Photography, Cinema and The Drama of Representation

A research project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art - MR208

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PHOTOGRAPHY, CINEMA AND THE DRAMA OF REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

In the last twenty years, fine art photography has undergone a shift from photography that documents ‘reality’ to photography that is actively engaged in the construction of fictions or alternate realities. That is, from the ‘representation of drama’ to the ‘drama of representation’. Consequently the range of stories that photography can tell has also expanded. My work employs constructed photography to investigate the extent to which the conventions of narrative cinema can be appropriated and applied to the emerging genre of photo-cinema. In particular, my investigation has focused on performances, projections, projected meanings and projection technologies in the portrayal of mid-20’s relationships and their conflicts of love and longing. My research contributes to our collective knowledge and understanding of, and engagement with, the genre, history, themes, processes and production of photo-cinema works of art.

The project’s principle research question is:

• In what ways can cinematic conventions, production methods and strategies be appropriated and applied to the creation of multi-linear narrative based photographic works of art that embrace, influence and contribute to the ‘drama of representation’ in the emerging genre of photo-cinema?

Research Approach

The origin of my research is founded in the significance of visual narratives in our lives, in particular stories from my world of mid-20’s relationships and their conflicts of love and longing.

The medium I work with is still-photography and the area I work in is the emerging genre of photo-cinema, which mixes cinematic and photographic processes in predominately narrative works (Campany 2013, Trifonova 2013). For example, the large-scale photographs of US artist Gregory Crewdson that derive from elaborate cinematic production methods (Berg 2005), or Barbara Probst who employs multiple cameras to extend narrative coverage, or Jeff Wall who elaborately constructs and performs fictions for the camera, which he refers to as ‘cinematography’ (Wall 2007).

Fine art photography has undergone a shift in the last twenty years from predominately documentary photography to constructed photography, which has greatly expanded the stories that photography can tell (Campany 2007, Campbell 2013). No longer is contemporary fine art photography documenting ‘reality’ but is now actively engaged in the construction of fictions and alternate realities. My methodology will involve constructed images that highlight the ‘drama of representation’ in my stories. That is, instead of photographically documenting my friends and their circumstances, I will be constructing dramatic fictions for the camera that combine elements of cinema and photography to emotionally represent the stories in our lives.

A series of case studies will also chart the history of the photo-cinema influence on constructed photographic moments. Studio based experiments will investigate the appropriation and application of cinematic conventions (Arijon 1976) such as psychological spaces, constructed realities, fictional encounters, aspect and scale, temporal shifts and screen motion in narrative photography. The ‘art gallery’ will also be a significant research site incorporating the display, testing and evaluation of the works-in-progress.

The research methodology encompasses making, performing, analysing, reviewing, reflecting, questioning and critiquing the construction, installation and exhibition of new multi-linear narrative photographic works in the photo-cinema genre, to determine the scope and suitability of this genre to the ‘drama of representation’.

The research findings will come out of the creation of new works of art, the keeping of detailed records and frequently reflecting on the process through looking, listening, examining and discussing what I’ve done. This exploratory and reflective methodology and its identification of the themes that have informed my practice will be assembled into a body of work that can be externally reviewed and analysed for its achievement.

The final outcome will be an exhibition of resolved photographic art works that engage with, and contribute to, the emerging genre of photo-cinema.
My research is inspired by, and is positioned within, a number of theoretical and artistic communities of practice whose work defines, examines and contributes to the intersection of photography and cinema. This includes photographers whose work is influenced by cinema or has been described in some sense as cinematic such as Jeff Wall (Wall & Glaassi 2007), Gregory Crewdson (Crewdson & Banks 2008), Barbara Probst (Probst et al 2014), Uta Barth (Barth et al 2010), Cindy Sherman (Galassi & Sherman 2003) and Mitra Tabrizian (Tabrizian et al 2008, 2012).

