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How we read exhibition spaces: new models of spectatorship in screen media art

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Miriam De Rosa

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Cristina Baldacci

Graduand

Elisa Etrari

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Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Abstract

In the last decades, screen media art has gained momentum both among artists as practice and among scholars for critical assessment. However, the role it plays within the museum context has not received much academic attention. The aim of this study is to bring together concurring theories that see in screen media art the grounds for new models of spectatorship. The pinpointed behavior is that of a self-conscious spectatorship, where the viewer is at the same lost and in control of time and space. This is allowed by the physical conformation of the gallery space, allowing the viewer to move around and away, and by the nature of the artworks, drawing the viewer to and into them. By combining how various scholars conceptualize this tension inherent to screen media art, a new model of spectatorship is then advanced. Through the use of two case studies, *When the body says Yes* (2022) by melanie bonajo and *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (2021-in progress) by Thao Nguyen Phan, the combination of these conjecture is tested, and its validity assessed.

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Introduction

You walk into a dim room, you see an empty spot, you decide to sit down and pay attention to the screen you are facing. You are not in your parents' basement, or in the independent cinema in your neighborhood, nor in an auditorium or a screening room of your university: you are in a museum, and the room you have just walked into is not that different from the one you stopped in to contemplate some paintings a few minutes before. Except of course, it is.

Screen media art has been a growing trend in the art field, even though given the relevance acquired in over 50 years from its inception, it would be fairer to say that it has become «one of the main modes of contemporary art»¹. With the complicity of technological advancements, manipulating and producing moving images has become more accessible and easier. Moreover, the domesticity with this medium has allowed for a widespread use for artists.

While technologies have progressed, also exhibition design and techniques have evolved². Several factors differentiate the art world from some decades ago: the interactivity of displays, the prominence of curatorship (to the extent that curators are nearly considered as artists), new techniques of immersion and participation, and the nature of exhibition spaces themselves. The black box has moved into the white cube, and this passage has implied many changes in terms of installation art and screen significance within it. As Brian O' Doherty first posed³, a turn from content to context has taken place, and that statement gets even more crucial in the realm of screen media art, aside from having further proved its accuracy with the passing of time.

Once moving images have migrated from the cinema, the new environment they enter becomes more prominent, or if anything, distinct and worthy of a different analysis. The literal space before the screen is highlighted, along with the physical screen itself, as well as

¹ Butler, Alison, *Displacements. Reading Space and Time in Moving Image Installations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland 2019, p.4.

² Frohne, Ursula, *Dissolution of the Frame: Immersion and Participation in Video Installations*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008.

³ O' Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, San Francisco 1986.

the seating arrangements, the existence of other spectators, the eventual presence of immersive elements, and countless other elements. While it might be misleading to assume that experiments with screen technologies are a recent phenomenon, as Ariel Rogers has displayed, there is no doubt that the new exhibition space changes the way screen media art is experienced⁴.

While the majority of the existing literature has focused on the ontology of video-installation as a new medium, asking mainly if it can be classified as cinema or not, the scope of this research is that of analysing whether the exhibition space proposes a different form of spectatorship. The question sits on the observation that by taking into account how attention is drawn to the physical presence of the screen, or by how it is connected to its surroundings, different elements in comparison to the movie theatre situation are brought forward. Screen media use and break different levels of space, that of the off-frame (what is happening in the material space before the screen) and the off-screen (what is happening in the fictional world portrayed in the screen), firstly conceptualized by Bonitzer⁵. The main thesis discussed in this research is that through this process a new form of spectatorship is enabled, different from the experience of both cinema and conventional ‘museum art’ reception.

My goal in this work is to enquire about this new form of spectatorship allowed by exhibition space in screen media art, building on findings by scholars in the field. In particular, after identifying two models of spectatorship, introverted and extroverted, Catherine Fowler and Paola Voci⁶ conceptualize a third one, which considers the spatial dimension influencing temporal formations. Kate Mondloch⁷ goes even further by speculating that screen media art, through the emphasis on the frame, allows viewers to be both *here*, actual subjects in the exhibition space, and *there*, observers into the screen space.

The application of these theories on two case studies, *When the body says Yes* (2022) by melanie bonajo and *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (2021-in progress) by Thao Nguyen Phan, will test their validity. Both works are recent, and have been displayed in the 2022 Art

⁴ Rogers, Ariel, *On the Screen. Displaying the Moving Image, 1926 – 1942*, Columbia University Press, New York 2019.

⁵ Bonitzer, Pascal, “Hors-Champ: Un espace en défaut.” in *Cahiers du cinéma*, n. 234–5, 1971-72, pp. 15–26.

⁶ Fowler, Catherine and Voci, Paola, “Brief Encounters: Theorizing Screen Attachments Outside the Movie Theatre”, in *Screening the Past*, n. 32, 2011.

⁷ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 2010.

Biennale. They constitute compelling units of analysis because of their location within the Biennale, their different exhibition spaces (the former an installation in a church, the latter a three-screens video), and their different narrative form. Even so, it is argued that they yield the same kind of spectatorship. Through the comparison of these two works then the study aims at filling the research gap by applying existing theory of spectatorship onto screen media artworks, offering more evidence that viewers are immersed «in illusionist virtual time and space while recognizing their embodied presence in the here and now of the exhibition space»⁸.

The thesis begins with an overview of the literature on the nature of cinema in terms of its discipline, assessing the relevant contributions regarding its ‘migration’ to the gallery/museum space. While when these new artforms started to appear the core of the debate was on their nature, or on the cinematic dispositif, gradually the focus has shifted on other elements. For the sake of context, this chapter also reviews two key terms widely used in the field: medium specificity and the post medium conditions, briefly touching on relevant conceptualization of spectatorship in the arts’ realm. The following section presents the theories guiding the study, highlighting their relevance and their appropriateness for the issue at stake. In this chapter, as for the first one, other pertinent matters such as the turn from content to context and the spatial turn in film studies are dealt with before dwelling into the core concepts, so as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the great quantity of notions at stake. Finally, in the last chapter the presented concepts are applied to the selected case studies, and results are presented. By way of conclusion, I finally discuss the findings and their implications for the multidisciplinary academic debate in relation to the broader question of spectatorship in screen media arts.

Chapter 1

1. State of the arts or the multiple *querelles*

⁸ Ivi, p. 74.

This section takes into account the different key issues in the field, with the aim of highlighting how the present research fits in it and what are its contributions. As with any state of the art, looking at the main question asked within the academic debate is key. In this vein, Raymond Bellour's «querelle des dispositifs», has marked and shaped the larger debate on screen media art⁹. In reference to this, the chapter is organized through crucial *querelles* in the discipline. In the first section, the discipline *querelle*, I briefly outline the contributions steaming from the field of film studies, namely regarding the migration of cinema to the exhibition space, and the various terminology used to represent multiple opinions on the nature of screen media art. Key questions in this sense are: are we talking about migrated cinema? Post-cinema? Expanded or exposed cinema? As much as these questions could feel rhetorical and too methodic, and while that might or might not be the case, they constitute a key starting point for research on screen media art.

In the second section the medium *querelle* is approached: this revolves around the issue of medium specificity and post-medium condition, which constitute recurring concepts often referred to in discussions about contemporary moving images. The goal here is to highlight the cornerstone of the dispute, tied to the study of the object and to the field of media studies at large. The review on the medium is deemed necessary as the debate in media art often focuses exclusively on the support and technique used. While they are indeed significant and worthy of assessment, they are not necessarily the core of the artworks.

In the final *querelle* that I propose, the viewer's place is taken into account, looking briefly into how spectatorship and viewership have been conceptualized. To avoid an analysis similar to the one proposed in the ontological *querelle* section, the spectatorship *querelle* section focuses more on current re-interpretations of the debate rather than enumerating the positions scholars held in the past. The three sections taken together will establish the foundation for introducing the guiding theories of the study, discussed in detail in the second chapter.

⁹ Bellour, Raymond, “La querelle des dispositifs/Battle of the images”, in *Art Press*, n. 262, November 2000, pp. 48-52.

1.1 The discipline *querelle*

Dealing with moving images in contemporary art has been always a complex question, mainly for the association with different fields. Understanding which realm is being dealt with into always proves challenging, be it media and visual studies, museology or film studies. What is certain, however, is the point of departure for the majority of the works analysing this topic: the migration of the moving image from cinema to the exhibition space. As Andrew Uroskie maintains, the point of convergence amongst the majority of scholars is the projected image's «interstitial status»¹⁰: namely its unstable association and assimilation within either the field of scholarship of the art gallery or that of the cinematic theater (or, if anything, within any exclusive field at all).

It is indeed from this issue that most of the literature departs: is screen media art cinema, or is it something else? Bellour shaped film studies' great disciplinary obsession with his renowned *querelle* on the nature of cinema, wondering what is left of it, and if this term can still be used once cinema has migrated and changed from its spectatorial structure¹¹. Since moving images have started appearing in exhibition spaces, their reference to the cinematic dispositif was of course very clear¹². What was not clear, however, was the nature of the former, and this question quickly became a key one in academia. The central matter for the French scholar, and for the field at large, is that of the dispositif: cinema keeps on existing as long as its dispositif exist. When cinema migrates, it changes its nature, and what is left is simply not cinema, or as he calls it a «new, vague and ungraspable 'other'»¹³.

As Valentini accurately proposes, this point of view has virtually elided the relationship with the history of the video, bringing forward the correspondence cinema-

¹⁰ Uroskie, Andrew, *Siting Cinema*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008.

¹¹ Bellour, Raymond, "La querelle des dispositifs/Battle of the images", cit., pp.48-52.

¹² See Douglas Gordon's *24 - Hour Psycho* (1993), a remediation of Hitchcock's movie slowed down to two frames a second, resulting in a movie lasting 24 hours, rather than the original 109 minutes; see also Pierre Huyghe's *Remake* (1994-95), in which Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is restaged using amateur actors, or McQueen's *Deadpan*, where the iconic hurricane scene in Buster Keaton's film *Steamboat* is reimagined as a short film.

¹³ Bellour, Raymond, "La querelle des dispositifs/Battle of the images", cit., pp.48-52.

contemporary art¹⁴. In spite of its limitations, this dual framing has monopolized the debate since the 90s, configuring itself distinctly in different geographical areas. While focusing on the lexical divisions may look inconsequential, it is a good meter to determine the scholar belonging to the cinema studies field and the ones working from a contemporary arts perspective.

Following up and adding elements to Francesco Federici's grouping¹⁵, three main tendencies are identified, or better three macro-divisions useful for my purpose, that is, to get a sense of what is being dealt with. It is worth mentioning that this framework is not intended as an aseptic division of scholars, but rather a way of organizing a large and dishomogeneous debate, with no ambitions of being comprehensive account of the multiple conceptualizations (and subsequent terminologies) in the field¹⁶. The first cluster of theories stems from cinema studies, and refers to moving images in the museum as *cinema d'exposition* (Royoux¹⁷) or *other cinema* (Bellour). It is mainly concerned with artists who explicitly refer to the original cinematic experience¹⁸. The key idea is that of a cinema that enters in the exhibition space in the form of a straight-forward installation, a viewing room not taking that much distance from a cinema theatre¹⁹. Once it has entered the museum however, it operates through a different dispositif from the canonical one, hence it ceases to be "orthodox" cinema and acquires new implications, meanings, and classification.

Then there are varying definitions, all originating from the idea that what is seen in the museum is still cinema. This conceptualization, of Anglo-American origin²⁰, expands the cinematic inquiry to all the audiovisual forms going beyond cinema and stems from the field of visual, cultural and media studies. Of course, within this debate there is wide disagreement

¹⁴ Valentini, Valentina & Saba, Cosetta G. (eds.), *Medium senza medium : amnesia e cannibalizzazione: il video dopo gli anni Novanta*, Bulzoni, Roma 2015.

¹⁵ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, Forum, Udine 2017.

¹⁶ For additional resources on relevant research see note 8, pp. 130-131 in De Rosa, Miriam, "From Ontology to Topology: a two-leg methodological journey to look at contemporary media arts", in *Visual Culture Studies*, n. 3-4, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano - Udine 2022, pp. 127-148.

¹⁷ Royoux, Jean-Christophe, "Pour un cinéma d'exposition 1: Retour sur quelques jalons historiques", in *Omnibus*, n. 20, April 1997.

¹⁸ See footnote 10

¹⁹ Dubois, Philipp, "Un 'effet cinéma' dans l'art contemporain", In *Cinema&Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, n. 8, 2006.

²⁰ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, cit.

on the characteristics and definitions of this cinema. Gene Youngblood is the first to experiment with taking cinema outside of canonical spaces, articulating the term *expanded cinema*, as to mean result of the establishment of a new idea of cinema in contemporary's art realm²¹. This prompted new lines of research, which enquires about qualitative characteristics and on the new state of cinema beyond its traditional limits. *Extended* cinema is another term used to indicate the possibility that cinema has in the world of the arts, namely that of finding more physical space, and a theoretical one not bound by rules and standards²². The other relevant tendency is to use the term *postcinema*, often connected to the issue of the medium, which is inevitably connected to the evolution of the concept of the postmodern²³, alongside with that of postmedia, which will be addressed in section 2.2. The use of these notions in film studies has determined a sort of departure from a more classic theory of cinema, to one that takes into consideration the space and time the moving images are placed²⁴.

Finally, the third way is more concerned with the study of media archeology and the medium. Regarding the latter, Francesco Casetti suggests that remediating older media is in the nature of cinema, and its relocation depends «not on the permanence of its physical aspect, but the permanence of its way of seeing, hearing, and sensing»²⁵. He is then concerned about the 'medium' as a technical support for an art and as its cultural practice²⁶. On the other side, the media-archaeological approach to screens suggests that their relevance in contemporary media cultures cannot be entirely understood without «exploring their antecedents and (re-) placing these within the contexts of their own times»²⁷. The objects of analysis taken here are virtually endless: the range is from the analysis of screen as virtual

²¹ Youngblood, Gene, *Expanded Cinema*, E. P. Dutton, New York 1970.

²² Dubois, Philippe, Monvoisin, Frédéric, Biserna, Elena (eds), *Extended Cinema: Le cinéma gagne du terrain*, Campanotto Editore, Udine 2010.

²³ Spagnoletti, Giovanni & Arcagni, Simone (eds), "Dal post-moderno al post-cinema", In *Close up. Storie della visione*, n. 24-25, 2009.

²⁴ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, cit., p. 30.

²⁵ Casetti, Francesco, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Columbia University Press, New York - Chichester 2015, p. 27.

²⁶ Butler, Alison, *Displacements. Reading Space and Time in Moving Image Installations*,

²⁷ Huhtamo, Erkki, "Elements of Screenology: Towards an Archeology of the Screen" in *Navigationen - Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften*, 6(2), 2006, pp. 31-64.

windows²⁸ to investigations of early cinema within the history of film practice²⁹, and inquiries about the intersection of new media, media art and film³⁰. This field is expanding and narrowing the angles from which approaching a methodic archeology of media is challenging. Especially for screen media art, the range of work is so diverse to make it almost impossible to think in terms of a unitary history³¹.

Although the questions raised by scholars in this context (mainly: are moving images in the museum to be considered cinema, or not? And if not: how to call them? Where are their boundaries?) are relevant, I have reason to believe they are not crucial. Or better: they are worth discussing, but focusing on this strict framework limits the scope and the depth of any analysis, since it circumscribes the analytical and methodological possibilities by departing from cinema studies (both in the literary and methodological sense). As a result, the debate is diminished to a reductive quarrel on the boundaries of definitions and classifications. What is more, it does not consider the bigger institutional, political and cultural context it is operating within: the museum is not the same physical place nor has the same implications of the cinematic experience. In analyzing the debate around *postcinema* (and the ontological question of cinema at large), De Rosa voices a similar concern: that of a discourse «with the only purpose of speculating on itself, for itself [...] with the result of ultimately looking inwards»³². Centering the focus on years-old, already extensively answered questions proves to be limited and not very fruitful.

The accent on this issue can indeed be seen as a symptom of a «historical crisis in cinema, around questions of the medium's exhaustion and renewal»³³, which can be in turn a sign of a crisis of sort in the field of film studies as well. Without a doubt, hybridization and the contemporary post medium condition have blurred the lines between what cinema is

²⁸ Friedberg, Anne, *The virtual window : from Alberti to Microsoft*, The Mit Press, Cambridge, Mass 2006.

²⁹ Musser, Charles, *The Emergence of the Cinema: The American screen to 1907* (History of the American cinema, Vol. I), Berkeley-Los Angeles 1994, Chapter one, "Towards a History of Screen Practice".

³⁰ Strauven, Wanda, *Media Archeology: Where Film History, Media Art and New Media (Can) Meet*, in Noordegraff, Julia, Saba, Cosetta G., Le Maître, Barbara & Hediger, Vinzenz (eds.), *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2013.

³¹ Knight, Julia (ed.), *Diverse practices : a critical reader on British Video art*, John Libbey Media, London - Bedfordshire 1996.

³² De Rosa, Miriam, "From Ontology to Topology: a two-leg methodological journey to look at contemporary media arts", cit.

³³ Butler, Alison, *Displacements. Reading Space and Time in Moving Image Installations*, cit., p. 4.

and what it used to be (and the same goes for art). Of course, the starting point for the fascination with screen media art is to be found in the interest for cinema and its cultural role in society³⁴. This starting point in film studies cannot, on the other hand, stop the academic debate from recognizing the place screen media art has in a bigger picture, that of visual culture³⁵. And in consequence, acknowledge the valid approaches and methods of various fields: visual studies, cultural studies and media studies. Taking into account the complexity of this art form and the interdisciplinary approach that is needed can then ensure an analysis that includes elements such as the dispositif, site and medium, providing an up-to date research not necessarily tied to the field of film studies going in fact beyond film alone.

To sum up the debate, it is evident that today the (new) more relevant question to ask is «where is cinema»³⁶. And even if, as Balsom suggests, the answer can start with “everywhere”, it cannot stop there: «cinema may be everywhere, but everywhere it does not remain the same»³⁷. It is time to turn the attention towards other elements pertinent to screen media art, in order to be able to adequately analyze this now very prominent form of contemporary art.

1.2 The medium *querelle*

In the debate about moving images and art, the terms medium-specificity and the post medium condition are often mentioned and paired given the relevant connection between them. The discussion on medium specificity is indeed a very crucial one: in other art forms, such as paintings, the medium employed tend to define the boundaries of fields of expertise. If, for instance, when talking about “oil on canvas”, one tends to refer to a uniform and coherent grouping, including of course various trends and movements. What is more, this categorization stands still against time, and although techniques and chemicals used in the

³⁴ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, cit., p. 64.

³⁵ Gunning, Tom, *An Interview with Thomas Gunning* in Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2006.

³⁶ Hagener, Malte, “Where Is Cinema (Today)? The Cinema in the Age of Media Immanence” in *Cinema&Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, n. 2, 2008.

