

Screens and Extremes¹

CANADA (MONTRÉAL)

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STRAW



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One of the difficulties of talking about cinema in the present moment stems from the withering of any stable relationship between the size or scale of cinematic projections and the prestige of cinema as a medium. As repertory cinemas close their doors, and critics bemoan the withering of *cinéphilie* and a *cinéma d'auteur*, extravagant exhibitions at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris suggest that large-scale “projection” has recently emerged as a object of collective fascination. The migration of filmmakers to galleries, and of visual artists to large-scale film projects, is one of the unexpected developments of the last decade. It is as much a puzzle requiring decipherment as is *You Tube*, which has shrunk the cinema to miniature form even as elsewhere it is being blown up to spectacular size.

In the movement of film-works between these exhibition contexts, minor moments are inflated to fill the walls of galleries or theatres, just as key monuments in a medium's history now take their place in the thickly-packed inventories of servers

1. This essay is an expanded and slightly updated version of my “Proliferating Screens,” *Screen*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring, 2000), p. 115-119.

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and hard drives. On YouTube, we may find virtually the whole history of 20th-century avant-garde film, from Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (cut into two halves) through unfinished collaborations between Marcel Duchamp and Maya Deren, lesser works by Andrei Tarkovsky and the later films of Abel Gance.

It is tempting to chart these migrations of cinema, across different scales and technologies of exhibition, as a series of paradoxes. Alongside the “vibrant colours and fine details” of IMAX exhibition,² for example, we confront the obscure, flickering imagery of Flash animations on our computers. The relationship between bigness and a classical, primary experience of cinema is no longer obvious. The IMAX screen's capacity for spectacle is regularly employed in the service of “minor” cinematic forms, like the travelogue, just as the obscure and tiny digital screen is more and more used to restore something of the enchantment of the cinema in its most cherished historical moments. As cinema moves more and more into the spaces of the art gallery (as in the work of Harun Farocki), paracinematic experiences like those of the security camera are blown up to the scale of wall-sized spectacles which emphasize their banality. In the art gallery context, this imagery is magnified, in both a visual and semantic sense, and cannot help but seem metaphorical, as a comment, for example, on the broader operations of the control society. On YouTube, in contrast, films of widely varying ambition and scope all seem to lose their metaphorical supplements, as they are reduced to a limited repertory of affective gestures. The films of Maya Deren now look, on YouTube, like *films noirs de série B*. Hans Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* comes across as a slightly more fanciful silent social comedy than most.

Highly crafted artworks of the last decade have engaged with this miniaturization of cinema in compelling ways. One such work is the installation *In Your Dreams* by the Canadian artist Gisele Amantea (Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1999). The work displays 31 tiny snowcones (those small novelties one turns over and shakes, producing a flurry of snow-like material) arranged along three shelves. Each of these cones, connected to a hidden video playback device, contains a mirror reflecting loops from long-ago films (Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc*, Busby Berkeley choreographies, melodramatic quarrels, and so on). In a variety of ways, this installation suggests the multiple vectors along which our experience of cinema is being transformed. The snowcones are both quaint – leftovers from an earlier regime of enchantment – and unexpectedly contemporary. As murky images flutter within them, barely decipherable from a distance, they resemble the pop-down screens of airplanes or inter-city buses, or the iPod screens we glimpse in the hands of nearby strangers.

2. Charles Acland, “IMAX Technology and the Tourist Gaze,” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1998), 429 p.

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The installation, like audiovisual gadgetry of the last few years generally, sets in place a visual field in which a global industry's polished products are regularly reduced to murky fluctuations of movement and colour, unfolding at the margins of our vision or attention.

In the “new media cabaret” performances of Stephen Lawson and Aaron Pollard, a century of popular cinematic affect is condensed within tiny streams of light projected onto minor elements of stage décor.³ In their *Zona Pellucida*, performed in Montréal in 2006, filmic imagery is blown up to fill screens in front of (or behind which) live performance unfolds. Projected moving pictures bring monsters to hover over the head of a live performer, or storms to disturb her simulated sleep. In other moments, cinema projections are shrunken to fit within a book held in a live performer's hand. The imagery employed in both cases is that of a barely remembered, archaic cinema saturated with pathos and horror. Like the films of Guy Maddin, *Zona Pellucida* conveys both the grandiosity of classical cinema as melodramatic machine and the quaint smallness of 19th century shadowplays or magic lantern effects. The genuine audio and visual fragments from commercial cinema interwoven in *Zona Pellucida* are taken from films just outside a recognizable canon, from secondary Douglas Sirk melodramas or the late-career films of Hollywood goddesses.

Predictions about the future of audiovisual media have long been fixated on the dissolution of boundaries. Most accounts of contemporary audio-visual media stress the withering of differences between media channels, between discrete textual forms, between the simulated and the faithfully reproduced. Video, Raymond Bellour once suggested, is both the material basis and symptom of all these passages and dissolutions, processes magnified in the computer's reduction of audio-visual texts to streams of code.⁴ Global media, here, are to be imagined as an open-ended system of interconnection and passage, in which the distinct status of individual audio-visual texts is dissolved. This is the view of things most often embraced within a range of contemporary theoretical models, with their affinity for energetic lines, currents and flows.

Against these scenarios, however, we might set the detachability of the contemporary audio-visual text, its circulation as a discrete commodity across multiple sites of exhibition and consumption. As windows for the marketing of films proliferate, the branding of films as discrete entities is heightened, such that they maintain their distinctiveness across every channel of exhibition, from the retail videocassette through the iTunes or bittorrent download. More

3. Portions of *Zona Pellucida*, the most stunningly realized of any of their work, may be viewed online at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjXVB6qCL-s>.