It also includes filmmakers whose work is distinguished by its heightened photographic qualities such as Wong Kar-Wai (Wong 1994, 1995, 2000, 2004), Michelangelo Antonioni (Antonioni 1960, 1964, 1966), Phillipe Garrel (Garrel 2005, 2008), Douglas Sirk (Sirk 1955, 1956) and Todd Haynes (Haynes 2002). In addition it includes filmmakers who are also photographers such as Wim Wenders (Wenders 1987, 2008) and David Lynch (Lynch 1997, 2001).

Critical writers and theorists, whose work examines questions at the intersection of cinema and photography such as David Campany (Campany 2003, 2007, 2008), Neil Campbell, Alfredo Cramerotti (Campbell & Cramerotti 2013), David Green, Johanna Lowry (Green & Lowry 2006, 2009) and Garrett Stewart (Stewart 2007) will also be considered. Narrative based photographic works of art that embrace, influence and contribute to the ‘drama of representation’ in the emerging genre of photo-cinema.

As both cinema and photography fragment and disperse across visual culture through the proliferation of small screens, social media and connectivity, photography is both “socially eclipsed and socially rooted at the same time”. (Campany 2013, p. 34) The digital archive has also made available the histories of photography and cinema like never before.

Against this background, the works of leading practitioners in the photo-cinema genre, such as Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson are essentially documentary photographers of constructed moments. Though they employ the production technology and capacity of the cinema, in Crewdson’s case, a film crew of over 100 technicians worked on his Beneath the Roses series (Crewdson 2008), the images do not look at all cinematic, but more closely resemble the documentary look and feel of the 8x10 camera that captured them. They therefore significantly under-represent the potential of photo-cinema works of art.

Through my critical and experimental inquiry into the photographic application of cinematic conventions, my research will contribute to our collective knowledge and understanding of, and engagement with the history, themes, processes and production of photo-cinema works of art, and the many ways they tell the stories of our lives.
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Wong, K. (dir.), *Chungking Express* 1994, motion picture, Jet Tone Productions, Hong Kong.

Wong, K. (dir.), *Fallen Angels* 1995, motion picture, Jet Tone Productions, Hong Kong.

Wong, K. (dir.), *In the Mood for Love* 2000, motion picture, Jet Tone Productions, Hong Kong.

Wong, K. (dir.), 2004, motion picture, Jet Tone Films, Hong Kong.

My first studio investigation was inspired by Lori Pauli's book, Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre from the National Gallery of Canada. It examines theatricality, cinema and social context in contemporary photography, and helped me to select a range of cinematic moments and film stills that imply or stage fictitious images in a narrative context.

I then set about recreating these images in the studio, only now within the context of my own stories, such as my fascination with 20's something love affairs. My overall aim was to begin to determine what cinematic qualities could also be successfully represented in a still photographic print.

The results of this investigation were publicly exhibited in the School of Art Gallery in July of 2014. The detailed feedback I received included a feature review in The Age Arts section by Professor Robert Nelson, and long discussions with senior curators including Shaune Lakin from the NGA, Susan Van Wyk from the NGV, and Stephen Zagala from the MGA. Professor Helen Ennis, Director of the Centre for Art History and Art Theory at the ANU School of Art, along with several prominent Australian art collectors also provided really helpful feedback.

All of this support indicated that I was on the right track. That is, everyone was engaged with my images, and reading the sequence as a complex cinematic narrative.

As well as acknowledging the powerful presence and emotional depth of my pictures, the feedback also highlighted the importance of cinematic qualities such as scale, projection and motion which later on became separate investigations.

My conclusion was that when close-ups of faces, embraces, and exchanges are juxtaposed against rear-projected locations, we tend to read the projections more as psychological spaces rather than actual places. That is, the pictures become spaces inhabited more emotionally and metaphorically, than literally and physically. This juxtaposition is what I have defined as Psychological Spaces in photo-cinema narratives.

I had already been wary of the limitations of projection from texts like Dominique Paini’s 2004 essay Should We Put an End to Projection. (October Volume 110) My research had also revealed the practical limitations of projecting backgrounds onto a studio wall. So I decided for my second studio investigation to focus on the broader concept of projection itself, including projected meanings and performances.