³⁷ Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2013, pp.30-31.

support might have evolved, a 14th century masterpiece might be grouped with a canvas finished last year. Needless to say, the same cannot be said about moving images, at least at a superficial level, because in this realm medium specificity is not granted anymore, nor easy to analyze³⁸.

In order to shed light on this issue it is worth going back to the definition of *medium* being used. According to Fredric Jameson, a medium is constituted by the union of three elements: «an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production; a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine; and “a social institution», including a set of vernacular forms, functions or uses»³⁹. Starting from “the specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus” a predicament is to be found. Technological advancements occurring at a relentless speed makes it virtually impossible to categorize a grouping based on the specific support used. As Julia Knight posits as regards to a specific technology,, this is an «inevitable consequence of the speed with which video technology evolves»⁴⁰ and her idea applies to basically every other technology.. Even without the issue of rapidly changing technology, identifying the central dispositif or machine is challenging: is it the camera that filmed the images or the projector that is bringing them to life? Is it the space they are exhibited in or the audience’s position and reaction to them?

Regarding the “artistic and specific form of aesthetic production”, the same catch: the variety of techniques used are anything but specific (and some might argue, not even artistic). As for the “set of vernacular form”, it has been often debated how moving images in museums, and especially in galleries, are not necessarily presenting an established procedure for the interaction with them, leaving the door open to a museum-like experience as much as a viewing one⁴¹.

Hence, as Liz Kotz advances, the question is on how video can be a medium, if it no longer adheres to any of the characteristics presented as founding by Jameson⁴². According

³⁸ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, cit., p. 97.

³⁹ Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London - New York 1991.

⁴⁰ Knight, Julia (eds), *Diverse practices : a critical reader on British Video art*, cit., p.15.

⁴¹ Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, cit., p.53.

⁴² Kotz, Liz, *Video Projection: the Space between Screens*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008, p.382.

to Rosalind Krauss, video is then not a medium at all, but more of a structure, including all of the elements mentioned above⁴³. Hayward resonates with this view, affirming that «the production discourses of advanced technology “art” constitute a system which can be responded to critically as a thing-in-itself (not the specific medium used) »⁴⁴.

These discussions fit right into the turn toward context first identified by O’ Doherty, who put forth the need for an analysis of moving images in their broader context (visual culture) and physical context as well (exhibition space). As Tanya Leighton suggests, new debates prompted by the collapse of disciplinary boundaries put forward a new model of specificity: medium site specificity, that is a concern towards the space of projection or exhibition⁴⁵.

On the other side, the very idea of medium is being put under scrutiny, since using it as the sole pivotal and defining feature of a work of art does not seem appropriate anymore. The tendency is on conceptualizing the artwork as an activity of production, a process, the product of various practices: as Saba poses «the idea of ‘medium specificity’ has changed and become more complex to include ‘sites,’ ‘situations’, and ‘actions’ in which, and through which, the artistic practices take place»⁴⁶. The obsession with medium specificity once redirected, can become a useful field of analysis for the influences at play in terms of spatiality and temporality⁴⁷.

Inevitably connected to the medium *querelle* is the notion of the post-medium condition, first conceptualized by Krauss⁴⁸. According to her, the starting point for this condition is the notion that installation art, by introducing ordinary components into institutions, begs the question “What makes this art?” rather than obsessing over the medium. Her work moves away from the Greenberg hypothesis, dominating the art world, that

⁴³ Krauss, Rosalind, *Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008.

⁴⁴ Hayward, Jack in Knight, Julia (ed.), *Diverse practices : a critical reader on British Video art*, John Libbey Media, London - Bedfordshire 1996.

⁴⁵ Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008, pp 26.

⁴⁶ Saba, Cosetta G., “Extended Cinema: The Performative Power of Cinema in Installation Practices”, in *Cinema&Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, vol. XIII, n. 20, spring 2013.

⁴⁷ Federici, Francesco, *Cinema esposto : arte contemporanea, museo, immagini in movimento*, cit., p. 96.

⁴⁸ Krauss, Rosalind, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames and Hudson, London 1999.

specificity is tied to a physical substance⁴⁹. In short, she dismisses the traditional media distinction in favor of hybrid artistic forms and technologies. Hence, the direct link between the essence of a medium and its physical characteristics falls, and the post medium condition brings into the field the presence of several media at the same time. The idea is certainly not new, and sprang from the collapse of disciplinary boundaries, along with the contact between moving images and art, whose ontological specificity has proven more difficult to articulate.

Connected to this concept are there to be found ideas such as the term intermedial, along with discussions on remediation. It is no use to go into this further debate, suffice it to say, as an illustrative example, that the medium comes to be defined as «that which remediates», as per Bolter and Grusin's definition⁵⁰. the evolution of this concept can be traced, going from strict and prescriptive definition to a less complicated one, not bounded by deterministic associations. To avoid falling into the cinema-not cinema obsession, it would be wise, however, to turn to the next section.

1.3 The spectatorship *querelle*⁵¹

To conclude the review on the previous studies pertinent to the research at hand, it seems appropriate to propose a brief focus on the spectatorship *querelle*. As previously seen, the central issue of the literature in screen media art has for the most part originated from the field of film studies. While the strict comparison with it has then departed for the most part and has gotten articulated in a variety of positions presented in section 1.1 focusing on the object at stake (i.e. the film or equivalent), it has nonetheless influenced the debate about spectatorship as well. The relocation of moving images from the movie theatre to the gallery clearly implicates a change in the way artworks are perceived. The auditorium in the cinema can be seen as an extension of the projection screen⁵², at least in term of spectatorship, but

⁴⁹ O' Brian, John (ed.), *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1986.

⁵⁰ Bolter, Jay David & Grusin, Richard, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1998.

⁵² Frohne, Ursula, *Dissolution of the Frame: Immersion and Participation in Video Installations*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008.

the same cannot be said about the gallery space. Dwelling on the implication of the various kind of installations in the field of screen media art in terms of spectatorship implication would be nearly impossible and beyond the scope of this analysis. What is offered here is a brief account of the two main conceptualizations of spectatorship, built on the dual perspective cinema-contemporary art that has monopolized the debate.

This review has been prompted by reflections on the role of the *flâneur* – consumer brought forward by Erica Balsom⁵³. While her elaboration is by no means original, I have found it to be much more useful than other considerations regarding the nature of spectatorship. Placing spectatorship in the wider cultural context, that is of course very much influenced by the economic system is operating within, proves to be more suitable for the analysis at hand. What is brought forward is then not new theories, but a reconsideration of established notions, placing them in modern times.

As Mark Nash quickly sums up, much of the research on film and video hastily (and reductively) associates sitting in a cinema with passivity and walking in a gallery with freedom⁵⁴. Much of the literature agrees: there is a passive spectator in the movie theater and an active spectator in the gallery, mainly in terms of physical movement⁵⁵. Of course, it is accurate to assert that the film spectator is experiencing the film while sitting, motionless, in their seat, while the museum visitor meander through space (or even if sitting, does not have to fit in such a defined seating chart as the one of the movie theaters).

However, it would be wrong to associate physical mobility with passivity. In particular, in film theory the idea of passivity/immobility has been linked to a state that enables, mainly, an identificatory process⁵⁶. Echoes of this line of thinking are to be found in the development of the psychoanalytical approach of theorists such as Metz or Mulvey, posing that to make sense of what it is seen on the screen the viewer identifies with either the camera or the

⁵³ Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, cit.

⁵⁴ Nash, Mark, *Art and Cinema: Some Critical Reflections*, in Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, Tate Publishing, London 2008, p. 447.

⁵⁵ Leighton, Tanya (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, cit.

⁵⁶ See: Metz, Christian, "Identification, Mirror," in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Indiana University Press, Bloomington - Indianapolis 1982; Baudry, Jean-Louis, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, in Rosen, Philip (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986.

characters on the screen, and what facilitates this identification is their immobility⁵⁷. However, equaling «physical stasis with regressive mystification and physical ambulation with criticality» is nothing short of an oversimplification⁵⁸. Despite that, it is also evident how the use of this dual framing is to be attributed as a way of asserting the critical value of gallery spectatorship as opposed to the cinematic experience⁵⁹.

Without going into details about dated debates on spectatorship as section 1.1, there is a relevant concept to be explored, and revisited under a different light, regarding spectatorship. Païni has associated the gallery spectator to the Baudelarian figure of the *flâneur*⁶⁰⁶¹. The activity of the *flâneur* has been defined as one of a «spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence»⁶². Placing this subject arbitrarily walking in the gallery instead of the street, the scholar finds their abandonment to movement crucial to experiencing moving image installations. In this sense, the spectator's mobility is not necessarily a sign of their autonomy in getting in touch with the artworks nor, more at large, of a critical approach to them. Movement can become a very passive activity, if done without really paying attention. As Erica Balsom wittily argues, walking in a gallery space filled with several videos might make the viewer lose the sense of looking at distinct pieces and classify the status of the artworks as «ambient décors»⁶³. It starts to become evident that

⁵⁷ Mulvey, Laura, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, in Merck, Mandy (ed.), *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, Routledge, New York – London 1992; Metz, Christian, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Indiana University Press, Bloomington - Indianapolis 1982; for a more comprehensive account of the psychoanalytical approaches see also: Williams, Linda (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick- NJ 1997.

⁵⁸ Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, cit., p.51.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 50.

⁶⁰ While acknowledging that in the original language, French, *flâneur* is a gendered noun (*flâneur* being the male noun and *flâneuse* being the female noun), in this research the term is used as a neutral English noun to indicate the stroller or wanderer. At the same time, it is also relevant to point out (as also will be remarked later below) that the gendered nature of the *flâneur* is by no means a coincidence, as prominently shown by Virginia Wolf. The male identity, or at least appearance, of the *flâneur*, be it in contemporary times or in the 19th Century, influences his experience in terms of perception and navigation of the space. While taking into consideration gendered accounts of subjectivity and spectatorship is behind the scope of this analysis, I find it worth it to acknowledge, as it can provide further direction for research as well as a more comprehensive and contemporary approach.

⁶¹ Païni, Dominique, “Le Temps exposé: Le cinéma de la salle au musée”, in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 26, Paris 2002.

⁶² Tester, Keith, *Introduction*, in Tester, Keith (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, London - New York 1994, p. 7.

⁶³ Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, cit., p.53.

the idea of productive wandering (opposed to passive sitting) is not that strong of an argument.

However, in spite of Bellour's famous disagreement to Païni's conceptualization («the street is not the salon» can be an effective summarizing quote⁶⁴), some pivotal points can be found in the study on the *flâneur*: first and foremost, the passive element of mindless walking. If anything, if pondering about the regime of the economy of attention, the conceptualization of the *flâneur* seems nothing short of visionary. While the original reference might be to the physical activity of window-shopping, what is key is indeed the idea of a distracted viewer, the perfect subject in the regime of a consumerist culture. Païni states it clearly:

Flânerie arises from this sort of deception in regard to images that simultaneously offer themselves up spectacularly while receding semantically, according to the model of objects of consumption in shop windows that attract aesthetically but economically remain unavailable.⁶⁵

As Friedberg suggested, it becomes then very easy to associate the *flâneur* to a prototype of sort for the consumer⁶⁶.

While the goal of this position is not to incur in the same mistake of strictly associating a term with a conceptualization of spectatorship, and reducing the cliché of the *flâneur* to an equation of mobility with passivity, it seems to perfectly fit in a wider perspective of taking into account the commodification of (digital) goods and the economy of attention in which the museum operates within⁶⁷. The feature of the *flâneur* that I consider to be the key point here is the moving subjects' inattentive consumption of images. In this sense, the *flâneur* incapsulates both mobility and immobility: the wandering into the gallery connotes a physical movement, but the current state of technological immersion we live within ensure a sort of petrification in front of an accumulation of disposable moving images,

⁶⁴ Bellour, Raymond, *Of An Other Cinema*, in Arrhenius, Sarah, Malm, Magdalena and Ricupero, Cristina, (eds.), *Black Box Illuminated*, Propexus, Stockholm 2002, p.42.

⁶⁵ Païni, "Le temps exposé", cit., p.71.

⁶⁶ Friedberg, Anne, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 34.

⁶⁷ Economy of attention intended both as a state of being which influences the way in which we interact with media at large and as the competition that the museum must face in terms of the entertainment industry.

impossible to process. And what is more, this conceptualization of spectatorship is intermittent, is distracted: is flickering. It is a very attentive kind of spectatorship in one moment and completely detached in the following. It is a spectatorship captivated by seductive images, which just a few seconds after might look redundant or boring (or, if anything, just fit in the wide accumulation of media and experience facilitated by the consumer mindset), situated in a setting that allows viewers to move forward, physically and mentally. It is, in other words, precisely one of the *brief encounters* conceptualized by Fowler and Voci⁶⁸. The perpetual availability of moving images in the museum grants moving images to be more disposable than a cinematic experience, hence oscillating between them begging for the viewer's attention and managing to secure it (for a limited amount of time)⁶⁹.

This conversation fits right into the notion of a system of control based in principle of mobility and circulation, as Deleuze pointed out in his reflection around the societies of control⁷⁰. Without getting too entrenched in this type of analysis, it is nonetheless a worthy reminder of the wider context whereby the museum as an institution must operate within. The museum is of course an institute of discipline in the Foucaultian sense, dictating appropriate behavior in the viewer, proposing a highly disciplined form of spectatorship⁷¹. In the contemporary diagram of power this institution is struggling to maintain its relevance as well as battling to operate within a more general crisis in moving away from a centralized exercise of power⁷². As a consequence, circulation and participation have become precisely what the museum is demanding in the context of the experience economy.

What is more, I find the argument on the *flâneur* within this power system to be even more topical for the study at hand. The case studies chosen are screen media art presented

⁶⁸ Fowler, Catherine and Voci, Paola, "Brief Encounters: Theorizing Screen Attachments Outside the Movie Theatre", in *Screening the Past*, n. 32, 2011.

⁶⁹ It could be rightly argued that the contemporary cinematic experience includes begging for our attention as well, with overstimulation and overstimulation being one of the key tenets in our state in the economy of attention. In the physical space of the cinema theater, however, some sort of etiquette is enforced. Talking and looking at phone, external sources of distraction, are frowned upon, and often discouraged by messages before the start of the screening. The same cannot be said about entering a museum.

⁷⁰ Deleuze, Gilles, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," in *October 59*, Winter 1992, p. 3-7.

⁷¹ Kérchy, Anna, *Queering the gaze in the museal space. Orshi Drozdik's feminist (post)concept art* in Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and László B Sári (eds.), *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2017.

⁷² Balsom, Erica, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, cit., p.51.

during the 59 Venice Art Biennale. While the status of the Biennale remains that of an established institution, akin to any museum, it is nevertheless an «unstable one»⁷³. Its nature, that of an art fair with the goal of selling art pieces, has changed over the years, becoming now a mega exhibition where selling is not permitted, although dominated by capital-oriented logics. Hence, the comparison *flâneur* – consumer gets particularly appealing in this environment, not tied anymore to the selling mechanism of the fair but now more to the economy of attention and its power structure. Additionally, it is indeed particularly interesting to think about a *flâneur* wondering through the space of the exhibition in Arsenale or at Giardini, both confusing and disorientating places in their own way, which really propose a wandering visiting experience. The physical conformation of the city really suggests a strolling possibility, even more so if considering that some Pavillions (such as the Dutch one, taken into analysis later on in the study) are located outside of the main venues, requiring the audience to literally move across the city of Venice. The analogy with the *flâneur* becomes then irresistible in the realm of this research.

It is also worth acknowledging other re-elaborations of the idea of the *flâneur* in visual culture, be it the cross-media *flâneur*, the *flâneur* 2.0 or *cyberflânerie*⁷⁴. In this sense however, the key features of the *flâneur* are those of a visitor subject to the arbitrary suggestions of algorithms on online platforms, who explores the web not on the basis of causal associations nor on temporal succession, but rather on following thematic clusters, comments, embedded links and keywords⁷⁵. The *flâneur* – user is relevant for this study then in terms of their attention (or lack thereof) which guides and mislead their navigation, since new line of research are spontaneously found and just as swiftly lost⁷⁶, and of their freedom of movement which allows for exploration but does not impose a specific one.

⁷³ Basualdo, Carlos, *The Unstable Institution*, in O'Neill, Paul, Andreasen, Søren (eds.), *Curating Subjects*, Open Editions, London 2007, pp. 47–52.

⁷⁴ See Hartmann, Maren, *Technologies and Utopias. The Cyberflâneur and the Experience of "Being Online"*, Reinhard Fischer, München 2004; Elsaesser, Thomas, *Tales of Epiphany and Entropy. Around the Worlds in Eighty Clicks*, in Snickars, Pelle, Vonderau, Patrick (eds.), *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm 2009.

⁷⁵ Ugenti, Elio, *Immagini nella Rete. Ecosistemi Mediali e Cultura Visuale*. Mimesis Cinema, Milano - Udine 2016, p.106.

⁷⁶ See the idea of "constructive instability", developed in Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Constructive instability', or: *The life of things as the cinema's afterlife?* In Lovink, Geert, Niederer Sabine

In spite of that, it is evident, however, how a conceptualization of spectatorship based on a revisitation of the notion of the *flâneur* fits right into the wider context of the contemporary attention and the experience economy. I find these considerations to be topical and focal as any understanding of moving images inside of the museum is strictly tight to the state of these images outside of the museum, and to the status of the museum as an institution as well. Even within this framework however, and in the debate on spectatorship at large, I find to be particularly lacking a gendered account of spectatorship. Agreeing with Mondloch, the shortfall in the acknowledgement of this lens (and relegation of any elaboration in this sense to the realm of gender studies) undermines its validity in contemporary time⁷⁷. As mentioned in the first section, the academic debate seems to be lagging behind, keeping on elaborating on years old questions without furthering new approaches, or new interpretation of older concepts. In this sense as well, I find the new analysis of the concept of the *flâneur* very fascinating and pertinent, also in terms of a possible new approach to the existing literature in the field.

Chapter 2

2.1 “Turning” Theories

Having examined the wide range of theoretical approaches regarding screen media art, it will now be possible to present the theories guiding this study. Before this, however, it is helpful to consider a couple of other issues relevant to the field. Once again, it is useful to categorise the topic at hand, and this first section deals with what I propose to call the “turning” theories, alluding to both the turn to context in the art scholarship and that of the spatial turn in film studies. Mentioning them together is not a coincidence since, as much as they are not two sides of the same coin, they are somewhat connected and related. In the same way the *flâneur* mentioned in the previous section fits into a wider cultural discourse related to how media is consumed, the turn to context and the spatial turn are in line with broader

(eds.), *Video Vortex reader: responses to YouTube*, Institute for Network Cultures, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 13-31.

⁷⁷ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 62, p. 115.

hypothesis on the new cultural logic of late capitalism⁷⁸. Indeed, the emphasis on space and spatiality can be seen as a «one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism»⁷⁹.

