

The People's Cinema: Desire, Time-Machines and the Heightened Moment

Text by Séamus Kealy

Introduction

This summer, the Salzburger Kunstverein presents *The People's Cinema*, an experimental project conjoining art and cinema. Including an exhibition, three cinema pavilions, a lecture series, and side events, and involving the creative input of over sixty participants, *The People's Cinema* aims to build a conceptual framework out from the myriad nature of the cinematic universe. It is thus framed by three reflective, over-arching themes (*Road to Damascus*, *Eternal Return*, *The Object*), in which the artwork of fifteen contemporary artists and coinciding cinema pavilions (each with selected scenes from the universe of cinema) are immersed. Fifty-one participants were also invited to each choose a scene from the history of cinema and moving pictures, which for them, would fit into one of these three above themes.

Part I: By which means this Exhibition acquired the Style, Title and Manner of The People's Cinema

*Heidegger defines art as "the setting-itself-to-work of truth", an original and genuine kind of self-disclosure of being ... Art is concerned with what is coming, what is only now announced but will perhaps come about in the future.*¹ Boris Groys.

The conceptual background to *The People's Cinema* is a romantic, curatorial notion of enabling a collective phantasmagoria of desire that emerges from the overall apparatus of moving pictures to take some residual form. From its inception to its many permutations throughout the last hundred years, to its arrival as a quotidian element in western life, to more personal forms of video or avant-garde film as well as video art, to radical, political film-making, to the digital revolution ... an endless tableau of images and associations is available for artists to work with. We call this *The People's Cinema*. This project engages artists who not only work with this vast material but who also produce artwork that acts out the dreamwork of moving pictures, whether cinema, online images, television, advertising, or home or online video. Likewise, where cinema and its cousins² normally mimic objects and the world (although they can often undermine reality), there may be a space where one can imagine objects, sensations or spin-off realities arising out of film; as a spiral between imagination, memory, desire and cinematic apparatus. The cinema space and the cave of associations that it bears also presents a plethora of wandering ghosts and the production of desire that creates new fantasies. One can imagine an object represented in a projection then emerging from the screen.³ The object contains a dream. When one enters into this object, into its pink, ripe, dark interior, with pulsating, thin, fleshy walls surrounding one's body, one finds there another screen presenting familiar and non-familiar images.

What spurs this project is the desire to unveil a minuscule slice of the unnameable, immense and impossible universe of every moment captured by cinematic, video or digital devices.

There was a moment, several years ago, when walking along an Irish beach,⁴ I imagined that one might make a machine that could accurately reproduce the past. This machine would go beyond methodologies of chronicling as found in the sciences of history or indeed beyond the index of recorded documentation (photography, sound recording or video). This machine would examine molecules in detail, as an archaeologist examines artefacts, in order to precisely represent where they came from. That is, through a function of advanced physics, this machine would fulfill the complex and scientific task of forming a moving image, like a projection, based on what actually happened. By reading each molecule closely, the machine would string together all the collisions each molecule had, as each had been historically disturbed, nudged or graced by the tremours of reality's movement. Thus what happened, let's say, a thousand years ago on that empty beach, would be accurately re-produced as a moving image, playing almost like a live feed, but indeed playing a distant past. The machine would project a representation of that past reality (from any number of perspectives, with sensations also transmitted and discernible) so that we could experience it faithfully as it actually was. We would see a horse careening across the sand, gliding past mullosks that are now long pulverized into dust now scattered away. Hoofprints appear fresh to our eyes, but are actually long-gone imprints in time. This machine would re-create lost moments so that we could experience them as faithfully as they had appeared. A cascade of sensations, happenings, joys and tragedies would be immediately available to us.

This sense of having any moment in time available to view would be overwhelming, even obscene. The hidden nature of the past would be lost, and its intangibility would be corrupted. We could imagine political, judicial and military interventions, manipulating the technology. Arriving into our world as a seer from a Greek tragedy, imaginably bringing immense chaos, the machine might better be vanquished.⁵

The People's Cinema treads a similar, reflective postulation of seeing, albeit modestly. The over-availability of images, and hyper-production and reproduction of them within the universe of moving pictures is a side theme to this exhibition. As this time-machine could dangerously re-awaken what has passed from a great, immeasurable, cosmological archive, artists also refer to and transmit reflections that create dangerous visions that cast our world into doubt.