4. Raymond Bellour, “The Power of Words, The Power of Images,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 24 (September, 1990), p. 7.

pointedly, television programs are increasingly designed for an existence separate from the sorts of flow in which we once expected them to appear, endowed with a self-sufficiency that allows them to fit into the schedules of innumerable networks, or the stored memory of handheld gadgets and desktop hard drives. If the number of contexts for audio-visual texts is now chaotically expanded, programming itself has assumed modular forms which find easy entry into such contexts.

This is one effect of broadcasting systems which increasingly efface their place of origin, and of a programming industry marked by an international division of labour. Canadians have long been aware that their documentaries, half-hour animated series and hour-long historical dramas must be designed as “strips” for the export market. They are commodities in an international economy which requires that they be slotted into schedules with little concern for a broader context of understanding. Specialty channels devoted to history, nature, lifestyle or various ethnic groups rely less and less on direct modes of address, on the sorts of discursive shifters which might ground their programming in a distinct place and time. Rather, they offer endless sequences of discrete texts, whose diversity of origins no longer strikes us as unusual.

This diversity works against our ability to attribute any coherent ideological or civic project to the network offering them (a British crime series from the mid-1980s leads into a recent *Law and Order* rerun, then to a new biography of John Kennedy, Jr., and from this to a public domain film from the early 1950s). Rather than producing a coherent and univocal sense of flow, cable channels and on-line videoclip sites presume prior acknowledgement of each program’s distinct individuality and integrity. That familiarity has almost always been produced *elsewhere*, in the prior history of these programs, or in the national and generic traditions upon which they draw. Science-fiction films, from *Robocop* through *Starship Troopers*, imagine the television of the future as an unending system for direct address and interpellation. This runs counter to the economic logics of television programming, more and more dependent on the transnational sale of detachable audiovisual texts. (Even CNN, in the wake of its merger with Time, moved from ongoing news “flow” to a series of magazine blocks, each given a distinct, previously established brand and designed for individual sales or repetition. MTV had already made this transition.) In the mid-1980s, the French critic Guy Scarpetta noted the difficulty with which the idea of video as a process (rather than a product) found adherents within the artworld. From a sense of itself as open-ended image-making, he suggests, “video” quickly came to designate the *tape*, the discrete physical and commodity form on which televisual signals were encoded.⁵ Mobility in

5. Guy Scarpetta, *L’Impureté*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, 299 p.

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the audio-visual world came less from the withering of boundaries between channels – as ambitiously utopian scenarios had envisioned – than from the circulation of discrete texts through and across them. Similarly, the creation of ever more spectacular environments for the projection of films has done little to dissolve boundaries between the film-text and these environments. Scenarios for the synthesis of technologically-based audio-visual forms have produced few popular examples of cinematic works which break through the frame of the screen, rather than simply extending or reshaping it.

As the channels in which we glimpse the cinematic shrink and proliferate, we presume, nevertheless, that the audio-visual texts they display will be more or less identifiable, that an extended look will allow us to affix to them the familiar brand names of films or television programs. While the spectacular quality of audio-visual texts is so often diminished, across the range of minor, low-definition channels through which they pass, our ability to identify such texts has grown. This recognizability is nourished by repetition – by an expansion in the number of windows and promotional sites through which these texts travel and across which they accumulate the markers of distinct brands and identities.

The 31 snowcones of *In Your Dreams* capture this proliferation of exhibition windows, even as close examination of each image reveals it to evoke a precise moment in the history of classical cinema. In its miniaturization, each of these moments is rendered punctual and fleeting, but this is not because the boundaries between them have broken down. On the contrary, that individuality has been reduced to the most basic visual gestures through which historical period, studio look or genre convention are conveyed. Each image now functions as the crystallization of a rich and identifiable aesthetic system, and has thus retained its individuality. Together, each image and its container – each film loop and snowcone – produces an almost tangible artefactuality, and one could easily imagine them as domestic toys or curiosities. Like the scratches from old vinyl records employed in musical sampling, the murky, archaic qualities of image and snowcone work to reenchant those contemporary practices in which they are employed.

Here, too, we might express caution with respect to widespread ways of imagining contemporary audiovisual culture. Against every scenario which asserts the dematerialization of the audio-visual, its reduction to information and virtuality, we must note the contemporary explosion of artefacts. Quasi-cinematic toys and trinkets, portable storage and display devices and other material props of an audiovisual culture have proliferated, each offering images and sounds in distinctive ways dependent on their own technological complexity and purposes. We may, in fact, amidst widespread discussion of dematerialization and virtuality, speak of an expanded life for physical artefacts, for

cultural commodities whose tangible forms circulate throughout the world. The sense that this tangibility remains resonant in an age of imminent dematerialization may be seen in the preoccupation of so many recent artworks with collections and display. Among the many paradoxes of digital communication is the extent to which Internet-based commerce, most spectacularly through such auction services as eBay, has resulted in millions of trivia items reentering the marketplace for tangible artefacts and being sent across the world.

As screens take their place in the corners of our kitchen, or in a range of transportation vehicles, they mark and define space in ways which belie their status as simple carriers of an information whose origin is elsewhere. As much as these proliferating screens invite us to rethink the status of audio-visual information, they suggest that we consider new ways in which that information comes to be attached to space. The gallery wall and the iPod screen are the two most symptomatic sites for this attachment at the present time. An understanding of audiovisual culture which does not account for them both – for the magnification of cinema to fill walls and its miniaturization to the size of screens held in our hands – will miss that culture's complex logics.

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