2.1.1 The Turn from Content to Context: White Cube, Black Box and Gray Zone

As the heart of analysis of this research will be, in a sense, the role of context in the spectatorship of screen media art, it seems appropriate to start from the so-called turn “from content to context” identified first by Brian O’Doherty in 1976. In his article “Inside the White Cube”, later collected with other essays into a book, he voices a concern that was to become more and more prominent among his peers⁸⁰. The heart of the essay was quite simple (and might seem obvious in contemporary times): the gallery space is not a neutral container, but a historical construct *and* an aesthetic object in and of itself. The emergence of context, as Simon Sheik points out, is enabled by its attempted disappearance⁸¹. The white cube of the gallery was initially thought of as a space of neutrality, free of the architectural constraints of daily life and of politics, and designed to get rid of the awareness of the outside world. Yet the apparent neutrality is nothing other than an illusion, as it represents a set of values and is constructed according to «laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church»⁸². Museums are of course explored in a different way than other spaces are, and the homogenization of the gallery/museum environments provides an even stricter code of conduct and of action. These places are indeed institutes of discipline, places founded on long-established, unspoken behavioral conventions where attention is hierarchized.

⁷⁸ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, London – New York 1991, and below.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 154.

⁸⁰ O’ Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, San Francisco 1986.

⁸¹ Sheik Simon, “Positively White Cube Revisited” in *E-Flux Journal*, n. 3, 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/positively-white-cube-revisited/>, accessed 15/12/2022.

⁸² O’ Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, cit.

O'Doherty is certainly correct in affirming that the history of modern art can be «correlated with changes in space and in the way we see it»⁸³. His essays have been seen as a general turning point in the art critical debate, because they made explicit a tendency on spatiality that was in fact already taking place in artistic practice. The spatial critique was indeed gaining traction as an artistic *modus operandi* which O'Doherty himself used (along with his writing production, he was an artist as well): through artistic practices such as installations the gallery space and institution are analyzed politically and spatially. In current times political and spatial involvement in the arts are getting even more topical, since they are entangled with mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, representation/underrepresentation. Spatial production is in sum strictly tied with institutional critique and politics, both key elements of the contemporary art debate and art production.

This turn towards the context and, by extension, space at large, has influenced or is at least connected to other disciplines intertwined with the arts. For instance, in the evaluation of art, looking at the context in a broader sense can imply an observation of semantic context and the information provided (artwork title, art historical facts, authenticity)⁸⁴. Physical context, thought as the literal museum's rooms and in the wider sense as the museum as an institution, can be conducive to contrast and assimilation effects⁸⁵. In summary, looking at context from a human behavior perspective, it can produce behavioral and psychological phenomena⁸⁶. Cognitive and emotional processes associated with and implicated in art's evaluation and response have been found to be embedded in a context⁸⁷. More and more scholars are trying to prove how the (museum) context strongly influences art reception, by

⁸³ O' Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, cit., p.14.

⁸⁴ See: Leder, Helmut, Carbon Claus-Christian, Ripsas, Ai-Leen, "Entitling art: Influence of title information on Understanding and Appreciation of Paintings", in *Acta Psychologica*, n. 121, 2006 pp. 176–198; Millis, Keith, "Making meaning brings pleasure: The influence of titles on Aesthetic Experiences", in *Emotion*, n.1, 2001, pp. 320–329; Swami, Viren, "Context matters: Investigating the impact of contextual information on aesthetic appreciation of paintings by Max Ernst and Pablo Picasso", in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, n. 7, 2013, pp. 285–295.

⁸⁵ Locher, Paul J., Smith Jeffrey K., Smith Lisa F., "The influence of presentation format and viewer training in the visual arts on the perception of pictorial and aesthetic qualities of paintings", in *Perception*, n. 30, 2016, pp. 449–465.

⁸⁶ Cela-Conde, Camilo J., Agnati, Luigi, Huston, Joseph P., Mora, Francisco, & Nadal, Marcos, "The neural foundations of aesthetic appreciation", in *Progress in Neurobiology*, n. 94, 2011, pp. 39–48.

⁸⁷ Leder, Helmut, Belke, Benno, Oeberst, Andries, Augustin, Dorothee, "A model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments" in *British Journal Psychology*, n. 95, 2004, pp. 489–508; see also Cela-Conde et al., "The neural foundations of aesthetic appreciation", cit.

conducting several experiences in controlled lab/classrooms environments⁸⁸. By controlling different variables in different groups (notions about the artworks, background environments, contextual information), and the findings were ranked based on the basis of a variety of elements, such as aesthetic emotions/judgements, time spent in front of each artwork, and so on.

While these highly controlled laboratory-based study can provide some stimulating and fascinating results, the goal of bringing them up in this discussion is to highlight how, in all these studies, the stress is on contextual factors. Even when all variables of the study are explained in detail, there is little emphasis on the “type” of art examined. Of course, for the sake of reproducibility and validity of the study, the artworks used (and the possible presence of reproduction of artworks in the lab environment) are specified, but with little description of the piece at hand, using wide descriptors and general characterizations⁸⁹. Within the field, there is agreement on the fact that current experimental approaches are dominated by laboratory studies, which result in an evaluation of the aesthetic experience quite different from that observed in real life⁹⁰, a claim reinforced by empirical research as well⁹¹. In a recent compelling review by Pewloski et al., an inquiry on the factors that should be controlled for

⁸⁸ Brieber, David, Nadal, Marcos, Leder, Helmut, Rosenberg, Raphael, “Art in Time and Space: Context Modulates the Relation between Art Experience and Viewing Time” in *PLoS ONE*, n. 9(6), 2014.

⁸⁹ For instance, in a study on the valuation and memory of art, the description of artworks and reproductions are as follows: «Evaluation of real contemporary paintings, photos and collages (Museum Startgalerie Artothek, Vienna) 25 paintings, photos, collages from “*Beauty Contest*.” vs. computer simulated version of exhibition in laboratory. Simulated version included labels and art reproductions (9.85 x 7.50 in., 24” screen). Could navigate between artworks and hide/show info; previous/ next work also shown on screen; 137 psychology students (93 women, *M* age = 22.5) assigned to three groups (museum–lab, lab–museum, lab–lab). Unrestricted viewing. Evaluate for arousal, valence, liking, interest, understanding.» Setting aside the technicality of the details in participants and such, I find provocative the lack of more information on the painting themselves: note for instance how the measurements of the reproductions are provided, while the measures of the original artworks are not. Of course, the nature of the artworks is not the unit of the analysis in the research, and as such are not explored into details, but the attention given to context over content is in line with the original assumption by O’Doherty. For the complete study, see Brieber, David, Nadal, Marcos, & Leder, Helmut, “In the white cube: Museum context enhances the valuation and memory of art” in *Acta Psychologica*, n. 154, 2015, pp. 36–42.

⁹⁰ Augustin, M. Dorothee, Wagemans, Johan, Carbon, Claus-Christian, “All is beautiful? Generality vs. specificity of word usage in visual aesthetics”, in *Acta Psychologica*, n. 139, 2012, pp. 187–201; Brown, Steven, Dissanayake, Ellen, *The arts are more than aesthetics: Neuroaesthetics as narrow aesthetics*. In Skov, Martin, Vartanian, Osin (eds.), *Neuroaesthetics*, Amityville, NY Baywood 2016, pp. 43–57; Cross, Emily S., Ticini, Luca F., “Neuroaesthetics and beyond: New horizons in applying the science of the brain to the art of dance”, in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, n. 11, 2012, pp. 5–16.

⁹¹ Specker, Eva, Tinio, Pablo P. L., & Van Elk, Michiel, “Do you see what i see? An investigation of the aesthetic experience in the laboratory and museum” in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 11, 2017, pp. 265–275.

empirical research is presented, as a foundation for further research ⁹². And, as expected, three main levels are highlighted: the artwork, the viewer, and the physical aspect of the museum. The captivating aspect of this analysis is that of providing very detailed tables on the features considered to determine these three key levels; once again the physical context factors (with details going down to the tint of the light to the height at which paintings are hung) have the same importance of the artwork context factors (size, contrast, texture, color)⁹³.

All of the directions of research just mentioned point to a new exploration of art experience, tied to the interaction of perception, attention, memory, emotion amongst themselves and in connection with institutional, historical and cultural factors. This line of reasoning suggests an almost endless supply of potential research materials, stretching across methods and fields. It goes without saying that these matters belong to a completely different discipline, as they are strictly tied with behavioral, cognitive, and psychological factors, as well as with aesthetics. It is nevertheless quite fascinating to see how the exchange between the realm of arts and several field can provide result that even if not strictly transferrable, can yield further insight to this study.

In spite of that, dwelling more into this domain would be beyond the aim of this study. Another compelling point raised by O' Doherty is however the idea of the white cube itself. Ideologically loaded, it has become by now the archetype for the exhibition space by making «claims to rationality and detachment while also conferring a quasi-mystical value and significance upon the work»⁹⁴. The principles of the white cube are now the norm for museum environments globally, in stark opposition with another supposedly neutral frame: the black box. As shown in the last section of the previous chapter, the conceptualization in diametrical opposition of museum/art gallery and cinema theater as two opposite poles is by

⁹² Pelowski, Matthew, Forster, Michael, Tinio, Pablo, Scholl, Maria & Leder, Helmut, "Beyond the Lab: An Examination of Key Factors Influencing Interaction with 'Real' and Museum-based Art", in *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts*, 11, 2017, pp. 245-264.

⁹³ For these details, see supplementary materials in Pelowski, Matthew, Forster, Michael, Tinio, Pablo, Scholl, Maria & Leder, Helmut, "Beyond the Lab: An Examination of Key Factors Influencing Interaction with 'Real' and Museum-based Art", cit.

⁹⁴ Bishop, Claire, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention" in *The Drama Review*, 62 (2), Summer 2018 (T238), pp. 22-42.

no means new. The two contexts have a great impact on the audience's attention and behavior inside of these spaces, and their opposition worked as a model structuring the cultural world in the 20th century. As Manovich posed, one was traditionally high culture, the other was low culture: the gallery was refined taste, the cinema entertainment for the masses⁹⁵. The two institutions represented two models of exhibition and spectatorship which appeared to be antithetical, if not in competition⁹⁶. And yet, with the appearance of screen media art, they begin to merge.

Before wondering on what shape a white cube in a black box could take, it is needed to break down their main components. Looking at their features is key, as they deal with two key facets in spectatorship: attention and behavior. The white cube promotes a multi-point perspective in which visitor can enter and exit at any time, following their instinct or instruction on the wall. They can take pictures, talk, answer the phone, or google the name of the artist, move around, choose where to stand. The black box proposes a single-point perspective, with viewing subjects at rest, sitting. They are encouraged to be silent and switch off their phones, whisper if they need to talk (but better now talk at all) but can laugh or clap, and can eat and drink (although some film nerd might not be so enthusiastic about it). The main distinction, however, pertains the two different kinds of temporalization⁹⁷ that are put into play. In the white cube there is an *exhibition time*, linked to working hours, that leads to self-directed viewing not synchronized with other visitors. In the black box there is an *event time* which presupposes a simultaneous viewing experience, usually in the evening, where watchers start and finish at the same time.

What unwritten rules and unspoken conventions do viewing rooms in museums have? Are they the only place where you can eat inside of a museum? Do visitors have assigned seats and a time to show up at? These rhetorical questions give the chance to introduce the brilliant concept of the *gray zone*, presented by Claire Bishop. In her work she focuses on the performing arts and argues that their introduction in the museum institution brings forward a

⁹⁵ Manovich, Lev, "The poetics of Augmented space" in *Visual Communication Journal*, 5(2), 2006, pp. 219-240.

⁹⁶ Uroskie, Andrew V., *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*, The University of Chicago Press, London 2014.

⁹⁷ Bishop, Claire, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention", cit.

disruption of the long-established norms in place. More than multi-point perspective, there is the absence of an ideal viewing position: performers are moving around, and it is not possible to stand right in front of them to admire them in the best possible way. Protocols are vague, or at least they are open to improvisation and unspecified, as the spectator is holding an undefined position. The supremacy of the text is abandoned, schedules are not definite, expectations are not satisfied. Smartphones are permitted and there is room for unlimited documentation. The gray space appears as «direct consequence of the white cube and the black box changing under the pressure of new technology and eventually converging to produce a hybrid apparatus»⁹⁸.

Bishop holds the presence of smartphones in this gray zone as its main defining feature, placing the first museum exhibition involving continuous performances in the gallery space in the same year as the introduction of the iPhone⁹⁹. Other conventions in this new space are up for negotiations, as they are not yet determined, not even through experience, given the relative novelty of this form. The presence of social media and photography is unavoidable for the scholar, and to her this tenet is pivotal since it fits into a broader question of how technology impacts attention. With reference to work by previous intellectuals¹⁰⁰, she affirms modernity has created a «dual concern for attention and distraction as a direct result of capitalism's reformulation of human perception», bringing forward a critique akin to the one present in the last section of the previous chapter (theory to which she is by no means stranger)¹⁰¹. What I found to be key in her analysis is the stress on the blurring of the line between attention and distraction, and placing this critique in the space of the gallery while acknowledging the wider context they are operating within¹⁰².

⁹⁸ Bishop, Claire, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention", cit., p. 31.

⁹⁹ *A Choreographed Exhibition*, Kunsthalle St Gallen, in 2007, which was open four hours a day, five days a week, between 1 December 2007 and 13 January 2008. More on this in Bishop, etc. note 6 on p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ See Bishop, Claire, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention", cit., pp. 36-38.

¹⁰¹ See section 1.3 The Spectatorship *querelle*.

¹⁰² I find beneficial to stress that Bishop sees her elaboration fit for the description of performance spaces in museum only, in particular performances that take place continuously in the museum space and constitutes the exhibition itself. In particular, she looks at dance exhibition (and uses this term) rather than performance exhibition, as «is the visual and sensuous character of *dance* where we find the strongest convergence of contemporary anxieties around technology, attention, labor, and collective presence» (Bishop, Claire, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention", cit., note 7 p. 24.)

Also in light of the theories that are presented later on in this chapter, I find the postulation of a gray space to be extremely appropriate for a discussion of screen media art in the museum. Even though these artworks currently have become the norm in museums, for the most part they are displayed in different setting than the other works (or, if anything, in different rooms). Screen media art, combining moving images and sounds with architectural design, often takes the form of an installation, which by definition appropriates the space in which it is staged¹⁰³. If not, it is still arguable that video completes itself in the exhibition space, whatever form the staging of the video might take. Either way, the idea of the gray zone seems fit for an out-of-the (black) box deciphering of the context is being dealt with.

2.1.2 Spatial Turn in Film Studies and in Culture at large

As introduced above, O'Doherty put into words the idea of a turn from content to context that was taking place anyway in other fields, not only in the artistic practice. Humanities at large are traditionally a text-based discipline. Starting in the late 1990s or even before that, the advent of new technologies gave the chance to explore research directions beyond work on texts, images, and the relationship between them¹⁰⁴. In particular, in film studies this interpretation took a significant turn. With the change of the dispositif as it used to be known it, i.e. the traditional cinema theater, questions on its very nature were brought forward. While this is not to say that the study on the text itself came to an end, it is fair to say other disciplines started analyzing cinema's context as well. The appearance of screens in homes, in pockets, in shopping malls, in museums and in libraries created an intermedial and convergent condition where different media depend on and refer to one another, while highlighting the physical conditions they are displayed in, calling attention to the features of this appearances.

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¹⁰⁴ Thomas, Monique Martinez, "Dispositive, Intermediality and Society: Tales of the Bed in Contemporary Spain" in *SubStance*, 44 (3), 2015, pp. 98-111.

This occurrence brought about a conversation on the possible death of cinema, operated of course by the bloody hands of digital villains. What is by now clear is the fact that the change of the dispositif has opened up a way to rethink cinema itself. As might be expected the escape of the cinema refers to a reshaping of the very idea of cinema, not only of its material form. The dispositif comprises a conglomeration of material and discursive practices whose configuration is historically specific. What is evolving is then the whole practice connected to it, and the often-visible physical screen reminds the viewer of new uses and conventions. The predominance that the dispositif of cinema as a whole held for so long was destroyed, or better decomposed in its constitutive elements. The «historical and formal singularity of cinema», to quote Bellour¹⁰⁵, came into pieces and these pieces were then reassembled in new forms. The space surrounding the screen becomes part of a place for viewing which is explorable, and not a mere container for moving images anymore, while still giving prominence to them.

This turn fits into a bigger theory on the importance of space in the cultural paradigm. Already in 1984 Foucault was debating on whether space was coming forth as the «primary category for critical analysis». The importance of space does not lie in the incidental ground that everything quite literally occurs in space, be it one or another, but more on the fact that space shapes how events take place. It is not a «passive reflection of social and cultural trends»¹⁰⁶, but more of an operational and functioning force participating in the construction of meaning. While the “turn” took place in several disciplines, scholars argued on how the spatial turn implicated the end of historicism, which gave prominence to time rather than space¹⁰⁷. The emphasis on space and spatiality has been grasped by the same academics as the hallmark of postmodernity, bringing forward new operations and strategies with the goal of understanding space itself.

The effect of this practices has been labeled the «becoming topological of culture»: a new cultural order organized on the capacity of making connections rather than focusing on

¹⁰⁵ Bellour, Raymond, *Of An Other Cinema*, cit., p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Warf, Barney, Aria, Santa (eds.) *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge, London 2008.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey, David, *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, Blackwell, Cambridge 1990; Soja, Edward, *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*, Verso, London 1989.

a spot, working on linking issues and looking at them together rather than setting the focus point and looking at in independently, without connecting it to other matters¹⁰⁸. In short: looking around the object and not only at the object itself becomes imperative. Similarly, thinking about the space around the matter allows to focus on both context *and* content.

This approach is of course embedded in the pervasive current tendency, present in academia as well, of having an inter-disciplinary approach. A topological strategy is a creative method that aims at studying issues taking into account time, space and the issue at stake. Moving away from ontological questions on what media are or are not, the new approach implies a different paradigm of thinking through connections and intersections¹⁰⁹. This heterogeneous array of operations aims at navigating culture in a new way, through reclaiming, reappropriating and reimagining the way culture itself is thought of. In short, reshaping culture by changing, or at least connecting it with the space around it (i.e. the context), and other surrounding structural elements.

2.2 The off-frame and the off-screen

Given these premises, the analysis of spectatorship offered by Fowler and Voci seems particularly compelling. In their work, they include space as the main structural component to take into account when surveying the viewer's attention to screen media art and spectatorship in this field. Their research, presented in the next section, would not be fully effective without first outlining some concepts they use. As mentioned further above, their postulation involves the articulation of a new model of spectatorship, based on the ideas of the off-screen and off-frame. These notions have been historically debated in the cinema studies scholarship and were first conceptualized by Pascal Bonitzer with contributions and exchanges with and from Noël Burch and André Bazin, among others. As seen again and

¹⁰⁸ Lury, Celia, Parisi, Luciana & Terranova, Tiziana, "Introduction: The Becoming Topological of Culture" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29 (4/5), 2012, pp. 3-35.

