

## AT THE MUSEUM AND THE MOVIES

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1. It has been argued that contemporary cinema seems to re-open some paths that the history of the medium had interrupted or abandoned. Multiplexes, IMAX, digital technologies, cross-fertilization with music videos, videogames, the World Wide Web, are concrete and evident manifestations of such transformations. This new institutional framework accommodates new projects and creative impulses. Current utopias about the cinema, though, do not appeal to its “outside,” as something in which the cinema should lay its foundation – as it happened with secular (and sacred) spectacles for early cinema, with the theater during the introduction of sound, with television and other mass communication media (if only as an attempt to re-define cinema’s social role) in recent decades. Today the point of reference is either the basic tenets of early cinema or of classical cinema (either way: the tenets of a pre-modern cinema). The main belief behind several contemporary works (and therefore the uniqueness of the present situation) is that these tenets could resume their functioning within a structure of spectacle, reception, horizon of experience, within the territory of an institutional framework that is no longer that of contemporary cinema. What’s more, this institutional framework is not even that of cinema but, rather, it’s associated with other institutions: the museum, the art gallery, and the exhibition. This operation is based on the isolation, and therefore the amplification and reinforcement, of some traits of pre-modern cinema. The overall attitude is not fueled by nostalgia or mere aestheticism, but it is the result of a theoretical choice re-proposing possibilities that in the history of *cinema* had been considered scattered or lost.

Two recent examples appear to be particularly meaningful and revealing of the situation I have just outlined. The first is the 2002 installation titled *Going Forth by Day* put together by Bill Viola for the Guggenheim Museum in Berlin and the second is also an installation, called *The Paradise Institute*, presented by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller at the Venice Biennale in 2001. Viola’s work comprises the simultaneous projection of five “films,” shot on digital video, on as many screens leaning against the walls of the same space. Each film is about 35 minutes long and the screenings repeat on a loop. No point of reference is given to the audience as far as its *position* (there is no given vantage point or seats). On the first screen, in which the entry way creates a sort of “hole,” are projected the images of *Fire Birth*: “A human form emerges from a dim submerged world. The body swims in the fluid of an unconscious state between death and rebirth. Orange rays of light penetrate the surface of the water, coming from the previous world, which ended in fire. Now, illuminated by the light of prior destruction, the human essence searches for a way through this new underwater realm. It seeks the material form and substance necessary for its rebirth.”

On a huge screen, occupying most of the surface of the biggest wall of the room, *The Path* is projected: “It is the time of the summer solstice high in the mountains. The early morning light reveals a steady stream of people moving along a path through the forest. They come from all walks of life, each traveling the path at their own pace in their own unique way. There is no beginning or end to the procession of individuals - they have been walking long before we see them here, and they will be walking long after they leave our view. The constant flow of people suggests no apparent order or sequence. As travelers on the road, they move in an intermediate space between two worlds. A small marker in the forest grants them safe passage through this vulnerable state.”

*The Deluge* is shown in the smallest wall in the background: “A stone building, newly restored, stands in the clear light of the autumnal equinox. People move along the street immersed in the flow of day-to-day events. Small incidents play out, affecting individual lives. Families are leaving their homes, people on the street are carrying personal possessions, and all actions become colored by an increasing tension in the community. Moments of compassion and kindness circulate within a mounting concern for individual survival. [...] Now they must run for their lives as the deluge strikes with full force at the very heart of their private world. They rush out of a building when it is suddenly flooded from within by a raging torrent of water. [...]” There are two stories represented in the screens located against the biggest wall: *The Voyage*, and *First Light*. In the former, “a small house stands on a hill overlooking the inland sea. Inside, an old man lies ill on a bed, attended by his son and daughter-in-law. [...] Down by the shore, a boat is slowly being loaded with the personal possessions from the dying man’s home. An old woman waits patiently nearby. After some time the son and daughter-in-law must depart, leaving the old man alone with his dreams and fading breath. [...] Soon after, the old man reappears on the shore and is greeted by his wife, who has been waiting for his arrival. He too boards the boat, which departs, carrying them and their belongings [...]” In the latter, “a team of rescue workers has been laboring all night to save people caught in a massive flash flood in the desert. Exhausted and physically drained, they slowly pack up their equipments [...]. Eventually, the exhaustion and distress take their toll and, one by one, the four remaining individuals drop off to sleep. All is still and calm. Then a disturbance appears on the surface of the water and a young man’s face emerges. He rises up, limp and dripping wet, and floats up into the sky. The drips falling off his body turn to rain, waking the sleeping people. [...]”<sup>1</sup>