This is when I realised I needed to expand the spatial relations in my images in order to expand their narrative potential. To do this, I needed to include full figure projections across many different environments. But to do this, I also needed a very large rear projection screen. This realisation moved my research sideways for a while because fully functional rear projection screens are quite hard to design and build.

A lot of research went into the history of rear projection technologies and applications, the available materials and construction methods, and the shortcomings of commercial screens, such as not being able to include full figure projections. After a lot of experimenting I was finally able to create a portable 5m x 3m rear projection screen for under $1000 that fitted in the boot of my car and also addressed my artistic needs.

Designing and building the screen triggered more research into the physics of projection lenses and projection geometries. This also resulted in the development of my ‘Dual Projection’ methodology which provides unlimited control over every aspect of the image construction, projection and realisation process. It also inspired the discovery of other photo-cinema qualities such as Temporal Shifts and Projected Realities that I went on to investigate in more detail.

A series of images were created where the projection was not just a background to the narrative, but allowed its own narrative potential to be investigated. My first experiments embedded a couple within a series of projected environments. But creating a believable illusion was hard to achieve in a way that it did not dominate the picture’s appearance and interpretation.

After all, this was not an investigation of thebelievability of rear projection, or for that matter any CGI, but of the narrative potential of still images made in this way. However, despite rear projection being able to transport us around the world, I discovered it was its fiction and fabrication that were the most visually and narratively engaging effects. I have come to define this as Fictional Realities.

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**Psychological Spaces**

**Fictional Realities**
Projected Encounters

While I had been investigating fictional realities, I had also created a number of images where the couple were overly aware of the projected background, instead of being ‘embedded’ within it. I had initially discarded these images as failures, but I kept coming back to them.

I had also been reading about Tracey Moffat’s 2011 Up in the Sky exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW, and her 2012 exhibition of ‘staged cinema’ at MOMA in New York. These included her theatrical staging and references to film, art and photographic history.

This helped me realise that the less ‘real’ and convincing the projection appeared, that is, the less it resembled an actual location, the more the couple appeared to interact with it in interesting and evocative ways.

That is, when characters inhabit imaginative spaces, they tend to project ‘something else’ of themselves into the picture. I think this is similar to how our stories are also carried and revealed through snapshots, postcards and photo albums.

This encounter between the couple and their imaginary projections encompasses both the meaning they project onto the screen, along with the meaning we project onto them. This is why I have called this effect Projected Encounters.

Temporal Shift

My fourth investigation once again evolved out of something else. I had been working with the new projection screen and testing hundreds of backgrounds, along with new lenses and costumes, models and multiple lighting arrangements. I was over run with production problems and had dozens of different test shoots pinned to the studio wall. I had left them pinned to the wall in the hope that something would reveal itself, but so far it hadn’t and I feared it had been a complete waste of time.

What initially drew these disparate images together, and me to them, were their formal combinations of colour and mood. But eventually I came to the conclusion that it was their differences, not their similarities that were the most compelling.

David Campany helped me understand this when I read his 2009 catalogue essay on the work of Jason De, particularly when he said, “But what marks our present moment is a tension between parts and wholes”. That is, through juxtaposition, images from separate shoots that I had never intended to hang together, became the narrative.

Unlike my earlier findings, such as Psychological Spaces where the narrative is located within the pictures, the relocation or recombination of pictures can equally conjure or trigger a narrative, and is why I have called this effect Temporal Shift.

That is, I had discovered through careful sequencing how to ensure the images don’t get in the way of the audience invading and populating them with their own stories. This also affirmed that I was becoming more interested in the narrative potential of an image sequence, rather than any particular story embedded in it. These findings also laid the foundation for my later discovery, that the more ambiguous and speculative the narrative, the greater the reception it was likely to receive.
My fifth investigation came out of having seen the Thomas Demand and Jeff Wall exhibitions at the NGV in 2013, and in particular a lecture at the NGV by Justin Clements where he described scale as a fundamental feature of both the cinema and most constructed photography. He also helped me realize the power of cinematic projection doesn't just come from its sound, dialogue, movement and other temporal qualities, but its 'larger-than-life' scale helps us to engage with its fictional narrative.