The time-machine also by chance carries within it the three themes that frame this exhibition. Firstly, with the *Road to Damascus*, a powerful moment is unveiled that appears to have great meaning (Incidentally, in the original reference, a horse is also involved.) Secondly, we may sense here the idea of *Eternal Return*, where time is repeated endlessly, and what has passed comes to be again and again. And thirdly, the theme of *The Object* also appears here, where something that we see projected has the sense of being so tangible that it might as well be real, as a physical object manifested from nothing but vision.

Part II: Whereby a brief Account of the Artwork found within The People's Cinema emerges, organised by its three unifying Themes

When initially conceiving this project, there was a struggle to define why the title *The People's Cinema* was precisely the correct title. It might sound generic or too open or even akin to a socialist cinema of times past,⁶ or appear to be self-consciously embodying idealist democracy, that is, being a "something for everyone." It was not that these sentiments needed to be excluded from the meaning of the project. Rather, it was that they should not dominate this meaning. Therefore the next stage of conceptualising the project involved devising these aforementioned thematic categories, in which to frame the invitations to participants, again "Road to Damascus," "Eternal Return," and "The Object." Each could be immediately ascribed to an experiential affect of *The People's Cinema*. That is, each relates to experiencing a powerful moment in a film and the impact this moment has on one's psyche.

At the root of this entire project's process, there was a desire to "get at the stuff," at the kernel of what inspires artists to use or make use of cinema and its cousins, in other words, *The People's Cinema*. Moreover, in order to prevent this sentiment of *The People's Cinema*, as an exhibition, from floating into an unanquored pluralism that spins into unproductive non-meaning, we might witness an "order" that is definable within these categories, albeit the artworks are not to be constricted by the themes either.

There are to be no defined answers to these questions above. We leave that to the experience of the visitor.

Three cinema pavilions house three separate cinema programs. The first is an innocuous "domestic viewing station," something quite everyday in many Westerners' homes. The second pavilion is constructed in the shape of a Buckminster Fuller-style geodesic dome, a utopian throw-back from the 1950s.⁷ The third is presented outside the Künstlerhaus and is designed by German artist Erika Hock.

Each pavilion houses a montage of films that were selected by international artists, film-makers, writers and curators. Participants were invited to submit a scene from *moving pictures* (film, video, video art, or even home film/video) to be brought together to make collaged films for each of the three pavilions. All selected scenes were carefully montaged together to create three separate films (one for each theme), presented in the three cinematic pavilions. A loose narrative structure was devised to suture them together.

These three themes may also elucidate the inclusion of the artworks in the exhibition. It is critical to consider that these artworks are not bound by these thematic formulations, but rather, they are presented together in conversation through them.

Road to Damascus

*The morning world spread out before my eyes appeared as beautiful to me as if I saw it for the first time. Everything I saw made upon me a delightful impression of friendliness, of goodness, and of youth. I quickly forgot that up in my room I had only just a moment before been brooding gloomily over a blank sheet of paper.*⁸ Robert Walser. *The Walk*.

This sentiment of the “Road to Damascus” may be a personal, distinct before and after (culturally, personally, aesthetically) that emerges in a precise, heightened moment. The title is clearly taken from the moment when the Roman Centurion Saul converts into the future apostle Paul. When on his way to persecute Christians along this road, a flash of light disrupts the journey, and, falling from his horse, Saul is cast into a spell that ensures his conversion.⁹ With the selections for Pavilion I, therefore, the scene may have some personal “consequences” that not necessarily carry meaning but are perhaps life enhancing. Actually this moment must not clearly be a religious one. It may be agnostic or even ordinary in sentiment, as the above reference to Walser suggests. For where is the greatest of revelations found but in the most ordinary of moments? Therefore the use of a “domestic viewing station” as the first pavilion might well complement a modern rendering of this experience.

We may posit that three of the artworks in the exhibition roughly embrace or complement this theme. *The Train* by Olga Chernysheva is a seven minute film of the artist making her way along the aisles of moving train in Russia. Seemingly caught between a cinematic experience and everyday life, we experience here not only a heightened moment, but literally, with the gentleman reading out to the passengers, a poetry of the moment. Meanwhile the twenty-three minute film *The Tiger’s Mind* by Beatrice Gibson appears as an unclear drama of non-narrative counterpoints, an “abstract crime thriller.”¹⁰ The film consciously combines diagetic and non-diagetic sound with visions between the ordinary and extraordinary, seemingly built around an episodic encounter with madness, derived ultimately from a musical score in collaboration with six artists. Likewise *Washing Brain and Corn* by Sung Hwan Kim arises from the intense moment of two women washing a corpse, as found in *Leichen-Wäsche* by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The artist uses this image as the foundation for the short film, which weaves into several other associative as well as collaborative territories.