¹⁰⁹ De Rosa, Miriam & Fowler, Catherine, "Making Conjunctions: Thinking Topologically with Contemporary Artists' Moving Images" in *Screen*, 62 (4), Winter 2021, pp. 512-532.

again, the debates in this field tend to extend over prolonged periods of time, but fortunately this is not the case. Here are simply to be found echoes of classical discourses on the dispositif and on the apparatus, and just general references to historically debated concepts.

Nevertheless, the realm is that of initial theories and critiques of the early cinema. Right from the beginning of his work, Bonitzer starts putting forward the key facet that is focal in this discussion: the dispositif, the machine and mechanism. Its defining feature is that of manufacturing an image so similar to reality that it makes the process disappear from its product. While the latter element will be discussed later below, firstly the dispute is on the former one: the manufacturing of an image. This creation is tied to the material world, as the starting point for it is the adherence to reality and the attempt to reproduce it on screen. This line of thinking leads to an elaboration common to all theorists of film (and visual) studies: a reference of moving images to the *quattrocento* perspective¹¹⁰. The canvas as theorized by Leon Battista Alberti was that of a «window that opens to a space “beyond the frame”»¹¹¹. There is no doubt then, and Bonitzer agrees upon it, that the figurative system developed in the Renaissance brought upon the cinematic ideological dispositif as it is known, both scientifically and ideologically¹¹². Mimesis was indeed what the cinematic machine tried to achieve in classical cinema: the accurate imitation of reality. The process is the same one of a Renaissance painting, which might seek to portray reality through proportionate bodies rather than the more expressive, but less accurate, features of an Impressionist work. What is more, the stress is not only on the space inside of the painting, but on what exists outside of it, or at least what is suggested to be across its edges.

Filmic figuration is indeed set within a given space and unfolds with a temporally diachronic character, taking place in a scenographic cube. What Bonitzer adds to these reflections then is the fact that the introduction of many film techniques produces a «plastic discontinuity that irreversible fractures the *imaginary cube*»¹¹³. In trying to achieve the most mimetic representation of the world, the camera movements put into discussion the integrity

¹¹⁰ See, among others, Friedberg, Anne, *The virtual window : from Alberti to Microsoft*, cit.

¹¹¹ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens : Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xiii.

¹¹² Bonitzer, Pascal, “Réalité’ de la dénotation” in *Cahiers du cinéma*, n. 229, May 1971, pp. 39-41, trans. Hanlon, Lindley in Browne, Nick (eds.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III: 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation*, BFI, London 1990.

¹¹³ Schefer, Jean Louis, “L’image: le sens ‘investi’” in *Communications*, n. 15, 1970, pp. 210-221, here p. 210.

and veracity of a sequence. For Bonitzer, amongst these techniques the close-up becomes a unit of analysis because of their capacity to fragment and break down the scenographic unity of the moving image. In short, they remind the viewer that a camera is indeed there, that the viewer is not looking through their own eyes but through – you guessed it – a mechanism.

Thus far these remarks, belonging to the initial stages of the critic's analytical works, unveil the key feature enabling the new space he conceptualized to emerge as such, that is, the off-screen space (originally *hors-champ* in French). While it is Bonitzer to give the term more critical and scientific support, the noun itself comes from the *Theory of Film Practice* by Noël Burch. In this text, the latter defines the cinematic space as consisting of two kinds of spaces: what is comprised within the frame and what is outside the frame. He then proceeds to describe the feature of the four segments of space bordering the frame line, but for the purposes of this reflection the above-mentioned division is enough: what can be perceived on the screen by the eye and what cannot be; in short, the screen space and the off-screen space. This elaboration was then taken on by Bonitzer, who framed it in relation or opposition to other different kinds of space, or even better opposing it to others.

In his postulation there is to be found the idea of the off-frame (what Burch would call the concrete off-screen), in contrast to the off-screen. While the off-frame is the material space not shown in the scene, the off-screen is the imaginary, the fictional space the movie exists within. The off-frame is the physical space that is not seen, but that through camera movements could potentially be shown. The off-screen is the «unseen that remains unseen»¹¹⁴, is a fictitious space employed to suggest circumstances and happenings not shown directly. As Daniel Fairfax cleverly puts it, these two different levels of space are symbols of the opposing relationships with the moving images: the viewer is «divided between the reality of its [the screen's] flatness and the illusory depth it presents»¹¹⁵. The most prominent feature of the two spaces, however put, is their start on the edge of the frame: the thoughts and elaborations they suggest are produced by their existence at the periphery

¹¹⁴ Fowler, Catherine, "Into the light: re-considering off-frame and off-screen space in gallery films" in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, n.6 (3), 2008, pp. 253-267, here p. 256.

¹¹⁵ Fairfax, Daniel, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968-1973)*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2021, p. 723.

of what is seen. According to Deleuze, the off-frame is just «that which exists elsewhere», while the off-screen is a «more radical elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time»¹¹⁶.

The impression of reality is then manufactured by working on what the cinematographic image hides from perception, whether in terms of view or in terms of understanding. However, this hiding does not relegate the position of the spectator as an unabridged victim of the screen: the face of an actor, the authenticity of a costume or the not-so-convincing special effects might pull them back from fantasy. The audience oscillates then between believing «*pseudos* of reality whose illusory character is known to us, but to which our desire adheres»¹¹⁷ and contesting the authenticity of what is seen. The public is swung back and forward from being responsive to the impression of reality to conducting a critical pull-back¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, for Bonitzer, this process is a form of shielding against the power of assertion produced by the cinema. To maintain the trust in the film, both in terms of realism of the scenes and of narrative verisimilitude, moments of distancing are in fact needed, since the desire for the real cannot be absolutely satisfied. Indeed, «the ‘impression of reality’ is from the start affected by a lack» which is a result of the “material structure of the cinematic fiction.”¹¹⁹

It is this material structure, this system of gravity of the scene that is then unsettled by the off-frame and the off-screen spaces. To go back to the initial comparison with the figurative arts, or to the space of theater as well, as per Bazin’s formulation, the frame in these medium «polarizes space inwards»¹²⁰: they guide evaluations on what is inside of it. The viewer looks at what is *in* the painting, and while there might some cues to the outer world (the protagonist of a portrait not staring straightly, prompting the viewer to enquire on what they are staring at, or off-stages voices and sounds in a drama piece) the frame is permanent and will not change. O’Doherty carries on suggesting that « [in easel painting] the stability of the frame is as necessary as an oxygen tank is to a diver. Its limiting security

¹¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The movement image*, trans. Tomlinson, Hugh & Habberjam, Barbara, Continuum, London 2005, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Fairfax, Daniel, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968-1973)*, cit., p. 722.

¹¹⁸ Bonitzer, Pascal, “Hors-champ (un espace en défaut),” cit., p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem, p.16.

¹²⁰ Bazin, André, *What is cinema? Vol. I*, trans. Gray, Hugh, University of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles 1967.

completely defines the experience within»¹²¹. On the other side, because of its off-frame that quickly becomes on-screen, or because of allusion of the off-screen, in the cinematic frame there are to be found many references and mentions to the outside. The information gathered to framing are then to be recalled and connected with what is seen in the frame. The frame is present, but it is not anchored, it is extremely fragile and prompts to look outwards, or to its edges. Bazin characterizes these two opposing tendencies as “centripetal” and “centrifugal”¹²².

As an example, it could be useful to mention the cinematic trope of the chase¹²³. In this case, a chase is followed with a constant change of the point of view, to convey better movement and motion. Through appearances and disappearances of characters, objects and sets, the pivotal is now in and now out of the frame (off-frame). On the other side, through cuts of shots of possibly key moments (such as the ending of the chase, for instance), or crucial objects, or the implications of the systems the fictional chase takes place, the viewer has to make sense of the elliptical information they are getting (off-screen). Narratives depends on details and scenes being hidden from view, as mentioned above.

Bazin then aptly describe the cinema screen as a mask that «unveils only a part of reality»¹²⁴ rather than a frame that encloses it fully. Bonitzer seconds this definition, adding to his elaboration that the impression of reality in classical film representation (and by extent, the use of the off-frame and the off-screen spaces) is dependent on two principles. Firstly, sealing the gap between the scenes through prescribed rules of editing that adhere to the principles of «continuity, intelligibility and homogeneity»¹²⁵. Secondly, the dispositif of classical cinema must hide the existence of the “true” off-frame, such as the technical equipment used to manufacture the image, in order to avoid interfering with the investment in the reality of the scene.

To sum up the debate, through movement or framing the off-frame and the off-screen spaces move the attention towards the outside. This analysis, however, refers to these levels

¹²¹ O’ Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, cit., p.18.

¹²² Bazin, André, *What is cinema? Vol. I*, cit., p.105.

¹²³ This instance is brought forward as an example in De Cordova, Richard, *From Lumière to Pathé: The break-up of perspectival space*, in Elsaesser (ed.), *Early cinema: Space frame narrative*, BFI, London 1990.

¹²⁴ Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Vol II*, trans. and edited by Barnard, Timothy, Caboose, Montreal 2011.

¹²⁵ Bonitzer, Pascal, “Hors-champ (un espace en défaut),” cit., p. 21 [p. 297].

of space and subsequent theories in the contest of the film studies scholarship and in the space of the cinema. What happens then if this outside is not a dark cinema theater but a museum room?

2.3 The off-frame and the off-screen in another context: gallery films

In her work, Catherine Fowler starts from the concepts introduced by Bonitzer with the intention of applying them to what she defines “gallery films”¹²⁶. According to her, the latter proceed with the critique of the frame that has moved forward the research in avant-garde and expanded cinema. These two forms have individuated in the frame the «axiomatic point of tension»¹²⁷ of cinema: for the former, the frame encloses and excludes; for the latter, it divides the viewer from the image. In both cases, illusionism and narrative are the rivals of the experiment, since they try to conceal the frame. By focusing on innovative and off-center features (such as the film grain, the shape of the screen), rejecting cinematic conventions and exploring non-narrative forms, avant-garde and expanded cinema bring forward the cinematic dispositif instead. What Fowler is interested in exploring is how gallery films can champion narrative and illusionism while at the same time calling attention to the edges of the frame. She poses then that they challenge expectations regarding how the image should continue outside the frame, and they do so by proposing a new type of time-based investigation and a new mode of attention.

2.3.1 Vertical Investigation

The starting point for this time-based analysis is to be found in the writings of the avant-garde director Maya Deren. Elaborating on the configuration of poetry in film, she postulates:

¹²⁶ Fowler invents and uses the term “gallery film” to refer to screen media installation, in order to underline their link to the cinematic form. In this section, as I am dealing with her hypothesis, I stick to term she originally employs. See Fowler, Catherine, “Into the light: re-considering off-frame and off-screen space in gallery films”, cit.

¹²⁷ Fowler, Catherine, “Into the light: re-considering off-frame and off-screen space in gallery films”, cit., p.255.

The distinction of poetry is its construction...and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means...it may also include action, but its attack is what I would call the vertical attack¹²⁸

What she describes as the vertical attack is the logic of a principal idea, or emotion, which connects diverse images containing this vital common theme. It is the logic of poems, of spontaneous associations that might not be ordered in time, or logical in a strict sense. This is opposed to the horizontal attack or development, which is a logic of actions, functioning through cause and effect, moving towards a conclusion. It is the logics of drama, of a time that is linear and consecutive.

Deren, notably a filmmaker herself, aimed at freeing her works from the horizontal development by using various techniques such as editing and staging¹²⁹. Her structure of vertical investigation allows for moments of realization where the viewer suddenly realizes that time and space are no longer linear, through a repetition of something already seen earlier, but with a different detail, or through an edit implying a glitch. In these split seconds the viewer recognizes that the narrative is no longer progressing, and time is not linear, or not dominated by causal actions anyway. It presents the viewer with the issue of the awareness of the passing of time, while still being constrained by the time logic of cinema.

As effective as her non-linear exploration has been, she could not escape the nature of the cinematic means she was using. This artistic medium is tied to a dispositif: a single autonomous screen, a seating plan, a set and a shared beginning, and end, to the projection. The "space" she was working within was tied to a horizontal development, linked to a time

¹²⁸ Amos Vogel, 'Poetry and film: a symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Oylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman William Maas', in P. Adams Sitney (ed.) *film Culture: an Anthology* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001)

¹²⁹ The exploration of this vertical investigation Deren describes is to be found in her first trilogy: *Afternoon, At Land* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945). In these works, the interruption of the chronological time structure is evidently brought forward.

«inevitably limited by the imperative of the cinema to keep moving from A to B»¹³⁰. If these conditions are removed, can the vertical investigation be more effective? This is what Fowler queries, and according to her the very interaction of form and content in gallery films produces «an even stronger sense of the vertical investigation that Deren called for»¹³¹.

Several are the differences of context in the gallery space, going from the activity of the visitors to their asynchronous arrival, from the presence of multiple screens to the physical presence of the frame, more easily seen in the white or dimmed light, to the content of the gallery films themselves, often resorting to mechanisms of intertextuality and fragmentation. Or, if anything, the arrival of a viewer at any given time might make it feel like that (which, again, is imposed by the structure of the gallery space). The spilling over of the image into the viewer's space, be it through installation, multi-screens or projector beams, brings attention to the frame, hence making them reflect on both the off-frame and the off-screen, and implicitly presenting the question of how to rethink the in-frame space. Meaning is made in a physical sense also in terms of time, since it becomes possible to lose narrative, causality, and succession. This implies spectators that are not passive, they are instead drawn in and out, just as Bonitzer posed, ultimately bringing forward a new mode of spectatorship, conceptualized by Fowler and Voci and presented in the next section.

2.3.2 Brief Encounters and spectatorship models

These shorts moments of attention, mentioned by both Bonitzer and Deren, for Fowler and Voci are to be paired with moments of distraction. Starting from different kinds of cinematic screens (gallery films for Fowler and from portable movies for Voci), they analyze what it means for the spectator to recognize cinema in a different context¹³². The fact

¹³⁰ Fowler, Catherine, "Into the light: re-considering off-frame and off-screen space in gallery films", cit., p.328.

¹³¹ Ivi, p.329.

¹³² It is worth mentioned that the scholars, and my research as well, is not concerned with these cinematic screens as relocated or as distributed phenomena. Of course, the link to the cinema theater and the reference to the cinematic form is self-evident, but the institutional, formal, aesthetic, and experiential differences are undeniable. Both the products and the mode of consumption are different, hence it is not accurate, in these cases, to speak of relocated cinema.

that the two contexts are paired together is because these specific viewing experiences are continually ruptured, although in different ways. In fact, the scholars go as far as questioning if the term “watching” is accurate to use in these cases, «for *watching* is a term that suggests that we give over our look and focus our attention for a homogenous period of time»¹³³. When the viewer sees these cinematic screens, on the other side, they go through moments of engagement characterized by attraction and distraction. As they call them, *brief encounters*.

To better understand this concept, the starting point is discussing two pre-existing models for viewing, analytically tied to film viewing. For what concerns viewing outside the cinema theater, the authors have developed a new model, that will be presented later below. The first model is the dominant one, which the authors label *introverted* as its theorization has involved theoretical subjects rather than real viewers¹³⁴. In this model, the theoretical subjects capitulate to the dominance of the film: from its duration, imposing the viewing until the end of the projection, to the physical imposition of the seating plan. In the bigger than life screen hanging above the eyes Alison Griffith sees a similar architecture to the one of religious art hanging behind altars in church. She calls this gaze the “revered gaze”, characterized as being «pre- and over determined by wonder and awe»¹³⁵. This modality of viewing is facilitated by the darkness of the cinema theater, which makes it less likely for the viewer to look around and maintain the revered gaze without interruption.

The darkness of the cinema theatre, besides also enabling de-contextualization and de-materialization¹³⁶, facilitates an *institutional mode of attention*. This concept stems from Baudry’s apparatus theory, which in turn was the starting point for Burch’s *institutional mode of representation*, which is the attempt to create an entirely closed fictional world on screen, born from the bourgeois longing for a totalizing illusionistic representation¹³⁷. The authors advance that in the contemporary cinema theatre attention has become institutionalized. To

¹³³ Fowler, Catherine and Voci, Paola, “Brief Encounters: Theorizing Screen Attachments Outside the Movie Theatre”, in *Screening the Past*, n. 32, 2011.

¹³⁴ Mulvey, Laura, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, cit.; Metz, Christian, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, cit.

¹³⁵ Griffiths, Alison, “The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ.’” In *Cinema Journal* 46, n. 2, 2007, pp. 3–39, here p.16.

¹³⁶ Fowler, Catherine and Voci, Paola, “Brief Encounters: Theorizing Screen Attachments Outside the Movie Theatre”, cit.

¹³⁷ Burch, Noël & Brewster, Ben, *Life to those shadows*, BFI Publishing, London 1990.

do so they incorporate the notion of attention developed by Jonathan Crary¹³⁸. In his work the scholar enquires on the spectrum of activities and behavior included in the concept of attention. On one end of the spectrum, he identifies the “institutional modes of attention”, while at the opposite the “nomadic modes of attention”. He defines the former as «an activity of *exclusion*, of rendering parts of a perceptual field unperceived»¹³⁹, which involves conscious awareness in focusing and concentrating. Conversely, the latter consist of moments of “dangerous absorption” and “diverted attention”, fostering states of distraction, daydreaming, dissociation and even trance. Crary underlines how the cinematic dispositif has been conceived to foster the institutional mode of attention, rather than hybrid forms, or ones closer to the nomadic one. Indeed, the cinema theatre requires a lasting, focused, and attentive viewer, resisting interferences and distractions.

The second model for film viewing sets the viewer outside of the cinema, with a very different kind of focus. Fowler and Voci use the term *extroverted*, as the viewing experience is here more tied to its physical and social environments. Rather than intellectual and sensory responses to the moving images, in this model of spectatorship viewers are more likely to be distracted, multi-tasking, or if anything not solely focused on the act of un-interrupted viewing¹⁴⁰. The dominant position of the cinema screen, or the revered gaze to it, is gone: absorbed viewers here become interactive and creative fans watching cinematic screen possibly anywhere, creating their own responses to it, challenging the hierarchy between makers and viewers. In short, is the participatory culture of the concept of the media convergence theorized by Henry Jenkins¹⁴¹: a viewing experience not determined by the quantity, length, or the intensity of engagement.

While the first models do not respond to the fleeting attention of the gallery film, nor to its physical disposition, the second is too broad to considerate the various viewing experiences existing within it. In the introverted models the film prevails over the viewer, in

¹³⁸ Crary, Jonathan, *Suspensions of perception: attention, spectacle, and modern culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass 2001.

¹³⁹ Ivi, p. 24-25

¹⁴⁰ Casetti, Francesco, “Back to the motherland: the film theatre in the postmedia age” in *Screen*, 52(1), 2011, pp. 1-12.

¹⁴¹ Jenkins, Henry, “The cultural logic of media convergence” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 2004, pp. 33-43.

the extroverted models it is the other way round: gallery films (and portable movies) seem to not fit into any of these kinds. Given these circumstances, Fowler and Voci set out then to theorize a model that considers the different temporal formations of other cinematic screens. The key element of this models is the viewer's engagement with the moving images at the intellectual, sensual, and reflective level while not losing awareness of their surroundings and environment. It follows that interruptions, interferences and distractions become an integral component of the temporal formation of the viewing experience.