This finding triggered a series of experiments that included picture aspect ratios, because the physical scale of a work is not just the surface it covers, but also how that surface is configured.

For example, the psychologist Professor Rudolf Arnheim describes how vast panoramas allow us to gaze into other worlds by in part reminding us of the flatness of horizons and the perceived convergence of space. (Visual Thinking) Also the sheer scale of commercial cinema occupies physical space as a monumental architectural experience that photographs rarely obtain.

I therefore also needed to determine the scale where photographic images start to behave in a similar way. I up-scaled many test prints and discovered that it is not until the image is roughly double the width of our out-stretched grasp that it starts to behave like a cinematic projection.

Out of this investigation another consideration arose that took me by surprise. I had visited The Art Gallery of NSW to view some very large Thomas Struth photographs. These are not abstract images, but documentary photographs of interior spaces such as cathedrals and art galleries. But despite their impressive scale of just over two metres, I kept being distracted by their poor optical qualities, such as blurred sharpness and inexact renderings.

This is when I realized that in order for the narrative qualities of the cinema to be preserved in the still photographic image, the cinema's illusion of high optical resolution also needed to be preserved. That is, the projection of low resolution movie frames in the cinema creates the temporal illusion of much higher resolution. But this doesn't happen in a still photographic image where I found it just became a distraction.

A final series of experiments helped me determine the necessary camera techniques so that my large photographic prints had enough optical resolution to not interfere with their cinematic presence.

Cinema's temporal elements are so compelling and affecting that I always assumed there would be no equivalent elements in photo-cinema. Certainly Laura Mulvey thought the same in her 2009 essay "Rear Projection: Modernity in a Special Effect". Along with Mulvey I also assumed that only the non-temporal elements could be translated from the cinema into still images. The one exception might be subject movement from long exposure times.

My sixth investigation began with exposure time experiments to determine just the right amount of movement in my actors. This seemed quite straightforward, but quickly led me to another unexpected finding.

During my earlier image scale and aspect ratio experiments I had produced many images of different sizes and proportions. But as I was cleaning up the studio and discarding these test prints, I noticed a fascinating narrative effect occurred when different aspect ratios are juxtaposed against each other. This is not the same effect as sequencing different sized prints together. What startled me was what happens when prints with different aspect ratios, but the same height were sequenced together.

This effect isn't about movement within the frame, as happens with long exposure times, or the movement between frames as happens in the cinema. This is what happens when you change the ratio and the interval of prints in a sequence. In other words, a carefully considered sequence of variously proportioned still images animates the gallery wall in ways completely different to how temporality animates the static cinema screen. I have called this effect Screen Motion.

Because I had already determined the scale and aspect ratios that worked best at highlighting and extending a photo-cinema narrative, all I now had to do was determine their most effective combinations. For example, I discovered that including just one 1:2.35 image into a sequence of 1:1.85 images didn't just change the sequence, but introduced a profound temporal flow. This finding produces a narrative outcome that was not derived from the cinema at all, but arose from the interaction of individual still images.

This was my first discovery of a purely photo-cinema effect, though it does owe something to the history of cinema which is based on a sequence of rapidly projected still frames. However it is the irregular intervals in the sequence, not the movement between the images, that generates the temporal simulation of Screen Motion.
PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACES
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2012 – 2014. Photographic Technician, Print Imaging Practice Program for RMIT University City Campus
2013. Camera Assistant, Philip Brophy project: The Prostrate Christ
2011 - present. Webmaster for www.screeningthepast.com