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s installation is a wooden construction: the spectator who accesses it will find the real-life size balcony of a movie theater, with real seats, accessories, etc. The balcony overlooks the model of a large stall, just on a smaller scale, in such a way as to give the illusion, soon almost perfect, of being in a real, large movie theater. On the screen, also of a reduced scale, are projected images of a film realized (on digital video) by the artists. At the entrance, the audience is given headphones on which the soundtrack of the film is playing as well as other sounds typically heard in a movie theater (neighbors talking to each others, or eating pop corns, a cellular phone going off, the public’s reactions to the images on the screen). The film shows a man imprisoned in a big clinic, a mysterious doctor is about to catch up with him, a nurse tries to help him escape... “[The] scenari[o] alludes to Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*”<sup>2</sup>

2. In Bill Viola's installation we can retrieve many of the principles of *expanded cinema*, which Sandra Lischi discusses in this issue: the synaesthetic effects (the acoustic element, reproducing "real" noises of various films, has great relevance here), the structure of poly-vision, the idea of a "contemplative cinema," the rejection of editing, the choice of *duration*. On the other hand, this work situates itself within the experiences of video-art (of which the artist is an authoritative figure), as well as in the tradition of the expository form of installations. At the same time, it involves elements that call upon (maybe only implicitly, which doesn't make them less important) aspects and principles belonging most effectively to early cinema: the "format" of the *vue*, applied to sound as well; the idea of opening onto a real-life scene; a relationship cinema/painting that gives the latter the role of the model, of the point of reference in perceptual terms; the experience of the multiplicity of viewed materials; the re-appropriation of the space of fruition.

In all the videos projected (with the partial exception of *Fire Birth*) the cinema appears to return to the main tenets of the Lumière Brothers' first films. The frame is fixed, the action is followed in continuity, and the attraction resides in showing the fragment of an event, whereby the "event" comprises also a situation, a "state," a "landscape." In *The Path* the focus of attention is the flowing of characters across the frame (a sort of pop catalogue of common people), the duration of their presence in the frame, both in temporal terms (emphasized by slow motion) and spatial terms (underscored by the panoramic screen), however not the circumstances that motivate the action (the provenience, the destination, the occasion) nor the specificity of the location (unidentifiable). *The Deluge*, which nevertheless presents a good surprise element in its ending (the water that erupts from the house, sweeping away its inhabitants) is based on a similar representational structure. The dominant element is the indetermination of the origin of the event, the indetermination of the location. Once again, the flow of passersbys is central to the piece, a flow that will make sense, spatially and logically, only at the end.

*The Voyage's* structure is entirely based on the idea of the "animation" of a painting. The house on a hill, where the old dying man is assisted by his relatives, is open on our side and realized according to the compositional rules of a Giotto fresco, with the same spatial organization. The staging of the main scene follows meticulously the iconographic organization of XIV century painting. The exterior (the lake, the ship where the past of the old couple is being loaded) corresponds to the background of a painting of the Renaissance tradition. The cinema (as in similar examples from the 1910s) adds a temporal and narrative development to the pictorial structure, here again unfolding in continuity. As in a Giotto painting, the appeal of the scene relies on the simultaneous presence of real, quotidian elements (the scene at the house) and supernatural ones (the scene at the beach with the woman, already dead, who awaits her partner to initiate their journey to the beyond). At the same time, the temporal continuity gives emphasis to the similarities between this representation and an early cinema *vue*.

A similar model is at the basis of *First Light*: the actions following the attempt to recover the body of a man who has drowned emphasize elements of integrity and duration, focusing the attention on the anything and the ordinary. The pictorial model is this time from Quattrocento and the iconography comes from a *Resurrection*. And even while the unexpected ending (the body that, unseen, surfaces from the water) has the effect of re-orienting all the preceding narrative, it still doesn't change the regime of the representation.