One instance of this can be the analysis of television viewing by Kristin Gordon¹⁴², brought forward in Fowler and Voci's analysis. In her work, she looks at how emotional engagement or attachment to television programs is to be found based on conceiving differently aesthetics of and temporal formations for television. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's work on emotion in culture, she deploys the idea that orientation influences how one engages with and goes through the world¹⁴³. As an instance, she poses that the orientation attained in television viewing influence the demands the viewer makes on and of viewings and the contentment they get out of it. Watching television while preparing family dinner is different than watching it alone on the couch, or on Christmas night in one's childhood home. The notion of orientation applies then to the example of gallery films on how new spatial locations affect their temporal formations.

Gordon then moves on to a discussion of the moment, building on the work of S. Elizabeth Bird, who opposes the view that television is made up of a meaningless and infinite flow. Bird asserts that the messages and images found in television can resonate with the viewer by connecting to something in their cultural or personal experience¹⁴⁴. Gordon highlights this, how these instants of resonance indicate an emotional involvement with cinema. It is one of the *brief encounters* mentioned by Fowler and Voci:

¹⁴² Gorton, Kristin, *Media audiences: television, meaning and emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2009.

¹⁴³ Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientation, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press 2006; It is worth mentioning that Ahmed originally uses the notion of orientation in terms of sexuality, as in sexual orientation.

¹⁴⁴ Bird, S. Elizabeth, *The audience in everyday life: living in a media world*, Routledge, New York 2003.

In our descriptions of our brief encounters, what we have tried to highlight is precisely the resonating moments that stand out and are imprinted on our memories. Moreover, what they resonate *with* are our remembrances of cinema, our internalisation of its formal and aesthetic structures, our experience of previous engagements and our capacity to connect with moving images on emotional, intellectual and physical levels at the same time.¹⁴⁵

For the scholars, this is the new model of spectatorship that gallery films (and portable movies) propose. While the viewer is walking through an exhibition, maybe sending a text, maybe talking to a friend, something «out of place and uncanny»¹⁴⁶ catches their attention. The viewing is then rewarded by something that is somehow familiar: it is cinema, in a new context and form. This engagement is for a screen that, in term of content and context, is made for the gallery, and hence anticipates the disorientation or distraction that might occur and offers hooks for momentary engagements with the viewer. Changes in production and consumption of cinematic products implies then the attachment to the gallery film's screen: it is a cinematic attachment of sorts, that is experienced through brief encounters with these screens.

The choice of the word “encounter” is then extremely accurate, since what is happening is an unexpected meeting with something the viewer used to know. Going back to the unit of the analysis of my study, an encounter is precisely what occurs in the case studies: the Biennale visitor is walking around, and they might not be thinking about the similarities with the cinematic form until they step into a screen media art viewing room. They are then confronted with a product that they recognize to some extent, that fascinates them, but they are also left troubled whether what they are supposed to do. Is it a movie or not? Are they supposed to sit down in silence until the end of the screening? Can they talk or take picture? Are they watching a story unfold or just a composition of moving images?

Fowler and Voci develop their new model of spectatorship starting from the common disorientation taking place in these instances. In this model there is room for the development of a new order, challenging both the institutional viewing mode of cinema but also the

¹⁴⁵ Fowler, Catherine and Voci, Paola, “Brief Encounters: Theorizing Screen Attachments Outside the Movie Theatre”, cit.

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, p.

participatory culture of media convergence. It is a blueprint for an interaction that considers the current media saturated universe, the new different spatial and temporal formations taking place in modern times, and the fact that a lengthy and isolated form of attention is, aside from being impossible to attain, also undesirable to begin with. These short and intense instants of engagement fit within the framework of the attention economy, even more so in space where visitors allocate a limited amount of time to spend with the artworks.

It is a model of spectatorship that strikes as being extremely realistic, although not strictly descriptive neither prescriptive. It is not concerned with an emotional and/or intellectual response from the audience, but more with the reaction to the «evocative and associational quality of cinema (rather than its representational, mimetic nature) »¹⁴⁷. It is an epiphanic experience that is personal, as the viewer undergo a momentary emotional attachment, but also a recognition of the medium of the cinema presented in a more opaque and different context.

2.4 Being here and there, then and now

In the light of the concepts and frameworks presented so far, it is now possible to dwell in the last theory that I use in this study. As much as this preamble might seem too extensive, it fits in fact in the work done by Kate Mondloch, as she expands in a way the analysis forwarded by Fowler and Voci. In her book *Screen*, she aims at investigating what kind of spectatorship screen media installations propose, bringing forward an analysis that I see relevant as a continuation and expansion of the third model of spectatorship presented above. However, she is interested in doing so by looking at screen media art in its specific cultural and artistic context, rather than looking at it as (a) an isolated phenomenon and (b) proposing a single unfailing model of spectatorship¹⁴⁸. Regarding the latter, she believes that her whole investigation of this medium is based on an outline of the spectatorial ideals, rather than finding «an automatically and universally efficacious implementation of those

¹⁴⁷ Ivi, p.

¹⁴⁸ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xiv.

ideals»¹⁴⁹. In so doing, she is presenting a similar analysis to that of Fowler and Voci, that is, sketching some guidelines that are not strictly descriptive nor prescriptive. What is more, her model fits right in-between the two more “classical” models of spectatorship presented above, as she rejects the distinction between the “subject” and the “viewer”¹⁵⁰, signaling the impossibility to separate subject from actual individuals¹⁵¹.

Referring to the other issue of placing the works in their specific cultural and artistic context, this is clearly tied to discussions presented before on the shift from content to context. As much as this might seem a given, the role of screens in installation art or in the museum context has not received much academic attention or has focused the investigation on works that share a single material basis (i.e. the medium/mode of display)¹⁵². On the other side, the dominant role of screens in postmodern culture has produced much critical thought on their implications at large. Filling this academic void is then needed, especially as she moves further and further away from the film studies scholarship, fostering a conversation that deals with screen media art as such, not as migrated cinema, as video or as digital art but as something worth in and of itself. What is more, she does so by situating her research in the intersection of art history and film and media studies, enquiring among other things on the spatialization of time and on the spatial dynamics of spectatorship. Once again, this is a sign of culture becoming more topological.

Moving to the gist of her work, the starting point and underlying assumption of her analysis is the media consumer state as subject in a contemporary «society of the screen»¹⁵³. Within the Foucauldian social order in which power, knowledge and subjection are closely interlinked, viewers respond to internalized disciplines schemes. In Debord’s theorization of social relations, on the other side, spectacle isolates, separates and immobilizes the viewer. Either way, screens unconsciously direct appropriate behavior in the viewer. Screen-based

¹⁴⁹ Philip Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: Film Theory Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, p. 283.

¹⁵⁰ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xiv.

¹⁵¹ “subject” intended as the position assigned to the observer by the film and cinematic codes and the “viewer” as the actual person who watches the film and their compounded viewing responses, as per Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xiv.

¹⁵² Sterrit, David, “Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art by Kate Mondloch Review” in *Cinema Journal*, 51, n. 2, 2012, pp. 173-175.

¹⁵³ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xxi.

interactions are ubiquitous in everyday life, and propose a highly disciplined form of spectatorship, that detaches the bodily experience, filters communication, foster passivity and isolation¹⁵⁴. These behaviors are then transposed in the museum environment. Mondloch agrees with Crary, namely thinking that screens are nothing other than «the most recent techniques and locations of capitalist control and productivity via the requirements of sedentarization and passivity»¹⁵⁵.

Although the seducing power of screens has arguably turned viewers into “screen subjects”, she argues that there is a possibility to foster modalities and practices that can resist passivity. In her view, the exchange between the body and the screen can never be fully rationalized by capitalism and can actually be understood as «the site of a latent but potentially volatile disequilibrium»¹⁵⁶. A “volatile disequilibrium” analogue to the one produced by the tension between off-frame and off-screen and leading to brief encounters with the media. The goal of the book is then to inspect how screen media art «(re)materialize the neglected circuit between bodies and screens and, in so doing, posit alternate engagements with contemporary media technologies»¹⁵⁷.

To do so, Mondloch focuses on various examples of screen media art that accentuate «material, psychic, ideological and institutional» modes of mediation in the viewer-screen interface¹⁵⁸. The instances she uses are interfaces envisioned to unfold and unravel in the time of the viewing experience, rather than to be experiences and understood visually (and temporally) right away. This process can happen either through elaborated sorts of uncommon and creative installations, or simply through the structure of the gallery space, that allows visitors to explore, appropriate, leave and enter the viewing area as they please. What is the defining and revolutionary feature of the gallery space then? That of «choosing the right spatial model, the most adequate “schematism” allowing the translation of temporal properties into space»¹⁵⁹. In short, managing to install time in space.

¹⁵⁴ Crary, Jonathan, *Eclipse of the Spectacle*, in Wallis, Brian (ed.) *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, D. R. Godine, New York - Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art 1984.

¹⁵⁵ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 109.

¹⁵⁶ Crary, Jonathan, *Eclipse of the Spectacle*, cit., p. 294.

¹⁵⁷ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. xxi.

¹⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 94.

¹⁵⁹ Birnbaum, Daniel, *Chronology*, Sternberg Press, London 2004.

What Mondloch means by this is the self-conscious way that screen media installations can “put time and duration on display”. In particular, she is interested in this feature in connection to the gallery space, an aspect that often remain unaddressed: she talks about the lack of academic acknowledgement of «the multiple and sometimes contradictory durational impulses at work in the presentation of moving images to moving bodies in space»¹⁶⁰. The examples she uses are prominent examples in screen media art history: the extension of a classic movie over twenty-four hours projected onto a transparent screen, an eight-hours documentary of an artist’s studio displayed on four walls, a circular narrative played on eight screens across three rooms and a twenty-four-minute complex story screened onto two adjacent screens¹⁶¹. Bringing up these artworks, she aims to highlight the overlapping and conflictual temporal impulses at play: the artistic, individual, and institutional one. What I mainly want to stress is that these temporal formations are tied to the space they are screened within, given the presence of multiple disorientating screens. The viewer is then forced to have an embodied presence in the physical space, as continuous movement is required for them to comprehend what is going on.

But it is necessary to proceed with order. In the gallery space, time is not strictly burdened by externally imposed schedules, such as the ones of the cinema, as repeated again and again further above. As with Fowler, Mondloch undeniably gives credit to precedent installation art, for example to Paul Sharits. In his 1978 statement for film installations (which he calls “locational” works), he affirms how they can move beyond the passive spectatorship constraint of cinema if «the form of presentation does not prescribe a definite duration of respondent’s observation (i.e., the respondent may enter and leave at any time) »¹⁶². Of course, this manifesto is to be placed in a more general cultural shift marked by the reversal of many practices, among which the promotion of the reader over the author, the attraction to spectator participation, all framed as critiques of conventional media forms/viewing experiences. Nevertheless, what is key for my framework here is the continued focus on

¹⁶⁰ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 40.

¹⁶¹ The artworks are, respectively: Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Bruce Nauman’s *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001), Doug Aitken’s *electric earth* (1999), and Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s *Consolation Service* (1999).

¹⁶² Sharits, Paul, “Statement Regarding Multiple Screen/Sound ‘Locational’ Film Environments—Installations,” 79–80, as quoted in Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 10.

open-ended temporality, which is embraced in the examples Mondloch presents. Without critically assessing all of them¹⁶³, their common characteristic, achieved through different means, is that of situating the visitor «in the present (what is going on now?) and the future (what is about to happen?) simultaneously»¹⁶⁴. The images are moving, sometimes more sometimes less evidently, but even when they are telling a story, they tend to downplay bookends or linear trajectories, losing their narrative intention with no obvious beginning or ending point. The result is then very similar to the viewer's own experiencing of time. Doug Aitken accurately puts this into words:

Film and video structure our experience in a linear way simply because they're moving images on a strip of emulsion or tape. They create a story out of everything because it's inherent to the medium and to the structure of montage. But, of course, we experience time in a much more complex way. The question for me is, How can I break through this idea, which is reinforced constantly? How can I make time somehow collapse or expand so it no longer unfolds in this one narrow form?¹⁶⁵

This mode of display is then functional to disclose something about the nature of time itself, but mostly about how it can foster a «subjective reconstruction of duration»¹⁶⁶. Through confronting the notion of linearity, the viewer is then faced with the awareness that their subjectivity, and its construction, is a continuous process taking place in time as well. In the end, as Birnbaum highlights, the “temporal polyphony” of screen media art is really the time we experience life in¹⁶⁷.

On the other side however, it is clear how lack of attention for the artwork's duration, or point of beginning or end, leaves a fair amount of freedom of choice to the viewer. Païni, among others, is quick to assert that this freedom is just an illusion, proposing the analogy of the *flâneur* presented in the first chapter¹⁶⁸. This viewer-*flâneur* is just a consumer of art,

¹⁶³ For the complete analysis is to be found in the third chapter of her book *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., pp. 40-60.

¹⁶⁴ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 44.

¹⁶⁵ Aitken, Douglas, “A Thousand Words: Douglas Aitken Talks about electric earth,” in *Artforum* 38, n. 9, 2000, p. 161.

¹⁶⁶ Royoux, Jean-Christophe, “Remaking Cinema,” in *Cinéma Cinéma*, 26.

¹⁶⁷ Storr, Robert, “Stan Douglas: L'Alienation et la proximité (interview),” *Art Press* 202, 2000, p. 262.

¹⁶⁸ Païni, Dominique, “Le cinéma expose: flux contre flux / Movies in the Gallery: Flow on Show,” in *Art Press* 287, 2003.

victim of a form of a spectatorship characterized by short attention span. While rebuttals to this affirmation have already been explored, Krauss offers a captivating point of view: that of the place for “degraded” participation within the late capitalist museum¹⁶⁹. According to her, the contemporary museum is a place where to experience “experience” and the spectatorship fostered by screen media art is in line with the capitalistic tendency to reify experience. Conceptualized this way, the temporal wandering of the viewer might be then closely associated with that of the consumer, the Pāinian window-shopper, and more in general that of the mass media spectatorship.

And, if observed closely, this affirmation might not be so wrong, at least for some cases. Friedberg, in commenting the features of television and VCR in the 90s, talked about a spectator that is *lost in* but also *in control of* time. The possibility to fast forward or reserve, replaying and changing channel can be seen, in a way, as analogous to the possibility of staying, leaving, or even returning to a gallery space displaying a screen media work. Of course, the differences are many, and the concern here is not that of analyzing them, rather than looking at how the contemporary installation spectatorship is indeed influenced by how contemporary media are consumed.

To connect this blueprint with the concepts presented above, in the visionary words of Friedberg echoes of the same model of the brief encounters of Fowler and Voci are to be found: we have to do with a spectator that is in control of time, but at the same lost in it. The latter refers to those moments of distraction we have encountered, as well as to the non-existing, or fractured and then recomposed narrative, when they are absorbed in the evocative environment of the artwork. The control is re-established in a moment of attention, when the viewer gains awareness of the temporal mechanism taking place and possibly of the space around them, deciding to take agency over time and space. Fowler stresses repeatedly that the individualized and exploratory duration of gallery-based installations and screen media works is central both in terms of critical leverage and ideological function. This system of engagement allows divergent modes of interaction with both media screens and the structure of time itself.

¹⁶⁹ Krauss, Rosalind, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum” in *October*, 54, 1990, pp. 3–17.

In addition to placing the issue of screen media art into time, Mondloch touches on the spatial dynamic of spectatorship as well. More specifically, according to her, viewing screen media art differs from cinema, where viewers are «conventionally expected to disregard *actual space and time* for the duration of the film»¹⁷⁰. However, in this realm the focus is often scattered across coexisting screen spaces, sometimes even competing for attention with the actual exhibition space. The staging takes many creative and different forms, but the goal is to stress the tension between illusionist/virtual and material/actual space. To illustrate this Mondloch recurs to relevant examples as well, among which the one of an installation including an actual one-half of a full-sized Ping-Pong table completing itself in a projection on the wall, with moving large black dots¹⁷¹. The simulated Ping-Pong table is equipped with a Ping-Pong ball and a paddle, inviting viewers to play against the projection on the wall. The artworks she uses to explain her thesis get more and more complex, but what is key in them is the presence of several levels of space: the space inside the screen, the space in front or before the screen and the real spatial presence of the screen as an object¹⁷². While in the first instance the screen is used as a window onto a space of representation, in the second case the screen it is used to call attention to the space between viewer and the screen itself. In the third level, the material screen is brought to attention, allowing it to escape its frequently overlooked space, and highlighting its features as an object.

By revolving around other levels of space, viewers are indirectly asked to consider the space of «the screen's immaterial representation and its relationship to the material world»¹⁷³. The technique used to achieve this end, as with time above, is not the core of this logic: it can be more complicated such as asking viewers to literally enter the screen space, or using close-circuit systems, or simply distributing focal points across coexisting screens pace or including both sides of the screen. The aim is to break the canon of discontinuity, be it visual or conceptual, between the representation on the screen and the viewer's own space. What is highlighted is again a troubled and self-conscious spectatorship, built on the tension between actual and virtual time and spaces in a coalescing time.

¹⁷⁰ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 64 (italics added).

¹⁷¹ EXPORTS's *Ping Pong* (1968).

¹⁷² Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 63.

¹⁷³ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 68.

The screen as an object also becomes more important, as it comes to be a point of emphasis, conceptually and literally. The viewer can move around this material device, allowing for exploration and in some cases potential intervention. The screen as just a window to other spaces loses then its visual priority, competing with other compelling possible centers of attention and action. Within them, it is not to be forgotten the presence of other viewers, exploring the space and the screen, reminding the spectator of the surrounding context of the gallery space.

Just as with time, screen media art proposes a dual spectatorship that is self-conscious: on one side, the viewer is lost in the illusionistic representation, on the other is made aware of the material conditions of the viewing experience. Also, in this realm of spatial dynamics, the parallel with the brief encounters by Fowler and Voci is apparent: the viewer gets distracted in the immersive experience until is reminded of the spaces they are in, becoming attentive to it, and having the possibility to control it. Viewers are *lost in* and *in control of* space, not only time. This is the model of spectatorship that Mondloch envisions, proposing that viewers are both «here» (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) and “there” (observers looking onto screen spaces) in the here and now»¹⁷⁴. The common thread is causing, through different systems and interfaces, the audience’s awakening to the materiality and the mediation of screens intrinsic in screen media art.

