structures. In his account, the museum is an adequate dispositif for a new form of governmentality: “The ethical concept of redefining individual behaviour follows the ethics of neoliberal politics: individual choice, autonomous acting, governance of your own fate, self-initiative and self-determined living. The museum seems to be designed to provide this framework.”<sup>18</sup> When Buergel and his partner Ruth Noack were designated as the directors of documenta 12, parts of this critique were applied to the concept of the exhibition. One of the most obvious—and provocative—gestures was the one dissociating rather than mixing art and cinema. Documenta 11 in 2002 had included a vast number of black boxes, video installations, and multi-screen projections that presented a challenge to the visitors’ time management. In clear opposition to this, Alexander Horwath, the curator of the documenta film program, promoted a strong concept of cinema. His approach was based on a premise that looks anachronistic at first sight. Rather than putting forward yet another suggestion to mix and blend moving images and the gallery space, Horwath preferred keeping the two presentational practices separated from one another. To be more precise, he reactualized the historical differences between cinema and museum.<sup>19</sup> Even if there were some installations sporadically spread throughout the exhibition, their number was significantly reduced.

So instead of proposing a curatorial, synchronous “montage” of visual arts and cinematographic practice, Horwath incorporated the whole setting of cinema into the exhibition without adapting or altering its parameters: one screening a day, one specific theater, a little more than fifty programs by ninety four filmmakers/artists. In Horwath’s words: “The location of film at documenta 12 is the movie theater. This is a very simple answer to the recent debates on how to adequately present moving images in the context of art.” Horwath features cinema as “a strong presentation format and strong social space,” adding that “[t]his format and this space are based on the physical and technical characteristics of the medium. They allow film to be perceived on a specific level of intensity to which it owes its historical success.”

This is not the place to elaborate Horwath’s different arguments that went hand in hand with documenta 12’s critique of the art market in proposing cinematic experience as a mode of aesthetic experience that resists commodification. What I want to stress, however, is the emphasis on the specific structure of movies and of cinematic

experience. If you think of films as structural artifacts evolving in time and implying a beginning, middle and end, the supposedly rigorous arrangement of fixed starting times and screening schedules may rather trigger a certain concentration. In this respect, Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa has recalled a very simple argument: “I’m not a video artist, I am a filmmaker and film is a construction. Pieces are made to fit together, if they don’t the whole thing will collapse, or worse, will lack movement and tension. Every shot or scene I do depends on the one that comes before and on the one that will come after.”<sup>20</sup>

This insistence on a certain structure and architecture that relies on notions of “before” and “after”, and of “beginning” and “end” holds true not only for narrative cinema; it is also crucial to experience films by James Benning, Sharon Lockhart and a whole tradition of structural filmmaking. This brings us back full circle to the early seventies, when a constellation of “mixed media”, “expanded cinema” and television was already at stake. Horwath’s provocative gesture was to show and stress what he called “normal case of cinema”, a term that might echo Raymond Bellour’s description of the “other cinema” encountered in the museums and galleries.

It is therefore interesting that Horwath’s approach resembles ideas of his predecessor in the Austrian Film Museum, Peter Kubelka. Interestingly, Kubelka promoted and realized his concept of an “invisible cinema” stripped down to its central functions of isolating the senses of seeing and hearing in New York in 1970. His diagnosis is structurally similar to the one Bellour and Michaud make, yet the consequences he draws are the exact opposite: “it is of utmost importance, especially now that television exists and that expanded cinema and mixed media performances flourish, to create the proper conditions for classical, one screen, one sound-cinema presentation. This has to crystallize now if it is going to survive. And this holds true particularly for the conservative film industry. They should throw out the easy chairs and the flambeaux; they should create a decent cinema. In such a movie theater, the situation will change because the sensual pleasure will be raised incredibly, so that people will again start to go to the cinema.”<sup>21</sup>

There is no doubt that there are a lot of forms that demand being shown in museums and galleries: loops, multi-projections, image environments or videos projected on objects. These are not the forms that Horwath or Kubelka’s critique aims at. Their point is that the supposed “post cinema” condition sensitizes us for the capacities of the “normal case of cinema”. So when blending, mixing and difference have become the museum’s norm and the strolling spectator its commonplace protagonist, it might be interesting to reconsider the varieties of aesthetic experience within the paradigm of classical cinema. •

This text was originally presented at the SCMS-conference, Philadelphia, March 2008.

#### Notes

1. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus: “Showing different films differently. Cinema as a Result of Cinematic Thinking” in *The Moving Image 4.1*. (2004) xii, p. 1–16.
2. Cf. Raymond Bellour: “La querelle des dispositifs / The Battle of the Images” in *Art Press* no 262, Nov. 2000.
3. For an evaluation of Matthew Barney’s “Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbusters” see Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward: “Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster” in *Cinema Journal* 45, No. 2, Winter 2006, p. 3–16.
4. This is Juliane Rebentisch’s term in her book *Ästhetik der Installation*. Cf. Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2003, pp. 179–207.
5. Cf. Söke Dinkla “Virtuelle Narrationen. Von der Krise des Erzählens zur neuen Narration als mentales Möglichkeitsfeld” in *medienkunstnetz* ([www.medienkunstnetz.de](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de)).
6. “Le mouvement des images”, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, April 9, 2006 to January 29, 2007.
7. Published in English in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. by Timothy Druckrey, New York: Aperture 1996.
8. Philippe Alain Michaud “The Movement of Images” in *Le mouvement des images*, Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou 2006, p. 15–29; 16.
9. Cf. Tom Holert: “Noisebleed” in *Texte zur Kunst* 15, Jahrgang Heft 60 (Dezember 2005), p. 146–154.
10. Cf. Antoine Thirion “Le cinéma transforme le musée” in *Cahiers du cinéma* 611 (avril 2006), p. 22.
11. Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, Parts I to V (2003 to 2007).
12. Cf. Dominique Paini’s concept “Le temps exposé”.
13. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore: *The Medium is the Message*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1967, p. 68.
14. Chrissie Iles, “Between the Still and Moving Image” in *Into the Light: the Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977*, p. 33.
15. Ibid.
16. Cf. Linda Williams (ed.): *Viewing Positions. Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 1994.
17. Cf. Gertrud Koch/Christiane Voss (eds.): *... kraft der Illusion*, München: Fink 2006.
18. Roger M. Buergel, “Arbeit an den Grenzen des Realen” in *Texte zur Kunst*, 11. Jahrgang, Heft 43 (September 2001), p. 66–75; 68 (my translation, VP).
19. For more context on this see Horwath’s position in a panel discussion with Chrissie Iles, Vanessa Joan Müller and Marysia Lewandowska: “Does the Museum Fail? Podium Discussion at the 53rd International Short Film Festival Oberhausen”, *Kinomuseum. Towards an Artists’ Cinema*, ed. Mike Sperlinger and Ian White (Cologne: Walther König, 2008): 115–155.
20. Jan van Eyck Video Weekend. “From black box to white cube”—Round Table with Pedro Costa, Catherine David, Chris Dercon (moderator), Saturday, 26 May 2007.
21. Peter Kubelka, Interview in the TV-magazine *Apropos Film* (ORF). Helmut Dimko/Peter Hajek: Peter Kubelka. Das Unsichtbare Kino (*Apropos Film*, 13.10.1970).

Volker Pantenburg is a Berlin based film theorist and researcher, currently engaged in a project about post-cinema at Freie Universität Berlin. Author of *Film als Theorie. Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard* (2006), co-editor of *93 Minutentexte. The Night of the Hunter* (together with Michael Baute, 2006).