The influence of (especially Italian) pictorial tradition on Bill Viola's work is well known: in *The City of Men* (1989), *Nantes Triptych* (1992) and in the notorious *The Greeting* (1995), inspired by Pontormo. Concerning *Going Forth by Day* the author has talked about "images [...] projected directly onto the walls - without screens or framed supports - as in Italian Renaissance frescoes."<sup>3</sup> The bi-dimensionality of *The Path* also echoes a pictorial framework: the direction of the characters is always rigorously horizontal; not even the gaze of the characters is ever directed towards depth. But in this case the relationship with painting goes beyond an aesthetic reference or the evocation of a specific poetics. This is rather the re-designing of the relationship with the pictorial tradition according to principles analogous to those employed by early cinema; it is the re-opening of a path undertaken by the *Autorenfilm* (again, this is only an example) with "experimental" works such as *Die Insel der Seligen* (Max Reinhardt, 1913) or *Die Toteninsel* (Vilhelm Glückstadt, from the same year), which stirred the critical and theoretical debate of their time.

Furthermore, Bill Viola's installation encourages the viewer to re-appropriate the space of the movie theater. The multiplex produces an isolated spectator and a space approximating a private space, if not a domestic one. At the same time it disciplines, organizes, separates. The audience is fragmented, rigidly divided in groups, categories. The multiplicity of screens is entirely illusory because the vision is, in effect, rigidly oriented. Additionally, the theater becomes a neutral space, whose ultimate objective is to disappear, rather than being perceived as such. Any experience is "sucked in" by whatever appears on screen. We find ourselves, and we know it, in a situation that is contrary to that of silent cinema and, at the same time, very far from that of classical cinema (where the audience was a collective entity, the space of the theater was articulated, staged, turned into matter of experience) and where the variety of the program would act as a multiplier and would challenge the fixity of the screen. In the installation room (my argument, naturally, goes beyond this specific case and includes the "installation" format as such) the space is once again a living, divisible, structurable space. It is again a collective space where the spectator is a plural, heterogeneous, and multiform subject. The viewer also takes on an active role in the spectacular event, as it happens in the tradition of the popular cinematic spectacle or otherwise preceding (or alternative to) the spectacle of cinephilia.

*Going Forth by Day* is based, naturally, on the experience of simultaneity of vision (which is a situation that cannot be generalized). The situation of early cinema must not have been different. It is not impossible to think that the succession of the different *vues* and programs of different genres (along with "live" spectacles and numbers, and until the advent of sound) might have been experienced by the spectators as a *simultaneous presence* of different items or sources. The insistence in finding a narrative dimension in the *vues* can be interpreted as an attempt to neutralize this *synchronic effectiveness* of the individual numbers of a program, derived from the synchronism of other forms of spectacle, from panoramas to the Hale's Tours.

The installation re-proposes another feature of early cinema: the effect of opening onto a fragment of reality. Thanks to the real-life scale of the figures on the screen (*The Path*, *The Deluge*), thanks to the location of the screens (because of the size of the figures, the frontality of the framing of the house and the sidewalk, the lightness of the image, the screen located on the far side of the room, on the wall opposite the entry, the installation provides the strong illusion of witnessing a scene that is taking place outside the museum as seen through an opening in the room), thanks to the absence of any indicator (which we mentioned already) that would encourage to identify the screens

as such, thanks to the strong realism of the soundtrack, the surfaces appear less as supports to the representation than diaphragms in direct relation to the outside.

3. Another analogous project (here, furthermore, made openly explicit) summarizing and accentuating traits belonging to pre-modern cinema, in a context different from institutional cinema, is at work in the installation of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Here, the preliminary and strongest idea is that of re-appropriating the movie theater, of recuperating the qualities of the pre-modern spectator. The operation is achieved through the mechanisms of simulation: the “theater” is reconstructed, as we have seen, so that it can exist inside a museum; the interior space is the result of a perspective illusion; sound comes from the headphones. This further intensifies the above-mentioned characteristics precisely because they are made evident, literally *exposed*, in a place governed by different regimes of representation and fruition.