What I hope has become evident through the critical reconstruction of these analyses is their striking similarities, or at least the presence of recurring elements. Starting from Bishop’s work, the blurring of the boundaries between attention and distraction is presented as a key feature of her gray space. This tenet is the basis of Fowler and Voci’s proposition as well: their brief encounters are produced by concurring states of attention and distraction, which make the viewer aware of their surroundings. In the same way, Bonitzer uses the category of the off-frame to talk about viewers being drawn into the reality of the frame and being suddenly reminded that that reality is an illusion. Agreeing with this view, Mondloch proposed subjects being lost and at the same time in control of time and space. The common motif is then the “volatile disequilibrium”, the tension between two pulling forces that creates

¹⁷⁴ Mondloch, Kate, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, cit., p. 62.

a troubled and yet self-conscious form of spectatorship, even if for a brief moment. Aside from Bonitzer's departing point, this divergent mode of interaction with moving images is tied to the space they are displayed in, and the fact that they were made for that space. Screen media art allows the viewer to move around and away because of the physical conformation of the gallery space, and draws the viewer to and into the artworks, because of their immersive nature.

The union of different theoretical frameworks here aims at calling attention to the two core units of analysis at stake: time and space. Of course, the process of knowledge production taking place when screen media art is experienced comprises and occurs in different levels of space and time. But through the stress on one or another, or both, the viewer is reminded of their conditions and their relationship to the interface they are reacting to. Screen media art works foster a sort of creative disruption in the viewer's experience of time and space, causing confusion in the encounter with them, a confusion that is created by design and that is functional to the unsettling of conventional relationships to the media. By combining how various scholars conceptualize this disruption, a new model of spectatorship is then advanced. Through the analysis of two case studies presented in the next chapter I aim to validate this approach, and test if the combination of these theories is fit for the spectatorship facilitated by the artworks chosen.

Chapter 3

3.1 A new "self-conscious" model of spectatorship

Having examined the range of theoretical approaches available, in what follows I sketch a model of spectatorship that takes into account and recombines all of the elements presented in the chapter above. Through the streamlining of the features of this new model, I will stress the elements that I find to be key, and later test their validity through the analysis of two case studies. To do so, the artworks are first presented in detail and then surveyed. One key issue in studies of screen media art is their description: installations/interfaces are often site-specific and quite articulated to describe. Through the use of images, detailed

description and exhibition space diagrams my aim is to provide sufficient information for the understanding of the works at hand.

As mentioned further above, one key characteristic of this medium is that of enabling a self-conscious spectatorship. The aim of this review is not that of prescribing or theorizing from scratch an original conceptualization of spectatorship, hence I will not propose any specific label, but if I had to, “self-conscious” would be the adjective used to describe and identify it. However called, the space where this new model is in the *gray zone* resulting from the overlapping of white cube and black box, that is, a physical and conceptual space. The gray zone is the viewing room/space in the gallery or in the museum, hence is tied to the viewing experience of being an art visitor, but with some *caveat*. In this space protocols are not clear, or better they are not fixed: they might be determined for an exhibition, but they are not universal. While certain codes of conduct are endorsed, such as not eating, others are not definite: visitors might be allowed or confused on whether to sit on the floor or not, they could touch and interact with parts of the artworks (in the case of installation/interface), they could step on or step aside from them, etc. There is then no ideal viewing position, since it might not be self-evident, or there might be physical impediments (i.e. the length of the view forcing viewers to sit down on the floor, or the screen projection extending on the floor, etc). Schedules are not defined, as visitors can join at any moment, and the strict supremacy of the text is abandoned: its setting and surrounding aids in the meaning production process. Finally, as Bishop underscores, smartphones are permitted. This feature is seen by the author as the hallmark of the type of spectatorship that the gray zone proposes: a distracted one.

Before moving to the other defining features of this model, I find it fit to highlight another element, not formally tied to the *gray zone* in of itself, but more to its precursors: the white cube and the black box. In their definitions by reciprocal negations, one of their key differences is that of existing within two different time paradigms: the gallery space is tied to the *exhibition time*, linked to working hours, self-directed viewing not synchronized with other visitors. In the cinema theater there is an *event time*, which presupposes a simultaneous viewing experience, where watchers start and finish at the same time. Where does the gray zone stand in this scheme? Precisely in the middle. In fact, this is yet another element that makes the case studies chosen in this study, and screen media art spectatorship by extent,

quite distinctive. Galleries and museum are tied to working hours, without necessarily being linked to an event of performance time. It is in fact an interesting mix between two opposing temporalizations: a screen media artwork might foster a shared viewing experience for at least parts of its duration, but since viewers can join and leave at any time, the viewing is not synchronized and still self-directed. However, the moving images themselves will stop and start from the beginning again at the same time for every viewer. Indeed, this spectatorship implies a peculiar time experience that avoids characterization in neither of the two definitions presented.

Attention is another key point of this model of spectatorship, or better a distracted attention. The mode of interaction with screen media art is that of engagement at the intellectual, sensual, and reflective level, while not losing awareness of the surroundings. This means that interruptions, interferences, and distractions are not only welcomed but encouraged, since they might stress important qualities of the environment. It is indeed the design of the space that facilitates distraction (in the instance of installations or interactive interfaces) but also the fact that when the viewer steps into a gray zone they step into a physical but conceptual place as well. As posed by Ahmed, the demands on and of viewing that the viewer makes, and the contentment they get out of it is determined by their orientation. Finding a screen media product in the gallery/museum space implies then a certain level of expectation, for better or for worse, different from seeing the same product on a movie screen or at home. Consequently, the mode of interaction changes and this impacts on both the *level* of attention, and its *quality*.

The kind of attention proposed by this model is to be understood to be within the spectrum of activities and behaviors that Crary includes in the concept of attention. Recalling notions presented earlier, the scholar draws a spectrum spanning from an “institutional mode of attention”, involving a conscious awareness in focusing, to a “nomadic mode of attention”, a diverted attention fostering states of disassociation. While the cinematic dispositive proposes an institutional mode of attention, the same cannot be said in screen media arts. In this case, the mode of attention is to be defined as more hybrid: the viewer is still consciously trying to block out some level of distractions but is not immune to them. On the other side,

as highlighted again and again, is the space itself offering occasions for diverting the focus on something else.

This distracted mode of attention is facilitated also by the content of the screen media artworks. As much as it is not possible to draw a description on the general subject matter or narrative quality of these works as a whole, it is possible to underline common features. First, these artworks proposing the vertical investigation envisioned by Deren, which is developed as a way to put time and duration into display; this is based on a logic of spontaneous associations not strictly tied to ends and beginning, to linear developments or mechanisms of cause and effect. This is not to say that all of screen media works put duration on display (although a good deal of them certainly does), but more than the vertical investigation is promoted by the gallery space. As the viewer can enter the viewing room at any point in the projection, it is never easy to understand at what point they are joining the screening: the moving images might not be defective of narrative or focus around a central theme, but that might be the initial feeling by design. The viewer walks in what might be the end of the screening and tries to make sense of the unconnected images they are witnessing.

Very rarely viewing rooms in museum have timed entrances facilitated by a cultural mediator, while most often it is just noted when a screening starts (e.g., with a wall sign: screenings last 40 minutes and starts at the top of the hour). In the case of the former, while this alternative is embraced sometimes, I argue that firstly it is more likely to draw visitors away, since they might not want to wait for viewing an artwork that they probably will not see in their entirety and might opt for a more “immediate” one, such as a painting (again an instance of the fight for attention that the gallery space has to carry on). Secondly, this practice that is wildly disregarded: in the instance of the Venice Biennale Arte 2022, while the screen media projects were presented in large quantities, only the Romanian Pavilion operated the choice to time entrances¹⁷⁵. Regardless, the process of making sense of an ongoing artwork places the viewer in the present (what is going on), in the future (what is about to happen) and in the past (what has happened this far) at the same time. It is a time-based analysis happening in time. This is caused because interfaces are conceived to unfold

¹⁷⁵ With this exemplification I do not want to generalize findings nor use anecdotal evidence, but it is worth highlighting a tendency of the phenomenon I am discussing in context.

and unravel in the time of the viewing experience. They are not designed and produced with the intention of being experienced and grasped visually, temporally, and spatially, right away.

This design stresses elements that pertain to the narrative but are also at its edges. It prompts questions regarding the time and the space in the screen, such as inquiries on the nature of the universe portrayed on the screen, but also regarding the time and space the viewer is living in, such as wondering how long the screening is, how much more time they can spend in the museum, but also how the work was filmed and produced, and so on. This model of spectatorship is indeed marked by the centrifugal character possessed by the screen. Evaluation on what is outside of the screens is prompted by mentions and references external to the reality portrayed in it, sometimes caused by the tension between the on screen, off-screen and off-frame. Alison Butler goes as far as identifying a “deictic turn” towards more complex and mutable conceptions of space and location in screen media art¹⁷⁶. This feature contributes to the dislocated condition of the viewers, whose viewing experience is marked by a feeling of uncertainty.

However, even though these levels of space afore mentioned are useful categories to use, they are more derived from the cinema model. In the screen media art viewing experience is there to be found a more persistent and crucial tension between three other screen-reliant spaces: the space inside the screen, the space in front or before the screen, and the spatial presence of the screen itself. These different levels of spatiality, in a different way and yet similarly to the previous categories, prompt frictions between the illusionistic/virtual and the material/actual space. The technique is not the same of avant-garde cinema, as they reject in fact cinematic conventions and explore non-narrative forms to bring forward the frame. Here, screen media art champions narrative and/or illusionism while at the same time it brings forward the edges of the frame.

It does so through allowing viewers to be in control and lost in space and time at once. In control of space, since they can move around the exhibition space and explore the various levels of space. In control of time, because they can decide when to stop the screening, or when to disregard it to give attention to something else, which they can do while still inside

¹⁷⁶ Butler, Alison, “A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation” in *Screen*, 51(4), Winter 2010, pp. 305-323, here p.306.

the exhibition space and without too much worry about not respecting conventions or viewing etiquette, since they are not so established as the rules of cinema viewing. Concurrently, the viewer is lost in time, since they are lost in the display of duration of the screen narrative, but also lost in a time not structured by schedules or synchronous beginnings and ends. They are lost in space as well because of their physical disorientation, sometimes just initial or something lasting the whole viewing experience.

Looking into some selected case studies will exemplify more clearly how this model of spectatorship unfolds. While for both cases I will touch on all of the elements mentioned, I will focus more in depth on some for one case and some for the other, as I see them more fit and appropriate for the explanation of theoretical concepts.

3.2 *When the body says Yes (2022)* by melanie bonajo

When the body says Yes is the immersive installation presented at the Dutch Pavillion for the Biennale Arte 2022, commissioned by the Mondriaan Fund. The work is by melanie bonajo (they/them), a Dutch artist, filmmaker, sexological bodyworker and somatic sex coach and educator. While the Dutch show is part of the Biennale, its location was not the usual one in Giardini. For Biennale Arte 2022, the Mondriaan Fund has invited Estonia to make use of the Dutch Pavillion in Giardini, while the Dutch entry has been re-located in the Chiesetta della Misericordia (or Chiesa dell'Abbazia della Misericordia), a deconsecrated 10th century church in the area of Cannareggio¹⁷⁷. This gave to the artist and the scenographer Théo Demans the opportunity to create an immersive video installation. The detail is not of small relevance, since the work itself includes nudity, sexual references, pleasure, and consent, all displayed in a former church setting.

¹⁷⁷ The relocation of the Dutch Pavillion in the church fits into a wider discussion, on who's representing whom at the Venice Biennale. Younger nations such as Estonia cannot build new pavilions in Giardini, while older nations such as The Netherlands hold on to their prestigious and unique spaces. With this one-time transfer Dutch authorities wanted to give recognition to the contributions by Estonia in visual arts over the past ten years, sharing their platform and at the same time trying the same challenge the Estonian Pavilion takes on each year: that of finding a space and creating a pavilion outside Arsenale and Giardini.



Figure 1 - Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy the artist and the Mondriaan Fund. Photo by Peter Tijhuis.



Figure 2 - Church outside view. Image courtesy the artist and the Mondriaan Fund. Photo by Peter Tijhuis.

But before dwelling into the content of the artwork, it is important to describe the space is set into. As shown in fig. 1 and 4, the church underwent interventions that although

change and mask the environment but still make it undeniably recognizable as a church. Already from the outside, the character of the building as a church is evident, and even though there is a poster of the exhibition, it might not be clear right away that the church is not a place of religious worship anymore (note the poster text is completely in English, aside from the Biennale logo) (fig. 2).

This element is deemed very compelling by the artist, who has talked about the fact that since the pavilion is located in one of Venice's neighborhoods, and entrance is free, it can possibly be seen and experienced by a wider variety of audience¹⁷⁸. Once the viewer has entered the church they are admitted in a dark vestibule, where they are greeted by a cultural mediator, inviting them to visit the exhibition, explaining the rules to follow (to not eat or drink inside, to take off their shoes if they wish to step in, to take pictures without flash and to lower the volume of ringtones and notifications). As soon as they go right, through the curtains, the environment they find themselves is quite different from the outside. The first thing that catches the eye is the collection of shoes and boots (or sandals and flip flops, depending on the season) on the floor. Aside from this mundane detail, the difference in lighting is indisputable.

By comparing figure 1 and 2, the outside and inside of the church, the contrast in the light tone is striking. Biennale Arte took place from April 23rd to November 27th 2022, and the pavilion opening hours were 10 AM - 6 PM. Excluding the last two months of October and November, when with the complicity of the change to the solar time and of the shorter winter days, sunset occurred, respectively, around 6 PM and around 4:30 PM, for the rest of the months visitors step from a bright environment to a significantly darker one.

Afterall, Italian summer months are the sunniest it gets in Europe, considering also that the church is facing a waterside *campo* (square) without close obstruction from other taller buildings aside from the Old School of Santa Maria della Misericordia with which it

¹⁷⁸ melanie bonajo, source: <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/activities/venice-biennale/>, accessed 26/01/2023; The Biennale's location at Giardini and Arsenale, where the Dutch Pavillion is situated, are on the other side ticketed events.

shares the corner, hence the building gets direct sunlight for most of the day. For comparison, please see fig. 3 and 4.



Figure 3 - Church inside view. Image courtesy Art Events. Photo by Elena Semenzato.



Figure 4 - Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy the artist and the Mondriaan Fund. Photo by Peter Tjihuis.

In fig. 3, the light gets through the window without any screening, and it is possible to understand the level of brightness and natural illumination also through the shadows on the floor. Juxtaposing figure 4, where the church is seen from the same perspective, the difference is remarkable. Aside from possible editing in the shade and temperature of the light, the stark difference is in the amount of light as well. Two fifth of the windows are screened by a purple shading material, while the remaining portion of the window is shaded by a yellow one. With the aid of artificial lighting in the back of the main altar, the light is dimmed and diffused, not direct. This alone changes the aspect and feeling of the environment. This is a researched effect: according to the artist, the idea is that of softness define the space as a “cuddle space”¹⁷⁹. The setting is indeed very comforting, and the feeling of stepping in resemble a step into a soothing cocoon, or into a microcellular organism, cushioned and relaxing. For sure, very different from the outside world.



Figure 3 - Pillow detail. Image courtesy the artist and the Mondriaan Fund. Photo by Peter Tjihuis

The feeling is aided by the other interventions on the space. In figure 3 is the inside of the church, which is privately owned and used for art events, without the installation. It

¹⁷⁹ melanie bonajo, source: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/458555/melanie-bonajowhen-the-body-says-yes/>, accessed 26/01/2023.

has been restored in 2017 without structural alterations and maintaining its general defining characteristic. The same ratio pushed the scenographer and artist in their collaboration to appropriate the space: the main and side altars are for instance still recognizable. This might not be casual, as the artist has described the space as one «which centralized the clitoris as the epicentre of social design and a place of worship»¹⁸⁰.

The scenography is indeed resembling of a living organism, composed of thin hanging ropes and of fluffy and hard pillows and structures where viewers are encouraged to sit or lay on. These “pleasure islands” are an invitation to immerse in a sensorial experience, allowing and resembling both a playful and a sensual element. As seen in fig. 1, the whole flooring is covered in various materials, different at touch and at sight. Some are harder, other softer, and it is possible to understand which ones make a good support for laying on just by trying them.

Again, this is an invitation to explore and to touch that might not be always welcomed (in fig. 2, for example, some visitors prefer sitting on the cold steps of the altar). Different textures and filling of the pillows, visible in fig. 5, reiterate this invitation to explore and the feeling of softness. The strips of fabric hanging all around connect one side of the church to the other, giving the feeling of being in a canopy bed of sort, or a tent, a somewhat secluded and intimate space. They also compose the frame of the screen, springing from the back of it to the sides, floor, and ceiling, and covering small parts of it without excessively obstructing the view, since they are for the most part see-through materials.

Finally, the location of the screen itself is counterintuitive. Its rear side is the first thing seen upon entering the space, as it is facing the back of the church. As it is clear from fig. 6 below, showing a floor plan of the show, the orange area is the walkable surface, while the screen is indicated by the red line at the right. Hence, viewers assume the opposite position from the one they would assume if visiting the church as a place of worship (that is, facing the altar). The screen is however hanged significantly above the viewer, and its church setting is indeed evoking Griffith’s “revered gaze” (see chapter 2.3.2). In this case, the wonder and awe might be directed to the screen but to the space as a whole: the unique nave

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem

is 360 square meters big, and the screen's sizes are in proportion. These feelings might also be evoked by another element: the space inside the screen is resembling the one the viewer stepped in.



Figure 6 - Church plan. Courtesy Art Events, elaboration mine.

In the video itself, viewers are invited to reflect on the meaning of touch and intimacy in relation to their bodies and within the contest of an alienating, post-pandemic capitalistic world. To do so, bonajo gathered a cohort of international gender queer people, many with a bicultural identity, in the form of a pleasure-positive camp. In this environment participants practiced touch tutorials, set boundaries, gave and received consent, and did “weird rituals” expanding on the meaning of sexuality beyond the Western discourse, on what genitals means to one and to others, and on the sensational dimension of touch. The work is part of the artist’s research on intimacy and touch as a remedy for the modern epidemic of loneliness, marked by disembodied zoom fatigue. This whole process is documented in *When the body says Yes*. The place where the process took place is very similar to that of the church installation, to the point of having the feeling, in some moments, that the deconsecrated

church was the set for the movie. The colors of the clothing and environment are similar, such as pink and earth tones, interrupted by bright highlighted colors.



Figure 7 - 'Big Spoon', film still from melanie bonajo 'When the body says Yes', 2022. Commissioned by the Mondriaan Fund. Image courtesy of the artist

The film starts with bubbly floating letters, moving slowly together on a holographic background to form the title. After that, there is the only explicit invitation addressing the viewer in the 40 minutes long work: “We invite you to follow your curiosity. What are you noticing in your body right now?”. Then, all the rituals and workshops are shown, with no particular order or narrative, chronicled by several voice-overs. They span from collective party-like dancing in the forest to blasting music, to playful pouring of bottles of oil onto the bodies and then using them as a slide. Bodies are mostly naked, and gently touched, often with one person staying in the middle and all the others touching gently different parts of the body at once. There is cuddling, there is the exploration of different forms of arousal and pleasure (mostly not visual but just in terms of voiced analysis, which however never appears erotic or gross), there is pillow-fighting, there is decorating and drawing of the area around (covered) genitals, there is holding and being held. There is a good deal of laughing and smiles. The narration from the various voice-overs touches on different sexual and non-sexual instances of touch and intimacies, going from talking about circumcision to the

implication of dancing with someone at the club, spanning from the differences in conceptualizing genitals or touch in different cultures to personal choices in terms of being touched. The majority of the accounts however are concerned with touch intended as a micro-sensorial experience which is not inherently sexual per se, but rather as a perceptive means that allows for questioning the relationship with one's body and emotions. The accounts take the form of separate episodes or chapters, not tied together, but divided by the appearance of a black screen or a pause in the visuals.