Exhibitions:
2010. RMIT Fine Art 3rd Year Graduate exhibition FortyFive Downstairs, Flinders Lane, Melbourne. 7 – 20 December, 2010.
2010. Kodak Salon 2010, Centre for Contemporary Photography
2009. Kodak Salon, Centre for Contemporary Photography
2006. TOP ARTS VCE, 2006. The Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria
APPENDIX A: REAR PROJECTION TECHNOLOGIES
APPENDIX B: REAR PROJECTION METHODOLOGY
APPENDIX B: REAR PROJECTION METHODOLOGY
APPENDIX C: THE ART GALLERY AS A RESEARCH SITE
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
INSTALLATION STILL: STILL CINEMA TEST EXHIBITION AT RMIT SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY, IMAGES 3, 4, 5 AND 6, 2014
INSTALLATION STILL: STILL CINEMA TEST EXHIBITION AT RMIT SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY, IMAGE 4, 2014
PRODUCTION STILL: PRINTING AND MOUNTING OF FINAL WORKS FOR STILL CINEMA TEST EXHIBITION, 2014
PRODUCTION STILL: PRINTING AND MOUNTING OF FINAL WORKS FOR STILL CINEMA TEST EXHIBITION, 2014

APPENDIX D:
CRITICAL FEEDBACK
APPENDIX D: CRITICAL FEEDBACK
Still images evoke a moving past

Holding his jacket over his shoulder, a young man frowns slightly, narrowing his eyes as if evaluating his circumstances. He's in a city, making his way across a wide space, with an implication that he's leaving some form of aspiration and moving resentfully into the void.

This image is a large photograph by Andrey Walking at the RMIT School of Art Gallery. Like the other seven photographs in this solo exhibition called Still cinema, the work is moody, with an air of brooding, evoking summer evenings with a dramatic tipping point, where an individual becomes aware of frustration.

Photographically, everything is set up to be visually rich and positive. The actor has huge presence, partly due to his confident and convincing performance, but also thanks to the pin-sharp detail at such enormous scale, plus lighting that picks up details in different colours to the left and right. The checked shirt acquires emphatic volume, as the planes in each direction register in the eye as an independent accent.

And as in a film, you believe that it's happening, that the elbow would poke you in the chest and that you share the preoccupations of the misanthropic protagonist. To leave without, the title for the work is: You never need me when I'm around. The young man is at the point of handling this disappointment.

The actor is Walking himself, and with this image, he steps into a tradition of theatrical photography known through Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills. The significant element isn't self-portraiture but narrative. It's upon the still an imaginary story, with some sequence before the depicted moment and a consequence that is about to occur.

Walking's subject matter is the filmic love affair, the melodrama, in which he chooses faithful moments when deep chords come in on the soundtrack. Sometimes he approaches faces, if tilting at the subject emotional transport of soap operas. An example is It doesn't matter, wherever you want to take me, where a pouting woman succumbs to a man who grips her towards a kiss.

In film, we respond to break-ups, intrigue, jealousy and betrayal; and Walking, in directorial mode, seeks sticky moments of pathos. An example is The only remaining question is this where a defeated man says to someone to elicit reciprocal sincerity.

Photography rarely penetrates so far in playing the heartstrings of narrative. Walking achieves the right pitch and we go away smiling.

The equal and opposite tendency in photographic history is to seek out sincerity, to capture the real and avoid theatre even in a portrait where the sitter would relish some flattery.

One of the masters of this genre is Roderick McNicol, whose excellent survey exhibition in three parts, Memento mori, is at Monash Gallery of Art. Nothing of cinema enters McNicol's studio, but also no narrative, unless the pictures are interpreted as a kind of story that records the artist's acquaintances.

McNicol is the first to draw attention to the preclusion of the photographic portrait. In his own words, his snapshots display a "formal, self-conscious gaze", a gaze and "a talisman of the "me" in the portrait is just the facility of looking back. It's logical that this absolute focus should draw McNicol to a time-series:

Above: It doesn't matter, wherever you want to take me, by Andrey Walking.
Incredibly enough, even today the arguments rage and the abuse flies in all the forums of public fandom discussion: when special effects look too artificial in a film, it’s bad, a mistake, too obvious, too distracting. It throws you, as a viewer, out of the story and away from the characters: quelle horreur!