Eternal Return

*If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.*¹¹
Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

While Kundera’s account is bleak, and Nietzsche’s original idea of eternal return is a profound, inescapable existential burden, this term may actually be open to more light-hearted sentiments as well, in the form of nostalgia or a comic recurrence. What is critical is the idea of repetition, not necessarily represented, but suggested or implied. There is an unseen force that returns one over and over again to the same situation or place. In some cases, this is a recurring nightmare, one you can’t

turn off. Playful cinematic associations might be, in this case, *Play it again, Sam* from *Casablanca* (a mis-remembered scene), or the deceased wife reappearing repeatedly in Tarkovsky's film *Solaris*.

The video installation in the Red Room of the Salzburger Kunstverein, entitled *Whistle Stop*, is a looped animation by Martin Arnold. His work has often had the reference of eternal return, whereby his manipulation of existing film and animation material often works within an ongoing loop, that is shifting terrifyingly from one tiny moment to the next, and back again, as a perverse and deliberate fragmentation and autopsy of his appropriated material. Likewise an appropriation of film material is also employed by Peter Tscherkassky in his work *The Exquisite Corpus*. Like a dissection of the material and re-spooling of it into inchoate scenes, with the presentation of the film material itself cut out and visible in a light box alongside, we sense the inevitable function of the film material to only be able to repeat itself in a series of bodily fragmentations, albeit this repetition may not only be jarring but obscure.

Less frightening is the elegant loop by Alexandre Estrela, called *Le Moiré*. This video projection presents a recurring moment, where an attempt to capture the wind and then to release it, is projected, repeating endlessly a visual imprisonment of the wind.

A Vicious Untertow by Jesper Just frames itself around a repeated melody as it is shared between apparent strangers. As the scenario unfolds, the encounter resembles memory and then a dream more and more, until a sense of *déjà vu* overwhelms the situation. The central protagonist appears pulled along by some unseen force, between desire and the sense that she has been here before and will also return (which she does).

A work that fits somewhat in between the theme of *Eternal Return* and the following theme of *The Object* is the work *Accent Grave on Ananas*, a 16 mm colour film on loop by Tamara Henderson. This work is a looped examination of objectness, as pineapples and other objects become vivid protagonists in a short melodic episode. The presence of the projector heightens the physicality of the self-reflective film loop.

The Object

*A miracle seemed to have taken place, a miracle of transubstantiation—in contravention to the very laws of physics, laws that make swings stop swinging and fridge doors catch and large, unsuspected objects fall out of the sky. This miracle, this triumph over matter, seemed to have occurred, then turned out not to have been done at all—to have failed utterly, spectacularly, its watery debris crashing down to earth, turning the scene of a triumphant launch into the scene of a disaster, a catastrophe. Yes, it was very sad.*¹²

Tom McCarthy. *Remainder*.

This reference to *Remainder* raises the notion of emotional connections and meaning-making that may be projected onto objects. When we think of this theme, immediately frames of reference from psychology and philosophy emerge, whether Sigmund Freud's ruminations on fetishism, "thingness,"

and desire, Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*, or indeed Graham Harman's *Speculative Realism*, which itself centrally relies on the idea of objecthood. In Pavilion III, the selected scenes each reference this theme of thingness or objectness, somehow. The fantasy of something emerging from a dream or vision into reality is central here, but not all encompassing. The choice of a film scene from the late Iranian master, Abbas Kiarostami (selected by Jem Cohen), is personally for me one of the most powerful choices in all the pavilions. We can also experience profound forms of symbolism or the transfer of spirits through the presence of objects with this theme.¹³

The twelve minute video *MindPlace ThoughtStream* by American artist Shana Moulton plays out this interplay between fantasy, image and object production most directly and with kitschy humour. Meanwhile the German artist Manuel Graf places figurative objects on the screen of his video, literalizing this object—image relationship even further. He has titled this new work after the exhibition itself, since it was developed after his invitation to participate. Here the “people’s cinema” is the political spectacle on TV talk shows. The work references German language shows such as *Anne Will* or *Phoenix Runde* where hot political topics are discussed sensibly between the public and refined “experts,” however abstracted they actually may be from the context in question. The objects themselves seem to radiate from the discussion or, rather, from the spectacle itself, serving simultaneously as projected desire, orientalised fetish and the missing presence of, for example, the very Syrians who are presumably the topic of discussion.