As the detailed description of the piece both in terms of content and dispositif highlight, the installation does take place into a gray zone. The protocols in this space are not clear, and even if *some* rules are imposed, there is no guarantee they are followed. A case in point as this regard is the array of shoes found as soon as the viewer enters the room: as much as the cultural mediator ask visitors to take them off, there is no one inside the church ensuring people are doing it¹⁸¹. Also, the lack of an ideal viewing position is striking, as visitors can place themselves wherever they want, sitting, crouching or laying down, closer or further from the screen. The video plays on loop, and there are no specifications on the daily schedule nor indications about when each screening starts. The text is central but is aided in the meaning production process by the installations, both in terms of suggestive surroundings and of sensorial embodied experience. Finally, the light allows for a more or less free use of the phone (aside from calls, the brightness of the phone screen does not disturb the viewing of other visitors) and does not restrain people from talking. If anything, this is the grayest zone of the whole Biennale: it is a pavilion located in the middle of the city, which is not a strange thing in of itself as pavilions and collateral events are held all around Venice each year, but the fact that the physical structure of the Dutch Pavilion is located inside Giardini is undoubtedly a source of confusion for the visitor. On top of that, there is plenty of room for distraction.

The combination of the video's message with the installation brings forward an intellectual, sensual and reflective engagement. While the viewer's brain might be busy

¹⁸¹ The cultural mediators at the entrance were asked to step into the church to check on the environment and on the visitors once every 10-15 minutes, but there was not a permanent post inside the church, mainly because of staffing issues. Two people were working at the pavilion in weekends, but during the weekdays there was only one person, making it impossible to check both spaces (entrance and inside of the church) at the same time.

pondering about what kind of touch they are used to, their hands might be petting a furry pillow. The viewer is then at the same time attentive and distracted, but this distraction is functional to fully experience the screen media artwork on every level. The layout of the seating arrangement is almost explicitly designed to foster a diverted viewing experience. While the viewer might choose to sit on the steps of the altar, there are no “proper” seats that allow for an upright sitting position: all the pillows arranged on the floor almost force the viewer to slouch and sink among them. As attentive as a viewer can be, or wants to be, the natural instinct of relaxing in such a position is stronger, if only for the association with a more comfortable seating position (the sofa is more commonly used to relax while the chair is for work). Moreover, mega-institution such as the Biennale are extensive and notoriously rather draining when it comes to the viewing experience: there is no doubt some viewers might have fallen asleep in the middle of the viewing. This might sound outrageous, but it works for the intention of the artist, who said that the work is to be approached with the intention of «embracing your inner sloth»¹⁸². While the statement is far from encouraging naps, it is not to be excluded that they might have occurred, and it is not to be excluded as well that they might have been functional to a more embodied experience: the video follows a loose narrative, non-causal and non-consequential. Missing a part because of a rest does not undermine the comprehension of the piece, if anything expands the comprehension on the bodily level.

This type of engagement is of course influenced by the space of the installation inside of the church itself, but also by the space outside of it. As mentioned earlier, the installation is located in one of Venice’s neighborhoods, Cannareggio, which is at a considerable distance from the main sites of exhibition of the Biennale, Arsenale and Giardini (the quickest way, at least 30 minutes on foot). While it is troublesome to try to sketch a truthful composition of the audience (locals/tourists, Biennale visitors/casual strollers, etc.) it is safe to assume that the majority of it has not seen the main exhibition at the Arsenale and the Dutch pavilion on the same day. This is inferred simply because of time constraints in terms of opening times of both spaces, their extension, and the distance between them, the sum of which make the

¹⁸² melanie bonajo, source: <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/activities/venice-biennale/>, accessed 26/01/2023.

hard to visit thoroughly on the same day. It is definitely possible that a visitor trying to fit in as much as possible in the smallest time window has stopped to see *When the body says Yes* on their way to the Arsénale, but highly unlikely that the majority of the audience has done so. The detail is not of small relevance if I recall Ahmed's notion of orientation advanced earlier above. In her view, orientation influences the demands the viewer make on and of viewing and the contentment they get out of it. It might be assumed that the demands made in this case are widely different in term of emotional attachment, attention, expectations, and so on. Enquiring about their nature is not the scope of this analysis, but what is sure is that these spatial locations affect temporal formation and attention.

Furthermore, this screen media artwork does propose a vertical investigation of sorts: the central theme is tackled through spontaneous associations that do not reach a conclusion, both in terms of narrative and of general reflection. While at the start a direct invite to the viewer (a deictic "you") is presented, the end does not have any distinctive element that might indicate that the film has come to a closure. Each of the episode presented is a chapter isolated from the others and could be understood as a single unity by itself no matter their temporal order. Any of them could be the end, or the beginning, of the viewing experience. And in many cases, they are, as viewers can enter the space at any given moment. This, of course, does not matter at all: the center of this investigation is not linear, and is not limited by a move towards a conclusion. For instance, throughout the 40 minutes often times the image of bodies slipping on each other covered in oil is presented, although the "scene" where olive oil bottles get emptied all over the bodies is not displayed until the twentieth minute of the screening. The exploration is around a central idea, probing its ramifications, and it is more concerned with its qualities and depth that with a sequential order of action. This intention is explicitly set by one of the voice-overs: «Together, we explore the universe of micro-movements through touch. The emphasis lies on the intensity of movement and encounter, not its sizes».

This feature of the artwork is not made apparent at once, nor right away, to the viewer. It takes at least some time to understand that the viewer is not looking at a story, that the artwork is produced with the intention of getting unraveled (and understood) visually, sensually and intellectually. This exploration is also aided by the tension between the

different level of screen-reliant spaces present. The space inside the screen, as already mentioned, is similar or at least reminding of the space of the installation, but it is not always the same. Sometimes the participants also take their steps into a forest, that appears to be not too far from a little pond, and from someone's backyard. The space before the screen is quite extensive, depending on where the viewer is sitting, but almost always include some other viewer's presence. Even if the exhibition space is empty, the space in front of the screen is at times an extension of the screen, at times its stark opposition. Finally, the screen as an object has a prominent presence. It is seen from behind, and it is cornered by ropes and wires, constantly reminding the viewer of its presence. Additionally, it is hanged above the eye level, provoking the already mentioned revered gaze to it, with implication in terms of the attachment the viewer develops from that. It is significantly bigger than the viewer, and even if a sort of reverence cannot be derived by its size, it cannot leave the viewer completely indifferent. Finally, although quite obviously, it is very visible. The low light environment allows for its presence to be very prominent, and act as a constant reminder of where the viewer is. As much as they might get drawn into the moving images and their themes, the frame is there as a constant reminder, pulling them back to the reality of the exhibition space.

The combination of these levels of space causes indeed a tension between illusionistic/virtual and material/actual space. Such a friction is similar to the one between distraction and attention, between the being drawn into the screen and the critical pull-out. It causes the viewer to be both in control of space, touching pillows and lying down, and lost in it, wondering where they have to sit, or again, lost in the sensorial experience of being inside a deconsecrated church repurposed as an art space, or also lost in the attempt to capture this space in a picture on their phone. They are in control of time, because they can decide when they want to stop the screening, or if they want to disregard it to pay attention to something else, to talk to other visitors or to look at the installation itself. However, they are also lost in time, since they are disoriented in the time of the screen, not structure and strictly consequential. In short, they are *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*.

3.3 *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (2021-in progress) by Thao Nguyen Phan¹⁸³

First Rain, Brise-Soleil (2021-in progress) is the video installation presented by Thao Nguyen Phan at the Biennale Arte 2022. Differently from the other case study analysed in this dissertation, this work is part of the main exhibition, hence is displayed in a viewing room inside Arsenale. Additionally, it has not been conceived and created specifically for the occasion of the Biennale: it has been previously displayed in a solo show of the artist at Tate St. Ives, from February 5th to May 2nd, 2022. The Vietnamese artist has been trained as a painter, but now works also with installation and video that mix the real and the imaginary, connecting mythology and folklore with contemporary issues revolving around industrialization, food security, climate change and imposed historical narratives.

The installation space built in the Arsenale is quite simple and straightforward to describe: a black box hosting a multi-channel projection composed of three screens. The three screens are of the same size, and they are positioned side by side, although the two lateral screens are tilted towards the viewer space (see elaboration below in fig. 8). The exhibition space is equipped with an L-shaped bench, cornering one side of the room. The “entrance” is provided through a tent, on the right-hand side of the room. The viewing room itself is not that big, but there is enough space for visitors to sit on the right side of the space and in front of the screens, both on the bench and on the floor. Differently from the other installation, there is not a person introducing visitors to the space: outside of the room there is a short artwork description, as it is the case for each piece exhibited in the Arsenal. Throughout the Biennale space there are cultural mediators ready to give more information about artworks, but they do not have permanent posts.

¹⁸³ Please refer to this note for all the figures of this section: figures 9 and 14 are from the installation at Biennale 2022, hence with the side screens slightly tilted, and with the subtitles on screen, in the central one. Figure 12 is from the installation view at Tate St Ives, in a slightly different space (the main difference in size). Figures 10, 11 and 13 are film stills of the three screens put side by side, with the subtitles outside of the screen space below the central one, hence they do not represent any of the installation views.

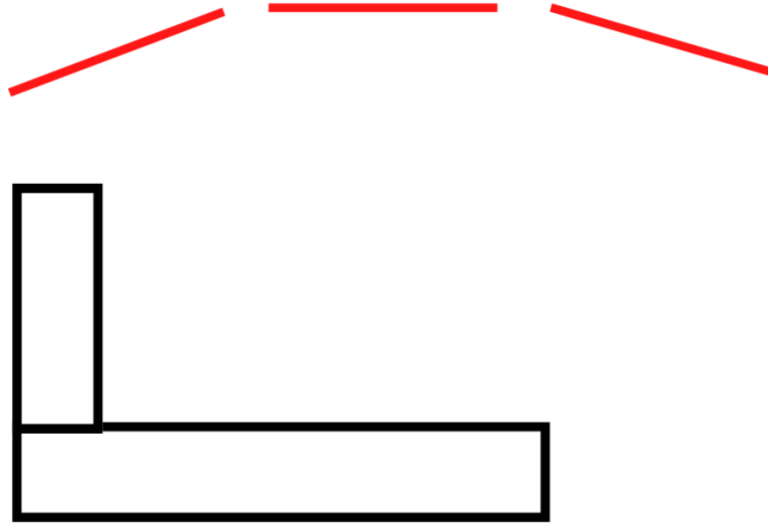


Figure 8 – Installation diagram, my elaboration

The content of the video, on the other side, it is quite complex, and narrated in a fascinating form. The video starts with a haiku by Matsuo Bashō, the most famous poet of the Edo period in Japan, which goes as follows:

With clear melting dew
i'd try to wash away
the dust of this floating world.

It is then followed by images of rain, while the narrating subtitles (in English, with no voiceover) propose a short story that indirectly introduces a set of recurring themes of the narrative: the Mekong River, construction works and materials, the monsoon rain, the destructive fire. After the title, followed by the artist's description of the work as an “evolving moving image”, the first part is announced: “Memory of a Construction Worker”. This chapter is a fictional memoir of a Vietnamese-Khmer construction worker. In first person (still through English subtitles, with no voiceover), he talks about *brise soleil*, or sun-blocking screen, an architectural element used to ventilate the interiors of buildings and shade

them from heat and sunlight.



Figure 9 - Thao Nguyen Phan, *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (installation view). Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia – ASAC. Photo by Roberto Marossi.

This technique was used in modernist buildings in the Republic of Vietnam (existing as a country from 1955 to 1975), and in New Khmer architecture in 1955–70, in the Kingdom of Cambodia. It was then tied to the US domination, as the lattices were at that time built with the modern material of concrete. The fictional worker was present at the destruction of the Preah Suramarit National Theatre, a building designed by the Cambodian modernist icon Vann Molyvann and regarded as national pride. This event is central to the story of the worker and is used as a reference to the 1977-1991 war between Vietnam and Cambodia.

Instances of *brise soleil* construction and the fire of the theatre are illustrated with animation of ink drawings by the artist that take shape on the screen, along with concurring evoking images. The *brise soleil* of the theatre, shaped in the form of fish scales, serves as a transition to images of the Mekong River, and to the second chapter of the video, “Memory of a Taste” (see figure 9 above). This part is narrated as a tale (it starts with “once upon a time”) taking place during 18th century local feudal wars. It is set in Vietnam and Chenla

(present-day Cambodia) and centers around a folk love story between a Vietnamese healer and a Khmer woman. The heart of the tale is the sweet and pungent *thouren*, or *durian*, a product of the Mekong Delta. This fruit becomes a magical symbol of loss and memory, and another hint at the conflict between the two countries. The romantic love story is narrated also through excerpt from a Vietnamese poem, the only time the viewer hears a voice speaking (in Vietnamese, with Vietnamese and English subtitles). The video ends by explaining that the traditional tale has originated another name for the *thouren*, *Sâu Riêng* (which means private mourning), and is followed by end credits.

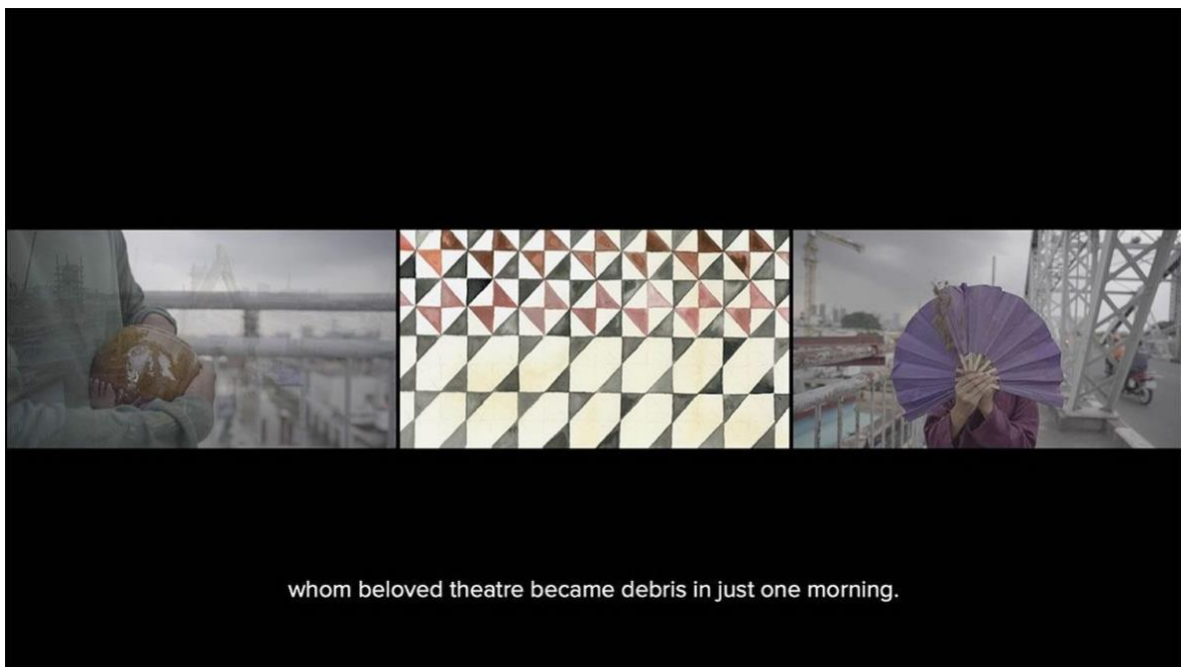


Figure 10 - Thao Nguyen Phan, *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (Video still) Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen. Made with the support of the Han Nefkens Art Foundation and Tate St Ives.

The installation, displaying Saigon's urban setting and the tropical landscape of the Mekong, addresses the many tensions and synergies between historical continuity and modern progress. The title itself is a reference to *Sa mu'a*, a poetic term in Vietnamese that indicates the first rain of the monsoon season, a mark of the start of the agricultural and spiritual cycle of the people living in the Mekong Delta. The script itself was inspired by the experience of the artist's uncle in the Cambodian-Vietnamese war, a rarely discussed taboo in media and Vietnamese official history. Through references to the consequences of climate change to her land (sea levels rising among the main concerns) and of war and occupation,

Thao Nguyen Phan aims at bringing forward political and socio-economic issues. «Proposing an alternative understanding of water, land, borders and territories, my practice explores the architectural and political dimension of folklore in relation to land invasion, ethnic migration, and urban progress»¹⁸⁴.

The way she addresses these themes is represented in the way images follow each other, a sort of weaving images, by the artist's definition. I will try to explain as follows. Out of the screens, the central one is also the center of the narrative for the most part. For instance, subtitles are always placed on that screen, except for the Vietnamese poem in the second part. This prompts the viewer to instinctively look at the central screen more, and then focus their attention there. However, side screens are not to be disregarded. In many occasions, they offer additional information on the story, and many times they show images that only when put together with the information the viewer gets from the subtitles are to be understood as premonitory.

For instance, when talking about the fire that destroyed the theatre, the subject is introduced by the fictional construction worker talking about having worked in Cambodia many times. At the same time, in the central screen there are the animated ink drawings of the theatre, while right side screen shows a child with a candle, and the left screen (maybe) the same candle screened by an orange tarp. After these images have disappeared, the subtitles read "I frequently have that dream after I caused the fire". Once the viewer sees these words, many consequent logical thoughts are prompted: firstly, they start learning the history of the theater and of its destruction and connecting the latter to the fire they just saw (and which did not make that much sense to the narrative earlier, when the candles on the side screens seemed to be quite irrelevant). Secondly, they might connect the fire to the short story told in the introduction: that of a barge's charge, grain, catching fire on the river. Both, sorts of premonition. Thirdly, they are left to make sense of what is meant with "that dream": is the builder referring to the images on the screen just a few seconds ago, or maybe to the initial story, apparently unconnected to the rest of the narrative up until now?

¹⁸⁴ Thao Nguyen Phan, source <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-st-ives/thao-nguyen-phan/exhibition-guide>, accessed 26/01/2023.

While what the real answer here is not of importance, what is key in the continuous leaps forward and back in time is the play with the viewer's perception of the temporal dimension featuring the story, its links and duration. References to themes mentioned earlier or to ideas that will make sense later in the video are the hallmark of this work, and they are given to the viewer in many instances and in many different ways: it is a weaving of images described by Phan. This is built upon a sensorial recollection of the past and at the same time an evocative presage of the future. It is a movement inside the time of the story, in both directions, and a movement in the viewer's experiencing and understanding of the story.