The theater becomes again a site of *experience* for the spectator and a site for him/her to enter in relation with the world of the film (condition, the latter, entirely lost in the contemporary movie theater where the spectator, severed from any spatial reference, is uni-directionally pushed towards an immersion into the space of the film). The theater, which is the first and elementary passageway, becomes again the site for an interaction among spectators (who are talking about being late, buying popcorn, or embarrassingly answer – in Italian! – the ringing cell phone) and for a re-elaboration of the “adventure” of the film. The audience (the voices from the audience are heard on the headphones) sings a tune playing in one of the film’s locales, or comments on a sex scene. This re-elaboration can concern a cinematic knowledge (the comment about an actor seen in another film, or about the sources of the story discussed in an article), but also life experiences: the events of the film are connected to experienced facts or they directly effect the present situation and existential horizon of the spectator: “I’m too worried. I have to go home and check the stove. I’ll wait for you there,” says the voice of a female spectator who we then hear exiting the movie theater, while on the screen we see images of a house on fire.<sup>4</sup>

*The Paradise Institute* “foregrounds”, as we said, these characteristics and therefore attributes them an even greater relevance. But let me underline again that these are the procedures of simulation itself, prevailing in this result. It is thanks to the fact that sound is conveyed through the headphones that a complete unification between the film’s acoustic world and the theater’s can be obtained.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, it is the model that produces the strongest unification between the space of the film and the space of the theater, because the same perspectival principles employed in the representation on screen are also applied to the theater. It is thanks to the headphones that the voice of a female spectator, in particular, “sitting” next to us, seems to address us directly for the entire duration of the spectacle. The voice (without a real body? Emanation of a real presence?) bearing all traits of the *acousmatic* voice, narrativizes our experience of the cinematic spectacle and, in this way, attributes an unusual and unexpected relevance to the “voice of the spectator.”

There is a point when, behind us, we hear the steps of one of the screen characters and his voice seems to be addressing us. The installation returns us, uncannily, to the situation of early cinema, to an idea of cinema as an “excerpt from reality” which can erupt, at any moment, in the theater. This is a situation that is not assimilable to the involving capacity of sound effects (surround sound and derivative technologies) in a contempo-



rary movie theater. In the latter case, the attraction relies in the sense of transference of the spectator to the acoustic (and physical) space of the represented scene; it relies on the possibility to suck the spectator into the event of cinematic fiction. The process triggered by *The Paradise Institute* goes, on the contrary, in the opposite direction.

In the introduction to the already mentioned volume, Wayne Baerwaldt discusses (albeit in problematic terms) the production of strong effects of identification, “as if to abandon the sanctuary of self for someone else’s mind and body.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, and positively, the opposite process is triggered: *the stories of the spectators and the theater - and the story of the film itself - are projected onto the viewer. The effect is a magnification of the ego of the spectator, a sort of mutation of his/her conscience leading him/her to absorb multiple lives and personalities at the same time.* This is a viewing situation that we probably had forgotten about, and which, on the contrary, must have been familiar to the spectators of the past. This is an opposite state than that of the modern and contemporary spectator, who is dragged into the film, and on the film projects his/her inner life.

From this standpoint, *The Paradise Institute* finds a direct precedent in the model of a movie theater used in *Murel Lake Incident* (1999) where we also find the projection of a film and the creation of the acoustic space of the theater for a spectator who feels like an “omnipotent child,” a “giant discovering a miniaturized world.”<sup>7</sup> Another antecedent can be found in the performances of the “walks” (*Louisiana Walk*, 1996; *Drogan’s Nightmare*, 1998; *Lakeside Walk*, 2000), where the “visitor” was invited to follow a path, leading also outside the museum, guided by a voice heard through headphones. Such structure gave birth to a complex system, developed like a veritable “text,” where the direct experience of the visitor would not only intersect with the experience of the subject expressed by the voice, but also with the traces of previous experiences of the same path, embodied by the sounds and noises heard on the headphones, connected to another exploration of the same trajectory. “I want you to talk with me,” “We’re connected now, my breath a part of yours, my thoughts transferred to your mind”<sup>8</sup> would claim the voice heard by the visitor. Another subjectivity would creep into the visitor’s.