Two other works spell out the play of the object from the world of representation. Laure Prouvost's sculpture *Exhaust Branch*, emerging from a wall (and sometimes spouting smoke) is itself an impossible hybrid that has appeared to emerge from a dream or vision. Finally, *User Group Disco* by Elizabeth Price is a dark hallucination presenting the value and meaning of fetishized objects almost in a pornographic style of presentation.

Ghosts and Democracy

As photography depicts time past, and thus presents an unretrievable past before one's eyes,¹⁴ might we not see cinema and its cousins also presenting wandering ghosts to our eyes? The scenes in the pavilions are themselves often haunted with this sentiment. And the film *Dying Living Woman*, by Camille Henrot enacts this sentiment. The artist literally scratches on old film to make haunted forms appear both playfully and menacingly within the filmed narrative. This is also a reference to avant-garde film-making, including the UK video art movement of “scratch video,” from the 1980s, which also used found footage and made deliberately violent juxtapositions.

Two final works are quite central to the exhibition. Erika Hock's pavilion, which rests outside the Künstlerhaus, not only houses the scenes of *The Object*, but itself may be used democratically. Initially designed to house an outdoor film program in Germany, this design is here employed also a gesture to a renewed collective experience of cinema in the wake of the digital revolution, which has often ironically kept audiences indoors. Likewise while the “domestic viewing station” references this “home-cinema,” the geodesic dome speaks to previous, unrealized possibilities, notions of utopia through media and modernization, and a renewal of possible suturing's of politics and art for the future.

Likewise the artist residency and summer workshop by Anna Witt involves participants selecting available video material online in order to appropriate and then re-enact scenes of violence. This project has as its roots an analysis of how forms of emotion and ideas of violence may lead to different political identities, and simultaneously explores notions of empathy.

Machinery of Desire

It is not uncommon for exhibitions to refer to previous exhibitions, or to grand themes, to the ideas of philosophers, or to movements in art. This exhibition is nowhere near the first exhibition to reflect upon the influence of cinema and moving pictures on art. However, this project's ambitions are to circumnavigate a few notions that themselves have arisen from the universe of cinema and its influence on art.

We might also ruminate on the experience of the audience. If we imagine a distant future where the cinema is excavated by archaeologists, what will they make of our narratives and pleasures, our self-reflection and dreaming, our visions and nightmares? Who will the audience of today be to them then? For this experience of cinema, this moment of self-consciousness (or the opposite), this identity-construction through an ongoing experience of the cinematic apparatus, this is a critical, underlying concern to this project. What makes us? What forms our identity beneath it all? May we find means to analyse what these conditions, fields and modes of thought-building are? What misconceptions through our desires and dreams mislead us? This line of questioning also makes reference to the collective memory of cinema. Each has one's own imagining or memory, and this also has profound consequences for considering matters such as identity and knowledge-production. This ultimate question of identity for any and all of us is thus very much also present as a political question. The People's Cinema posits thus a language and visual vocabulary for this kind of experiential and desiring relationship between the cinema and production of self, as well as for art production today.

On the Selections of Film Scenes for the Pavilions

Text by Vaari Claffey

The clips arranged together in each pavilion have been ordered following a loose narrative structure. Beginning with establishing a sense of 'normal life' (within the logic of the given theme), they build into a struggle to get to something—trying and failing—then hitting a moment of despair ('the worst of the worst'), through to the moment of a turnaround, and to return to a calm, reordered world. Throughout all this, the protagonist shifts, so that while each of the scenes selected by the artists holds its own powerful cinematic space, other narratives unfold, and still more are suggested, until a shifting tapestry of stories is made, unmade and remade as the exhibition unfolds.

The selections have been made under three headings, shown in three pavilions. Pavilion I is titled the *Road to Damascus*, and deals with those moments in cinema identified as having a 'before and after,' with the scene acting like a rainbow; a 'non-object' that divides the sky and signifies that the rainstorm is over and the day is changing. This may be a defining moment in one's own life or in an experience of cinema or of culture more widely. In *Mary Poppins* (selected by Jennifer Higgie), two bored and wayward children, Jane and Michael, led by their new Nanny, jump into a chalk pavement drawing made by chimney sweep Bert into a fantastical world of dancing penguins and magic hatstands. Mary Poppins goes on to 'enlighten' many of those around them including their conservative and remote father, Mr Banks. In Falke Pisano's selection *War Neurosis* a soldier suffering from PTSD is filmed as he walks with a crippling gait and a 'nose-wiping' tic. After two days of treatment he has dramatically improved and after a month we see him feeding chickens at a farm, cured of his crippling psychosomatic ailments. Many of the selections represent this curative effect, whether it be the saving of a culture or the final completion of a seemingly Sisyphean task (such as Igor Grubic's selection from *Nostalgia*), but they may also present a moment of loss and a subsequently changed world.

