

Attention, please.
Negotiating Concentration and Distraction around 1970
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I.

Don DeLillo's novel "Point Omega" begins at the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York. A man is absorbed in an installation piece. The work is silent. It shows movie images that are slowed down to the brink of standstill. The screen is suspended in the middle of the gallery. Sure enough, the man could walk around the flat surface and look at the images from the opposite side, mirror-inverted. He has done that before, but his favorite position remains the one at the north wall. This is not his first visit. Something in the piece fascinates him and makes him come back day after day: Anthony Perkins' and Janet Leigh's gestures look as if under glass, eerily expanded or enlarged, suspended between movement and immobility. The man's behavior is unusual. Whereas most of the other visitors spend only a few seconds in the gallery, he is struck by the images. "He found himself undistracted for some minutes," DeLillo writes, "by the coming and going of others and he was able to look at the film with the degree of intensity that was required. The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it." (DeLillo 2010, 5) What exactly is it then that characterizes this eccentric person and sets him radically apart from the others? One tentative answer could be: he experiences the work as a modulation of time that imposes its own durational regiment, while the other visitors take it as just another leg in the tour through the spaces of the museum.

II.

This fictional account of Douglas Gordon's iconic '24 hour Psycho' (1993) at the MoMA confronts us with two different ways of reacting towards moving images: One of them, favored by the majority of museum visitors in DeLillo's book, might be called "distracted reception," a term that Peter Osborne (2004) has taken up from Walter Benjamin. The other one, practiced by the nameless protagonist, takes the installation as a work demanding concentrated and patient examination that can only be achieved by a spectator who tunes into the challenging duration of the piece. Obviously, quite conflicting time regimes and economies of reception are at stake. While the conventional mode of experiencing an art work in the museum de-

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depends on the time budget of the visitor (and, as I should add: on the institutional framework of the museum), this strange man voluntarily subjects himself to the time of Gordon's installation. In doing so, he probably misreads the piece, or, put differently: he takes it for a "structural film" rather than for a piece of installation art or "expanded cinema."²

The dialectic of distraction and attention has a long history. As Jonathan Crary (1999) has argued in his canonical book, it is situated at the core of modernity itself. However, the topic has rather been neglected in the discussions about the ubiquitous migrations of moving images in the past two decades. When confronting cinema and the museum, there is a tendency to emphasize the *spatial* aspects of the question and the various kinds of flexibility the "emancipated spectator" (Rancière 2011) is given. I will come back to this point later to formulate some assumptions about the reasons for this bias. But first, let me have a quick look at two important moments in the history of perception and then turn to the time around 1970.

The first moment is linked to the work of the German sociologist Georg Simmel. He is well known for his influential thoughts on "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1998), for his sociological analysis of fashion and his *Philosophy of Money* (2011), all of them first published around the turn of the 20th century. Less attention has been paid to a short essay called "Über Kunstausstellungen" (On Art Exhibitions), written in 1890 (Simmel 2009). The argument that Simmel unfolds here anticipates many of his insights into the affects that the modern individual is exposed to in the big cities: the multiplication of impressions that characterizes life in the metropolis, leads, as Simmel (2009, 41) calls it, to "Blasiertheit", a psychological state shielding off perceptual sensitivity. The blasé rather glides along the surface of things than penetrates them in a concentrated manner. The obvious reason is that the sheer quantity of stimuli in a modern environment makes it virtually impossible for the individual to pay attention to all of them. Now, as Simmel argues in his short text, exhibitions of modern art operate in the same manner, albeit on a smaller scale. Simmel observes:

[In exhibitions there is] a hastening from one impression to the next, the impatience of enjoyment, the problematic aspiration to compress a maximum of excitements, interests and enjoyments in a minimum duration. [...] What is most divergent, finds itself in closest neighborhood and the spirit demanding stimulation can get the pleasant feeling to traverse within minutes the entire world of artistic design and expand between the most distant points of possible sensation.³ (Simmel 2009, 40)

² For a reading of '24 hour Psycho' that emphasizes how Gordon foreshadows digital technologies and could be called "one of the last video artists to end video art", see Røssaak 2014.

³ Translation by the author.