For some odd reason, it is at the exact point when cinematic technique and expressivity had reached their historic summit – that moment in the early 1960s when Alfred Hitchcock made, in rapid succession, The Birds (1963) and Marnie (1964) – that this line of carping attack, long simmering in the annals of film journalism, really boiled over, still spilling everywhere today.

Hitchcock used artifice on every level, of course, just as F.W. Murnau or Michael Powell had done before him – in the acting styles, the overall colour scheme and production design, and the expressionistic swirls of Bernard Herrmann’s music scores – but it was his particularly plastic attention to backgrounds that so troubled the reigning Nerds of Film.

Projected backdrops (for example, a street as seen through a supposedly mobile car window, in reality a prop fixed in a set) or painted landscapes (the port, the factory, the street behind the characters at key moments in Marnie) – Hitchcock compounded his artifice and raised its aesthetic to a new and, for some of us, glorious level.

But the device disturbs many people, especially the self-appointed professionals of the profession (as Jean-Luc Godard drolly calls them). Why? Because of something that doesn’t look right, feel right: a slight border or matte effect around projected zones in the image; a faint but perceptible mismatch in levels of light, speed of motion or scale of size between foreground and background; some fluctuation of colour control in the image. Above all – and most subtly – the felt sense of some décalage, some out-of-phase relation between flesh-and-blood photographed in the first degree (actors in front of a camera), and something else removed to the realm of the already two-dimensional image (such as a projected backdrop).

There are some modern artists and filmmakers who have vastly heightened and exaggerated this out-of-phase effect – Mark Rappaport in his Exterior Night (1993), for example, having his noir-cliché characters shuffle around in front of obviously quoted/sampled streets and sets from old movie images. Such artists use this non-alignment effect for a rude distancing, to break the illusion of standard, representational ways.

Andrey Walkling works in a quite different manner. With the maximum of real, hard-won technical skill, and as the result of much painstaking experimentation, he gets right inside the code of pictorial representation that informs narrative cinema of many kinds, times and places – from Hollywood melodramas to cool, Hong Kong urban vignettes, via the moody configurations of an Antonioni or a Godard.

In his superbly produced images of photo-cinema we see the frozen poses, the ambiguous clinches, the mysterious glances and ephemeral conjunctions of a cinematic repertoire made abstract and therefore eternal.

All the perturbations of the codes here are small, infinitely calculated, but richly telling. Walkling deliberately comes very close to an entirely seamless effect uniting real foreground and projected background – so surely does he work with the most minute properties of light, colour, scale, movement and gesture.

But then doubt creeps into the image – via the fine, almost invisible traps Walkling sets for our eye. A niggling zone of flatness, a sudden excess of primary colour, a tiny mismatch in scale. The image begins – but only just begins – to come apart into its constituent zones and pieces; it trembles, in a peculiarly modern frozen moment of pictorial distress and unease.

And it is into these wandering islands of sense, this new archipelago of the image, that Walkling projects his apprehension of contemporary emotions and relationships between young people, more mysterious than ever in their unknowable, troubled chemistry.

Long ago, in the 1950s, the avant-garde artists known as the Lettrists declared that, henceforth, all art forms and media were to be grasped as passing through various, strictly sequenced phases. After their amplic phase – the time of expansion, development, refinement – came the discrepant phase. This is when things disintegrate, when they break into bits and pieces, when they lose their semblance of illusory unity. Only after that, the Lettrists claimed, can we begin to build something really new, from the ruins.

Andrey Walkling is the poet of a discrepant photo-cinema. But he does not merely observe and record as the images, the cities and the intimate relationships fly apart; he stitches the unstitched discrepancies into a new kind of narrative, glowing through the gaps and interstices; he inserts his artistry into the fantastically unfathomable space between background environment and foreground life – to the point where we may never be able to tell them apart, ever again.

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