Pavilion II relates to *The Eternal Return*, a set of images that we refer to again and again, whether we play them over in our heads or physically rewatch them. This could also be an image or phenomenon that recurs within the structure of the film, such as the reappearance of Kelvin's wife Rhea in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

The late Irish painter William McKeown used to watch two films over and over in his studio—Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, as part of a work practice that primarily featured paintings of segments of the sky. In these kinds of repeated viewings, the question arises: are we looking *for* something or *at* something? This brings to mind a jail scene in Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law*. Roberto Benigni's character Bob draws a picture of a window on the cell wall. He asks Tom Waits and John Lurie's characters if it is correct to say you look *at* the window or you look *out* the window. The character played by musician and painter John Lurie replies 'In this case Bob, I'm afraid you've got to say, I look *at* the window.' In the case of these selections I think we've got to say that we are looking both *at* and *for* something, hence the repeated viewings. What we are looking *for* is the recognisable—the sketch that we have made of the scene in order to store it in our mind—what we are looking *at* is what is in excess of that.

Pavilion III involves objects as they appear in the movies. These scenes present an idea of 'thingness'—how objects appear in cinema and the roles they play—whether quite physical in presence or not. The 'McGuffin'¹⁵ could be an example or the infamous "smoking gun" could be another. The Bible, in Margaret Salmon's selection *The Salesman*, is desirable not for the text it contains, to which the customer already has access, but as a physical manifestation of the importance of this text in the life of the owner. In Libby Scarlett's selection *Things inside Things*, two objects coincidentally linked begin to display a behavior that can only occur in relation to each other, describing the serendipity of chance encounters, and in Valerie Jouve's selection *Au Bord de la Mer Bleu*, a piece of fruit is shared and consumed as the rhythm of a relationship develops.

¹ Boris Groys. *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*. Verson. London: 2012, p 57.

² By cousins of cinema, I mean any kind of moving image. This began with film, which was later adapted for the cinema, and later evolved into television, then into video and digital video. All the images available to us (imagined as an impossible library of visual information) is what we call *The People's Cinema*.

³ This happens, for example, in Shana Moulton's work in the exhibition.

⁴ This was Culleenamore Beach, County Sligo.

⁵ Indeed, the machine could function in reverse too, in principle, thus forecasting accurately what was to come on a molecular level, which translates into a projection of actualities in the future.

⁶ Incidentally, there is a "People's Cinema" of Russian origin, with this very political leaning.

⁷ Although he is normally credited with the invention of the geodesic dome, and had the patent granted to him, Fuller was not the first to use this format. The dome was first unveiled as "The Wonder of Jena" in 1926, in Jena, Germany.

⁸ Robert Walser. *The Walk (Der Spaziergang)*. New Directions Pearl. New York: 1957 / 2012, p. 13.

⁹ The reference to Syria is not one that we can take so lightly at this time. It is incumbent upon us to not neglect what is happening there now. A "Road to Damascus" moment clearly has many implications for us as global citizens given the war in Syria and the refugee situation today. By this I mean that we must also awaken as a society to a more Christian sentiment towards the victims of war.

¹⁰ Press release of The Show Room: Beatrice Gibson, 2012.

¹¹ Milan Kundera. From *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Faber & Faber. New York: 1984; p. 4.

¹² Tom McCarthy. *Remainder*. Alma Books. Surrey: 2005, p 155-156.

¹³ The world mourns now for Kiarostami, who left us on July 4, 2016.

¹⁴ As opposed to the time-machine. See my exhibition and publication *Punctum* (Salzburger Kunstverein, 2014), which in a similar spirit invited participants to ruminate on the ontology of photography by selecting photographs that, for them, had an element of Roland Barthes's notion *punctum* within them.

¹⁵ The McGuffin is an object or device in a film or a book which serves merely as a trigger for the plot. "The McGuffin in this intriguing comedy is an unpublished novel by a young writer killed in the war."