When Simmel wrote his essay in 1890, the question of attention and distraction was being discussed on several levels: (1) on the level of new techniques of processing stillness and movement in images (exemplified most famously by Marey and Muybridge); techniques, which were about to transform into “cinema” some years later; (2) on the level of vernacular cultural practices like the vaudeville and the fairground, which would provide the crucial context for “Early Cinema”; (3) on the level of established artistic forms like painting, when artists like Cézanne or Seurat investigated new ways to make our perception oscillate between concentration and distraction; and, not least, (4) on the level of experimental psychology and philosophy (for instance in Henri Bergson’s, Hermann von Helmholtz’s or Ernst Mach’s writings). Interestingly enough, Simmel locates the problem on yet another level: his concern is neither the particular style of the paintings on display (we don’t even know what kind of exhibition he had in mind) nor a difference of medium—for instance, photography vs. painting. His critique of distraction rather focuses on the *simultaneity* of artworks, on the abundance of supply that exceeds the demands and the capacities of the visitor. Without much exaggeration, you could therefore recognize in Simmel’s argument an early form of “institutional critique” or rather: critique of display.

III.

Needless to say, the situation from around 1970 is completely different from Simmel’s historical context. It is precisely the *historical variability* of dispositions like “attention” or “distraction” that can be learnt from its different historic theorizations. As Jonathan Crary puts it: “[A]ttention and distraction cannot be thought outside a continuum in which the two ceaselessly flow into one another, as part of a social field in which the same imperatives and forces incite one and the other.” (Crary 1999, 49-50)⁴ This “ceaseless flow” and flexibility is the reason why Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer come to very different evaluations, even if they both owe a lot to Simmel’s theories of modern culture. While Simmel gives us a skeptical and, many will say, politically conservative account of the risks that an accumulation of different stimuli might amount to, both Kracauer and Benjamin embrace “distracted perception” as an efficient antidote against the submissive and quasi-religious forms of bourgeois contemplation. It is no coincidence that cinema, anchored firmly in mass entertainment and the modern capital, is the technical medium for which they get their hopes up.⁵ However, my point is not the ideological dimension of the question. What I want to accentuate in both

⁴ Recently, Petra Löffler (2013) has provided an illuminating media history of distraction.

⁵ For an evaluation of the dialectics of distraction and concentration that Critical Theory highlighted, see Miriam Hansen’s brilliant study on Kracauer, Adorno, and Benjamin (Hansen 2011).

Simmel's and Kracauer's conceptualizations is their insight that both the cinema and the museum or gallery are not only architectures and institutions. As architectures and institutions, they are also containers that modulate duration and time and thus shape the viewers' and visitor's mode of perception.

Around 1970, both institutions had to face severe attacks. From political, structural and theoretical angles, artists like Daniel Buren, Allan Kaprow or Marcel Broodthaers came up with artistic and theoretical strategies against the museum that was, as Gregory Battock has it, taken to be "oppressive, reactionary, culturally debilitating, and socially and aesthetically negative." (Battock 2009, 90) At the same time, cinema was confronted with a similar contestation. One of the most persistent arguments in what was not yet considered the field of Film Studies was based on the premise that the "apparatus" of cinema—the specific arrangement of projection, screen and viewer—was nothing else than an "ideological machine." (Baudry 1974, 44) Building mainly on Althusser and Lacan, an all-encompassing continuity was posited between the idealism of Plato's cave, the invention of linear perspective in the renaissance and what was called the "dominant ideology" of the present. Few texts were as influential in (polemically) postulating this continuity as Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus", published in 1970 in the French magazine *Cinématique*:

No doubt the darkened room and the screen bordered with black like a letter of condolences already present privileged conditions of effectiveness—no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside. Projection and reflection take place in a closed space and those who remain there, whether they know it or not (but they do not), find themselves chained, captured, or captivated. (Baudry 1974, 44)

Cinema, addressed by Baudry (1974, 44) and others as a "system of repression" is regarded as an institution of discipline and force, and the immobility of the spectator is seen as his/her precondition for being indoctrinated with an illusionary reality and false consciousness. Much of the work of film theory since then has consisted in a critique and differentiation of this powerful argument. Feminist theory criticized its indifference towards questions of gender, and "New Film History" discovered Early Cinema as a rich field of alternative "viewing conditions", while phenomenological approaches emphasized the *bodily* dimension of film reception.⁶ All these impulses lead to valuable arguments against the potentially a-historical and transcendental subject of "apparatus theory." Surprisingly enough, the very argument of the immobile and captivated