The film projected on the screen of *The Paradise Institute* initiates also a direct dialogue with the “life,” the “text” of the theater. At the beginning of the story, the prisoner in the clinic seems to awake at the ringing of the spectator’s cell phone. At the end, the mysterious doctor is walking to the room where the nurse is trying to resuscitate the man in order to enable him to flee: the noise of the door opening is transferred to the theater, behind our heads; we hear, behind us, the steps of the man approaching, and his threatening words. Once the film ends, it is the same voice that invites us to leave the theater and points out the exit to us: the direction of the relationship between film and audience is indicated in the strongest and most provocative way. The film “exits” the screen and invests directly the sphere of the spectator’s existence. The spectator’s entry into the fiction transforms into the cinema’s entry into the life of the spectator.

This happens in Bill Viola’s installation as well. The spectator is immersed in an acoustic space, which isn’t simply the extension of the film’s soundtrack, but rather an autonomous source and remnant of experiences. The slow motion produces a similar effect by displacing the classical cinematic codes of the rendition of time (just like Giotto’s perspective challenged the codes of the perspectival rendering of space) and acts as an amplification of emotions or, even more, “could actually make visible the

events that were unconscious and could bring those things right up front.”<sup>9</sup> The overall effect is not only an intensification of the senses, but also of the subjectivity of the spectator, the creation of a sort of “multiple-ego” where sensations, stories, and different lives converge, coexist, and merge. In brief, this is the state of any film spectator, *before cinephilia and before the multiplex*.

4. That both examples examine the relationship with early cinema, i.e., with pre-cinema is quite apparent and even part of a poetics. In fact, the camera obscura holds a central position in Bill Viola’s artistic background. “Experimenting with a homemade camera obscura and video projections helped me to understand the idea of the room as an instrument [and not] as a container.”<sup>10</sup> An analogous role is played by the diorama in the training and work of Janet Cardiff (“it’s about the play of the imagination and about our ability to mentally jump into a space.”)<sup>11</sup> However, as I have tried to show, this relationship acquires a meaning that goes beyond this or that artistic work, and becomes a sort of re-planning of cinema (of its experience) and of the contemporary structures of (the experience of) vision.

Pre-modern cinema seems to have a lot to say about possible developments, or paths, opened by contemporary cinema.

This is a relationship and a set of processes that do not belong, in my opinion, only to the program, to the “poetics,” of this journal.

[Translated from Italian by Alessandra Raengo]

- 1 The quotations are excerpts from Bill Viola, *Going forth by Day* (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2002).
- 2 Scott Wattson, *Ghosts: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller*, in Wayne Baerwaldt, Ed., *The Paradise Institute - Janet Cardiff and/et/und/e George Bures Miller* (Winnipeg/Manitoba: Plug In, 2001), p. 33.
- 3 *Ibidem*.
- 4 The quote from the soundtrack is derived from the volume accompanying the installation: Wayne Baerwaldt, ed., *The Paradise Institute...*, cit.
- 5 The sound recording is realized with the binaural technique, which involves sound recording by two microphones located on the sides of a mannequin’s head. “Everyone listening to the headphones is at the center of the recording, where the binaural head was placed originally. Everyone feels like the action is happening around them. That’s pretty cool.” (G. Bures Miller) “Because the sound is being recorded in binaural audio we can push people’s perception of the reality around them” (J. Cardiff). Cit. from *I wanted to Get Inside the Painting. Brigitte Kölle in Conversation with Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller*, Idem, p. 9 and 11.
- 6 Wayne Baerwaldt, *Phantom of the Paradise*, Idem, p. 3.
- 7 Scott Wattson, *Ghosts: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller*, cit., p. 31
- 8 Cit. in *Ibidem*, p. 27.
- 9 *Bill Viola interviewed by John G. Hanhardt*, in B. Viola, *Going forth by Day*, cit., p. 107.
- 10 *Ibidem*, p. 86.
- 11 J. Cardiff in *I wanted to Get Inside the Painting...*, cit. p. 15.