⁶ See the writings of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Judith Mayne and others (for the feminist critique), important contributions by Tom Gunning, André Gaudreault, Thomas Elsaesser (Early Cinema), Vivian Sobchack (Phenomenology) amongst others. An early anthology collecting some of these trends was Williams 1994.

cinema spectator in his seat earned a powerful renaissance when new kinds of installation work appeared in museums and galleries in the 90s. Time and time again it has been argued that the wandering museum spectator is reflective and “emancipated”, whereas the seated spectator is passively stitched into the illusionist narrative worlds on the cinema screen. At first glance, the “Expanded Cinema” of the 60s and 70s seems to be in synch with the critical notion put forward by Baudry, as well as by curators and art critics decades later. Especially its Austrian protagonists, like Peter Weibel and Valie EXPORT, made it a habit to literally and physically attack the viewer both verbally and with diverse weapons like firecrackers and other pyrotechnical means.⁷ A closer look at the time around 1970, however, raises doubts about the supposed filiation between “Expanded Cinema” and contemporary installation art, especially when their relation to distraction and concentration is highlighted.

IV.

On a basic level, “Expanded Cinema” can be seen as an attempt to embrace all kinds of visual and multi-sensory stimuli that help to extend the range of human perception. In Gene Youngblood’s canonical book of the same title, the notion of “cinema” becomes a metaphor or an umbrella term rather than referring to a concrete institution or a specific cultural practice. Youngblood is more than explicit about this expansion of the term “cinema” itself when he states on the very first page:

When we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn’t a movie at all: like life it’s a process of becoming, man’s ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. One no longer can specialize in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind. (Youngblood 1970, 41)⁸

Some points are worth emphasizing in Youngblood’s credo. First of all, the vantage point from which Youngblood describes the broad scope of image practices in the late 60s is not—or at least not primarily—concerned with questions of art or aesthetic value. The vast terrain that he calls “Expanded Cinema” might rather—and with more accuracy—be called “visual culture” in its broadest sense. The

⁷ See their performance EXIT, documented in Vasulka and Weibel 2008, 275.

⁸ See also the more specific definition Youngblood gave in 1986: “Cinema is the art of organizing a stream of audio-visual events in time. It’s an event-stream, like music. There are three media through which we can practice cinema—film, video, computer—just as there are many instruments through which we can practice music.” (Broderick 1986, 55)

second point is intricately connected to the first. For the guiding paradigms Youngblood builds his utopia on are not concerned with the museum or the art gallery. “Communication” and “consciousness” are the key terms of his intervention, and both of them imply a strong political claim. Even if “Cinema” is addressed as something like a comprehensive “regulative force”, the imminent hopes and dreams refer either to recent image practices like television or video, or to technical inventions that are yet in the making, like holography and computers. Those are the material substrates from which cinema as a commercial complex was criticized.

Stan VanDerBeek’s work is characteristic for the high hopes that were raised by the multiplication and dissemination of images.⁹ Since the mid-sixties he had been working on combinations of architecture and multi-image projections. According to him, the collective experience with images had to be elevated to the global scale and liberated from the dominion of the spoken or written word.¹⁰ For VanDerBeek, the spatial condition for this is an immersive dome-shaped architecture, the famous “Movie-Drome.” His description of this architectural image-machinery is as follows:

The “Movie-Drome” would operate as follows: in a spherical dome, simultaneous images of all sorts would be projected on the entire dome-screen. The audience lies at the outer edge of the dome, feet towards the centre; thus almost the complete field of view is taken up by the dome-screen. Thousands of images would be projected on to this screen. (VanDerBeek 1966, 43)¹¹

The immersive architecture of the Movie-Drome should have provided the vital node for an interconnected, global *lingua franca* of images. VanDerBeek speaks of a “picture-language based on motion pictures” (VanDerBeek 1966, 43) and positions his goals at the point where art and education intersect. What he aims at in his somewhat crude mixture of belief in technical feasibility, psychological assumptions of an “oceanic consciousness”, and hope in globalization, is “to reach for the emotional denominator of all men, the non-verbal basis of human life.” (VanDerBeek 1966, 43) As VanDerBeek’s utopia is based on an idea of *immediate, real-time transmission* and information, it seems logical that it shifts from the immersive architectures in Buckminster Fuller’s style to the electronic media of computer and TV shortly after. In a documentary from 1972, he clear-sightedly states:

⁹ For a recent perspective on VanDerBeek that highlights his roots in the Black Mountain College and John Cage’s work see Uroskie 2014, 148-170.

¹⁰ In this respect, VanDerBeek stands in a long theoretical historical tradition, leading from Béla Balázs’s hopes at the beginning of *The Visible Man* (2010) up to Jean-Luc Godard’s numerous complaints that language unfairly dominates the image.

¹¹ The document is also included in Stan VanDerBeek (2011) and on the excellent website www.stanvanderbeek.com.

Quite clearly, with channel television and cable television, and other systems all these ideas will become part of our life. By telephone, you'll be able to reach out and get into a computer. Your children, 14, 15 years old, will be able to work with this in probably three or four years. Art schools of the future will teach programming as much as they teach live drawing. There's a whole new definition of communications which are now potentially in our hands—if we can get our hands on them. (Musilli 1972)

V.

If the umbrella term “Expanded Cinema” stands for a utopia that aims at global forms of communication, communion and consciousness, it is important to note that, at the same time, an opposing and no less utopian attitude began to take shape. Due to a number of positive circumstances, Peter Kubelka was able to realize a project that he had had dreamt of since 1958. Together with Jonas Mekas and the Anthology Film Archives, and designed by the Austrian architect Raimund Abraham, he planned and inaugurated the “Invisible Cinema” in New York. The goal of this extraordinary but short-lived architectural project was to create a movie theater that would not only guarantee but also amplify the conditions of a concentrated film experience. In their inaugural manifesto, the initiators stated:

The construction of the Anthology's cinema is premised upon the idea that the cinematic experience should be at once communal and extremely concentrated on the filmic image and sound, without distractions. The viewer should not have any sense of the presence of walls or the size of the auditorium. He should have only the white screen isolated in darkness as his guide to scale and darkness. [...] In order to minimize the possibility of distraction during our performances, no one will be admitted to the theater after the program has begun. (Anthology Film Archives 1970, 14; 16)¹²

The difference between this concept and “Expanded Cinema”, but also to the mobile and flexible museum experience that we encounter today, could hardly be bigger. Where “expanded cinema”, much in accordance with postmodern claims, strives to transform the cinema experience into a communal experience by blending it with other media, techniques and art forms, the “invisible cinema” and large parts of what came to be called “structural filmmaking” propagate both the media- and site-specificity of film and cinema.

¹² Another description by Peter Kubelka: “Ceiling, walls, seats were all covered with black velvet; the floor was covered with black carpeting. Doors and everything else were painted black. In the whole room, only the screen itself was not completely black. Consequently, the screen and the film projected on the screen were the only visual points of reference. In a cinema, one shouldn't be aware of the architectural space, so that the film can completely dictate the sensation of space. Due to the blackness of the room, there is no back reflection whatsoever on the screen.” (Kubelka 2005, 106)

Now, even if Hollis Frampton was unhappy with P. Adams Sitney's generic term "structural film", (Cf. Frampton and Broughton 2008, 225) his film work is deeply concerned with structure, duration, and memory. At several moments in his career, he has insisted on the quality of film as a *time-based* form of articulation, and two of his best-known films—"(*nostalgia*)" (1971) and the triptych "*Zorn's Lemma*" (1970)—depend entirely on their temporal construction with a beginning, middle, and an end. Apart from these works, Frampton's most explicit statement about cinema as a catalyzer of attention and concentration is to be encountered in the piece with the laconic title "*A lecture*", performed at Hunter College on October 30, 1968.

It is not easy to define this intervention. With Pavle Levi, we might call it "*Cinema by other means*" (see Levi 2012). It is like a film—it implies a projector, but not a filmstrip; it is like a performance, but with merely a homeopathic dose of performativity; it is reminiscent of an academic lecture, but then again, it is much too playful for this. "Please turn out the lights", a pre-recorded voice from a tape recorder states: "As long as we're going to talk about films, we might as well do it in the dark." Anyone familiar with experimental cinema recognizes this voice as belonging to Michael Snow. A moment later, the voice qualifies this "generic darkness"—the darkness of cinema—by calling it "the only place left in our culture intended entirely for concentrated exercise of one, or at most two, of our senses". (Frampton 2009, 125) What follows is a short meditation about the darkness and the specific ambience of the cinematic situation, which is quite the opposite of Baudry's captivated prisoner: "We are, shall we say, comfortably seated. We may remove our shoes, if that will help us to remove our bodies." Following this performance, the cinema space is a heterotopia that sensitizes the viewer, "suspended in a null space", it is a laboratory for exploring both the medium and the perceptual apparatus of the viewers.

While the beginning of "*A lecture*" is concerned with cinema as a space of concentration, Frampton has also dealt with the problem of distraction within his artistic practice. For him, the difference between still photography and film projection lies—amongst other things—in their unequal capacity to modulate and direct the temporal attention of the viewer. Asked about the origins of "*Zorn's Lemma*" by Peter Gidal, Frampton explained that his filmmaking evolved quite logically out of his work as a still photographer working in long series:

If you have a bunch of photographs, that you believe cohere even in book space, let alone on a gallery wall, there's no way to determine the order in which they're seen, nor the amount of time for which each one is seen, nor to establish the possibility of a repeat. So that already had me thinking of film, as a kind of ordering and control, a way of handling stills. (Gidal 1985, 93)

Frampton's idea of a strong author that imposes the work's temporal order onto the viewers is quite different from VanDerBeek's project, where the potential "use" of a movie-drome or a computer is up to the recipient and his or her temporal economy.

Still, the emphasis that Frampton puts on the institutional quality of the cinema space for attentive perception does not mean that distraction is simply discarded. Quite the contrary: in many respects, his films can be seen as elegant devices to think about the dialectics of concentration and distraction. As we know, "(nostalgia)" is based on a continuous temporal dissociation or rupture. On the one hand, there is a number of still photographs, slowly turning to ashes on a hot plate. On the other hand, there is the voice-over—again, it is Michael Snow speaking—that describes a different photograph, which is going to be seen only later. While we see an image fade away into the past, the voice conjures up an image of the future. What happens here—amongst lots of other things—is that our capacity to focus and concentrate visually on the image is constantly diverted by the verbal description that refer to something else, yet unseen; to something that belongs to the future and will only come to our attention after its verbal description. If attention means that something enters into our conscious awareness by blocking out or displacing all the rest, "(nostalgia)" is a sophisticated play with the dialectics of attention and distraction. Attention is permanently elicited and then distracted: by burning the photographs, by dissociating image and narration, by splitting up the present into anticipation and memory.

"Expanded Cinema" and Frampton's films would thus have different ideas about the level on which the problem of distraction is addressed. Frampton—along with the propagators of the "Invisible Cinema"—suggests to negotiate distraction and attention within the film work and to provide the best circumstances to guarantee the concentrated reception of the film at its own temporal conditions. In "Expanded Cinema", this is quite different: VanDerBeek and others hoped that multi-screens and a potentially distracting multitude of images would be best suited to break the spell of illusion and narration that commercial cinema was offering. This leads me back to the institutional logic of the museum and to Simmel's argument. In his contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition "Time Zones", Peter Osborne has described the gallery experience as a privileged mode of "distracted reception:" On the one hand, the museum has to provide an alternative to the distractions of everyday life, yet on the other hand, it has to implement and modulate attention and distraction itself. Osborne goes so far as to identify—at least hypothetically—one important function of the group show in minimizing the amount of attention that is imposed on the visitor: "Perhaps this is the function of grouping works together in the same visual space: they provide a psychic space of distraction which eases the anxiety involved in giving oneself up to a particular work." (Osborne 2004, 68-69)

Osborne's critique of the museum reminds us of structurally similar accounts of channel switching and zapping. Both TV and the museum operate with a multitude of potential channels (or galleries), with the simultaneity of various forms of content, with the permanent distraction provided by alternative options.¹³ Accordingly, Osborne argues that the "need for distraction is readily fulfilled by the gallery: by the sounds and movements and sight of other viewers, by the beguiling architecture of gallery-space, the view out of the window, the curatorial information cards, the attendants, and by other works." (Osborne 2004, 68) In their quality as *time-based* media, installation film works in particular expose the precarious dialectic of attention and distraction. On the one hand, time and its duration are the very elements that films are made of. On the other hand, a conflict with the rhythm of the visitor is inevitable, given the flexible parameters of the exhibition situation. Seen from the vantage point of attention, cinema's quality consists in the rigorous exclusion of external influences. The doors are shut, the lights are dimmed, and various precautions are taken to facilitate the encounter between viewer and film. Exaggerating slightly, one could say: while a film is shown, the rest of the world is non-existent. Of course, there is a dialectic at work, for this concentration could indeed be regarded as precisely a distraction from the outside world.

VI.

As I pointed out, "Expanded Cinema" and "Structural Film" differ widely in their respective critical intervention. It is possible to point out their difference as between a centrifugal impulse (expansion, TV, alternative spaces, computers, post-modernism, dissolution of boundaries) and a centripetal one (concentration, examination of the medium, the single frame, modernism, delimitation).¹⁴ However, what united both currents and impulses, is their anti-institutional desire and their opposition against commodification. Given the political issues of the 1960s, it is not surprising that both initiatives were striving for self-administration and forms of production, distribution and presentation that did not depend on capital or market criteria. The numerous film-coops in the USA (Canyon Cinema, Film-makers' Cooperative), the UK (London Film-Makers' Coop), Germany (Hamburger Film-Coop) aimed at independent networks hoping for a maximum of accessibility and circulation instead of a maximum of profit. The whole economic idea of the "coop" was to create an alternative to the modes of commodification that the "dominant", industrial cinema is based on.

¹³ For an extensive study of the manifold relations between contemporary art and television see Conolly 2014.

¹⁴ In a similar vein, Jonathan Walley has pointed out that many examples of Expanded Cinema are characterized by a dialectics of 'expansion' and 'contraction'. See Walley 2011.

The rediscovery of narrative cinema in art contexts in the 90s started from a very different position. It emanated from museums, curators and art galleries whose relation to value and profit was quite different. While DVD and the Internet has rendered an ever-growing amount of historical and experimental films more visible, installation works remain scarce and hard to see. This, of course, is partly due to their site specificity, yet there is also a feeling of exclusiveness attached to them that has economic implications. Experimental Cinema of the 60s was looking for alternatives to profit and commodification. Installation art, on the contrary, is deeply involved in the speculative economies of the art market that functions like a mirror—some say: like an amplifier—to the speculations of the stock market and the financial realm.¹⁵ At the 2010 Berlin Film Festival, James Benning observed that the success of film- and video-installation art in the 90s would have been unthinkable without a new type of commodification, incompatible with the pragmatics of “showing movies” that was characteristic of the experimental film tradition: “The Return of the time-based images in Installations and Galleries comes out of the 80s art movement that created art stars and millionaires. And to have millionaires, you have to have an object. The past films weren’t objects. They were something to put on the projector and the audience would watch them.”¹⁶

Benning’s argument takes us back to the various attempts in the 60s to get away from producing objects. The ubiquitous attempts of “dematerialization”, to use Lucy Lippard’s controversial term, were one strategy to dissolve the tradable object into language, performance, information or pure concept. In Youngblood’s panorama of “Expanded Cinema”, he cites Gerry Schum’s TV-Gallery as an example of a new kind of non-commercial gallery based on the idea of transmission. “After the broadcast there is nothing left but a reel of film or videotape. There’s no object that can be seen ‘in reality’ or be sold as an object” (Youngblood 1970, 292)—a conviction that has proved wrong with the introduction of editions and the limitation of copies.

The film medium has a specific place in this history. Again, we can turn to Hollis Frampton to grasp its peculiarity. In his best known text, “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses”, the filmmaker says: “[I]t occurs to me that film meets what may be, after all, the prime condition of music: it produces no object.” (Frampton 2009, 138) This sounds counterintuitive at first: of course there is an object—the print of the film—, which results from a number of technical operations by other objects: the camera, the editing table, and the projector. Yet Frampton insists on this

¹⁵ For an economic perspective on installation art and other ‘experiential’ art forms, see Horowitz 2011.

¹⁶ James Benning in the discussion “Time after Time. The return of the time-image in contemporary art and cinema”, James Benning, Sharon Lockhart, Mark Lewis, Karl Kels, und Sandra Peters, 16.2.2010, Kino Arsenal.

point by adding: “The act of making a film, of physically assembling the filmstrip, feels somewhat like making an object: that film artists have seized the materiality of film is of inestimable importance, and film certainly invites examination at this level. But at the instant the film is completed, the ‘object’ vanishes.” (Frampton 2009, 138) What Frampton means is that films do not exist except in the moment that they are being projected. They vanish into invisibility as soon as the film comes out of the lab and is put into a box. This poses a problem for each institution occupied with archiving, exhibiting or trading films. And it becomes especially complex when the art market enters the equation.

As an answer to what exactly should be exhibited in film museums, Alexander Horwath—Peter Kubelka’s successor in running the Austrian Film Museum and film-curator for *documenta 12* in 2007—has brought the term “working system” into the discussion. I will quote him at some length because his argument enlarges Frampton’s idea:

Apart from a few works in history (loops; some installations), which do not have a pre-set duration, all film works (= performances of film) are defined by the specific time they take to appear in full. One might say they are “framed” by their duration (if you accept the analogy to paintings or drawings)—or, rather, “framed” by the last moment in time before they begin and by the first moment in time after they have ended. In the case of a painting or drawing, the work is what’s inside the frame (or wherever the paper/canvas ends); in the case of film, the work is what’s inside the time-frame and inside the visual/aural space created by the joint performance of strip, machine, and operator. (Usai et al. 2008, 85)

The history of cinema, therefore, does not consist of objects. It consists of instances when the “working system” is put to work. The essential element that film history—and, by extension, museums that decide to exhibit film—deals with, cannot be restricted to any one of these single elements. This problem, I would argue, is at the center of the constant quarrel of how to display and exhibit film works, especially when examples from the history of experimental cinema are concerned. I believe that it can only be solved by either transferring the whole infrastructure of cinema into the museum, or by maximizing the media difference between the original “object” (the working system) and its manifestation in the exhibition space.

VII.

I started in the present, and, approaching my conclusion, I will now return to it. In the last few years, museums and galleries have demonstrated a growing interest in exhibiting classic films from experimental cinema. There were solo-shows by Jonas Mekas (in Cologne), by Kenneth Anger (at the PS1 in New York), by George Landow (at the Kunst-Werke/Berlin), a historical overview of “direct film” from Len Lye to Jennifer Reeves in Frankfurt/Main, to give but

a few examples.¹⁷ In each of these exhibitions, the question of the “object” of cinema was crucial, and the answers given were often dissatisfactory. As a spatial entity, museums and galleries depend on stable objects that can be displayed continually during opening hours. 16mm-films that do not meet these demands and thus have to be transferred to digital media, looped or, to put it more bluntly, vandalized, with the consent of their authors.

What is at stake in this transfer from one realm—experimental cinema, distribution or “transmission”, non-profit-economy—to the other (contemporary art, possession, the market) can be illustrated by looking at Michael Snow’s “Wavelength”—maybe the key work of what could be called the “durational tradition” of experimental cinema. The desire to exhibit “Wavelength” in a museum context made several curators approach Snow and ask him for permission to include it in group shows. Snow’s reaction was always negative, but he came up with an interesting solution:

I had resisted because that film (more medium specificity!) is totally filmic; it should be seen in a theater, with its projection beam, screen, and all that. But as you perhaps know, anybody can do anything to or with anything these days in music or moving pictures, so I thought I would take some preventative action and make a very video version of *Wavelength*. I thought that if anyone were going to vandalize my work, it should be me. I divided the forty-five-minute picture and sound into three fifteen-minute sequences and then superimposed the three of them on each other. The resulting simultaneity is interestingly antithetical to the original film, which was strictly one thing after another. (Varela 2005, 31)

For any fan of “Wavelength,”—at least for me—watching “Wavelength for those who don’t have the time” (WVLNT), as Snow aptly baptised the piece, is a painful experience, both a good joke and a horror. Yet it provides a useful commentary on the different economies of time, attention and money that prevail in contemporary art and experimental cinema. What the constellation around 1970 can teach us today is that the normative confrontation between “cinema” and the “museum” does not do justice to the complexities and contradictions both institutions are entangled in. In 1969, in the “Open Hearings” of the Public Hearings Committee of the Art Workers’ Coalition, Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow and Ken Jacobs expressed their dissatisfaction with the MoMA and demanded: “The Museum at large must recognize both the separateness of film with respect to the other fine arts and its absolute parity with them.” (Frampton et al. 1969, 1) 45 years later, their demand is still valid.

¹⁷ For a critique of the exhibition ‘Celluloid. Cameraless Film’ in Frankfurt see Pantenburg 2010.

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