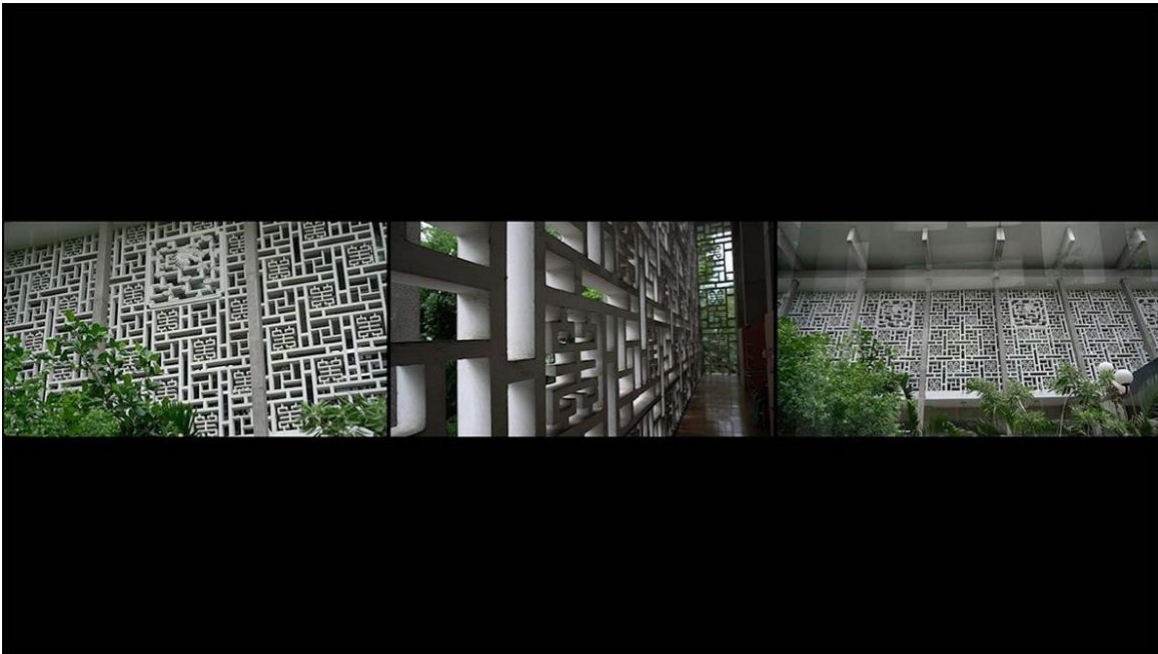


Figure 11 - Thao Nguyen Phan, *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (Video still). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen. Made with the support of the Han Nefkens Art Foundation and Tate St Ives.

Another example is the transition to the second chapter: while the construction worker is talking about the *brise soleil* resembling fish scales, as an homage to the aquatic life of the Mekong, the side screens are already showing children on barges over the river. The middle screen is still showing ink drawings of this specific type of *brise soleil*, that slowly become a mask over the background of the moving river; concurrently, the side screens have already set the scene for the second story (see fig. 9).



Figure 12 - Thao Nguyen Phan, *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (installation view.) Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen. Made with the support of the Han Nefkens Art Foundation and Tate St Ives.

However, the side screens are not necessarily always functional to the progression of the narrative or evocative in nature. In some instances, they are just showing other sides or points of view of what is displayed at the center. During the second chapter, when the *thouren* is firstly mentioned, the central screen shows its outside, while on the side screens the viewers see children eating it, so that the pulp and the pit of the fruit is to be seen, and we can better understand what it is. This way, the side screens just foster a further exploration of the central theme, or at least the expansion of a subject without moving forward or backward in the time of the story: for instance, where the *brise soleil* wall of a building is shown from the inside, it also shown from the outside, and from further away on the lateral screens (see fig. 11).

Finally, yet another use of the screens proposed by the artist is to evoke emotions. Especially in the second chapter, the viewers see many associations not strictly linked to the story: recurring choreographies of fans, sometimes catching fire, children walking forward and backward losing or finding scarves, images inside the stilt house typical of the Mekong Delta, or of young girls and boys washing their hands. All of these images are not strictly

useful to the narrative, they do not necessarily add information, but they hint at something: for instance, a girl is seen tearing up book pages of a book, which are then thrown into the river by a boy. To the careful (or Vietnamese) viewer, the title of this book, seen briefly in one frame, is very telling: *Truyện cô Cao Miên*, which means “Ancient Tales of Cambodia”.

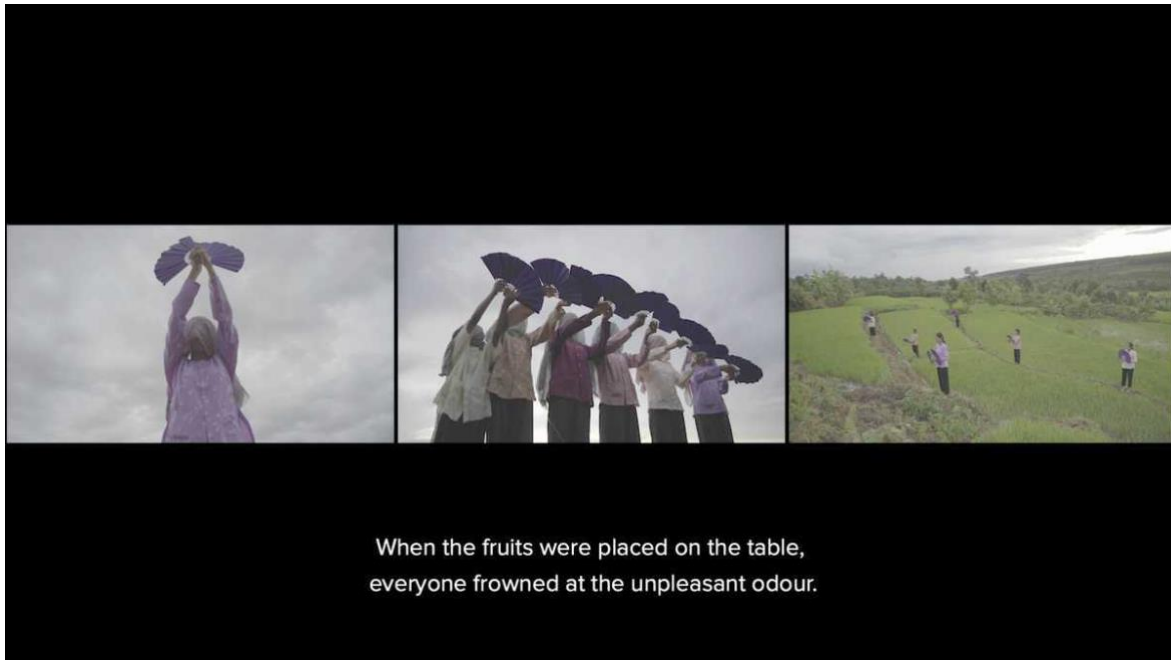


Figure 13 - Thao Nguyen Phan, First Rain, Brise-Soleil (Video still) Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen. Made with the support of the Han Nefkens Art Foundation and Tate St Ives.

To the casual viewer, the pulled apart book might still evoke contrasting feelings. In the first case, connections and political implication could be drawn to the cancellation of the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict in the common opinion, or to the loss of folklore and tradition, in the latter links to the story of loss narrated, to the mechanism of memory and witnessing. Either way, the interpretation of images might carry the viewer forward or backward in time, or out of time as well.

Having extensively explained the techniques used by the artist, it is now possible to dwell into the analysis of the method of spectatorship proposed by the artwork according to the scheme envisioned, starting off from the first element. Even if the gray zone found in this case is relatively different from the one presented above, it is still possible to find its defining elements. Protocols are vague as well: outside the viewing room there are no signs explicitly mandating behavior, nor a person explaining how to interact with the artwork or what to

expect. Although the space is very limited, the absence of rules allows visitors to interact between one another or to sit on the floor in a disorderly manner. This action occurs also because there is a lack of ideal viewing position, since the bench cannot host more than a few visitors. What is more, even if one manages to get a seat on it, the viewing might be interrupted by other visitors moving across the room, which makes the viewing position not ideal at all. The centrality of the text is not abandoned, but a sort of tripartite centrality is advanced: paying attention to all the three screens is quite challenging and trying to understand the mechanism governing them undermines its unfiltered reception. Schedules are not defined, and viewers are likely to enter and to experience the screening only partially, since the overall duration of the artwork is indicated but not at what time it has started. Finally, smartphones are permitted. Although it is a cinema-like environment, the light is dimmed and not completely dark: this influence the extent of phone usage, that might be frowned upon, but still employed (even if for taking a quick snap of the videos).

As a result, the same conclusion of the inattentive mode of distraction is to be inferred. This, like the first case study analysed in this text, is caused also by the space the screen media artwork is set. The Arsenale main exhibition is extensive in size and is also designed as a route that moves only forward. That is, it does not form a loop, or easily allows for returning to the starting point (although it is possible to do that): the entrance and the exit are in two different spots, quite far from another. *First rain, brise soleil* is the first video installation visitors find when exploring the Biennale. While this might cause adverse reactions (visitors staying for the whole screening, since is the first thing they see and they might be full of energy, or visitors staying for little, since they might be worried about not being able to see the whole exhibition in the day) it certainly influences the behavior inside the exhibition room. What is more, the artwork is presented along with a very wide number of other artworks, concurring for the viewer's attention. Big shows such as the Biennale and other mega-institution are often criticized for one of their common characteristics: that of being virtually unvisitable, just for the sheer quantity of works present, and causing museum fatigue and information overload to those that actually manage to visit in person.. Additionally, the location of the artwork in of itself and within the Biennale wider space is focal also in relation to the concept of orientation. Orientation influences how viewers engage

and go through artworks, and although it is not simple to draw a general orientation of the viewer, it is worth acknowledging that the location of the installation within a wider institutional and cultural space affects the demand the viewer makes of it.

In this case study, the exhibition space itself however does not offer chances for particular critiques, if not for the presence of multi-screens. This three-screens-circuit cannot be said to be excessively aimed at immersion, but it certainly plays with the viewer's capacity for attention and stimulation. Human's binocular vision allows for really focusing the eyesight on one thing at a time, and what is out of the strictly peripheral vision is registered only as background. It is impossible to look at the three screens at the same time, and the viewers might be shifting right and left trying to follow the images unfolding. While this might ensure constant and alert attention to focus on the narrative, it also fosters distraction, continuously giving images to the brain to elaborate. Excessive accumulation of disposable images, as explored in chapter 1.3, might cause indifference in the viewer, a sort of petrification caused by the impossibility of processing them. The presence of subtitles instead of a narrating voice might increase the additional material to scan. On the other side however, the installation is under stimulating in terms of the audio track, since it lacks a narrative voice and for the wide majority of the video the viewer hears ambient noise, while only in some rare instances accompanied by music.

However, it cannot be denied that the three screens are a source of distraction, if not of outright disregard for the moving images. Either way this is also aided by the vertical investigation operated by the artist. As explained above, this mode of narration is connected mainly to poetry, an explicit intention of the artist¹⁸⁵, and indirect references to a mode of vertical investigation are also to be found on the fact that she defines her installation "an evolving moving image". Vertical investigation is the time of meanwhile, which confronts the viewer with the passing of time they are caught with and asks them to stay with and think around an event. It is arguable that *First rain, brise soleil* is a compelling instance of this vertical investigation. Firstly, because the structure fosters moments of recognition: while the story might seem to progress, often there are break in the flow of time. The meaning of

¹⁸⁵ Thao Nguyen Phan's website masthead presents a quote by Édouard Glissant: "*the highest point of knowledge is always a poetics*".

each of these interruptions is challenging to decipher, but the sensation left in the viewer is that time and space are no longer continuous, or that slippages are continually occurring. Some interruptions might also be interpreted as repetitions of something similar occurred earlier, but with a difference. Elements such as fans, scarfs, fires, grains, the river and its lush



Figure 14 - Thao Nguyen Phan, *First Rain, Brise-Soleil* (installation view) Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia – ASAC. Photos by Roberto Marossi.

environment, the rain, the sand used for construction are all recurring throughout the whole movie. Again, aside from their significance in terms of meaning, the confusion evoked in the viewer is undeniable, as it is not clear if the video has looped and the story is starting again or if they are just witnessing a reference to something mentioned at the beginning, a dream, or something occurred in the past. The initial short story, which is seemingly not connected to the rest of the narrative (a barge's charge, grain, catching fire while drifting on the river) is recalled throughout the video with multiple visual references to it.

Another compelling instance is apparent in fig. 14, where viewers get the feeling of seeing again images or scenes they have already seen previously. This segment is to be placed in the second segment of the story, when the tale of the young lovers is told. When

talking about the difficulty the couple was facing, flower petals are briefly shown, right before introducing the central theme of the *thouren* fruit, found in the couple's garden. Afterwards, when the story has moved forward (the woman has died, and the husband has moved away to Cambodia), the same flower is seen again, with a hand peeling away all his petals, used as a metaphor for explaining the nature of the *thouren* fruit, with an ugly outside part but with "insides as beautiful as love". It is of course possible to draw connections after repetitive and attentive viewings, maybe with the aid of notes like in my case, but to the viewer witnessing the piece only once the feeling is that of reliving same and similar moments, or seeing multiple repetitions of them, while being confused on their links to the narrative.

These sensations foster the exact sense of simultaneity that Deren was looking for. The case of *First rain, brise soleil* does mix some elements of horizontal development, as there are two stories that progress more or less linearly, with some of the vertical one, as often central emotions and ideas tie together images, rather than the story itself. It does indeed look as if the central core is not what is occurring, but what feeling it evokes. When, during the second chapter, the husband is opening up the *thouren* and he finds inside a mysterious object, he is struck by a stream of memories. To evoke them, a voice starts narrating a poem, stopping the progression of the story, that after the end of the poem resumes. The viewer then is not just informed that the man is remembering his lost wife, instead the feeling is explored and to do so the narrated events stop. Of course, the viewer is then faced with coming to the terms with the duration of the story, and the passing of time within the story and within reality. This mechanism is not clear right away but unravels in the time of the viewing experience.

The combination of the three screens and of this vertical investigation structure bring forward an intellectual and sensual engagement, while at the same time fostering distraction. It is not only the layout to suggest that, but the constant references to multiple elements that disrupt a continuous and focused attention. Hints at apparently not connected themes, at various environments and mostly at the structure of time itself make the viewer ponder about technical components. This type of engagement is of course influenced by the space outside of the installation itself, but also the space inside of it. The benches can only accommodate a limited number of viewers, while others have to sit on the floor or stand leaning on the wall.

As seen above, the entrance is to the right of the screen, while the benches are sided up forming a L shape in the left-hand corner. This implies that viewers are very much likely to have other visitors in their field of view, the room being not so big, and to enter or leave will get into the space between the other viewers and the screens. Of course, this characteristic of the exhibition space, that of other visitors physically getting “into” the viewing experience, causes distraction to those already watching. It might also be causing distress or annoyance, but the main point is that these distractions heavily disrupt the screening, as the plot is quite challenging to follow. Missing a few seconds can mean missing a key element, also because the subtitles are present just on the middle screen, and there is no voiceover to help with the narrative. This causes an engagement that takes place at the intellectual, sensual and reflective level while making it impossible to lose awareness of their surroundings.

These features cause an intense tension between the illusionistic sensations produced by the vertical investigation and the actual material space of the installation. Viewers are heavily drawn into the exotic dimension of the story, the space inside the screen, both because of the fascinating moving images and because of the appealing method of narration. This narrating technique however puts attention on the spatial presence of the screens: as much as the poetic storytelling is immersive, is also a constant reminder that there is not only a screen, but multiple ones, and that the viewer is in an exhibition space. Finally, the space before the screen, allowing viewers to pass in front, stresses the presence of bodies, also because the dimension of the screens themselves is not much bigger than the average height of a person.

The result is analogous of the other case studied before, although achieved with different techniques: viewers are even more so *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the extent to which screen media art proposes a different kind of spectatorship. Drawing on relevant theories dealing with the same matter, I argue that the cultural context these artworks are displayed in, along with their exhibition spaces and the consequent investigations they propose are crucial. Indeed, the case studies presented have revealed that the spatial features of the exhibition spaces are of paramount importance

for determining how the work will be perceived. In turn, these case studies proved the proposed model of spectatorship to be a working one. While the defining characteristics of this model are not intended as a checklist to adhere to, they do touch on different key aspects of the viewing experience: time, space, attention, context. The model is indeed not intended to be strictly prescriptive nor descriptive, but more to highlight the status of screen media art as a hybrid viewing experience, not quite the same as the cinema, nor as the conventional art white cube. Indeed, it would be probably more fit to see the features deemed defining as a spectrum to which artworks can adhere on a more profound or a lesser extent.

The case studies chosen, in particular, are not by any means similar in how they bring forward this self-conscious spectatorship. Through the use of a comforting environment, drawing attention to the church setting while at the same time fostering distraction, *When the body says Yes* creates a mix of involvement and disregard for the moving images. In this instance, the focus is not so much on the content of the video itself, or on the screen, but on the space around them. Here is the location of the installation, its characteristics, and the space around the screen that influence the viewer's attention. As a result, the viewer is not simply bored, or distracted and lost for good: a continuous channelling and rechannelling of the attention is taking place as the dominant mechanism in the viewing experience.

Meanwhile, *First rain, brise-soleil* works on another level while achieving the same results. Its assessment has demonstrated that the investigation proposed by the three-screens circuit is key in determining how the viewer respond to the work as a whole. The confusion and puzzlement produced by this structure are functional in drawing the viewer in while at the same time creating a detachment from these images. The focus here is not on the space around the screens, but the screens themselves as objects which determine the way the viewer interacts with them. The channelling and rechannelling of attention is even more self-conscious here, as the viewer is left to make sense of what they are seeing, and has to take active action if interested in understanding the narrative.

Either way, through different techniques, these artworks cause the viewer to be lost and in control of space and time. This result is achieved through their peculiar characteristics but to the conformation of the exhibition space and to the cultural paradigm they exist within as well. From these results it is possible to state implications about the broader field, both in

terms of art spectatorship (without restricting the focus of analysis to a certain medium) and about the state of images in a media-saturated environments, such as that of our contemporary visual cultures. As mentioned several times, the accumulation of images, of information, of experiences, is relevant in an attention economy fighting hard to secure the viewer/consumer's attention. Enquiring about how these dynamics influence the museum, a non-neutral space, and how these dynamics are in turn influenced by the mode of attention proposed in cultural spaces is key. Not as much as to individuate which one is prevailing, but more to understand art, and in particular screen media art, not as a phenomenon happening in a vacuum, but to recognize its role as influencer and influenced piece. This, both in terms of societal and academic relevance.

Of course, this is not to say that study as the one presented here can be taken as encompassing analysis of the overall circumstances culture exists within, nor of the spectatorship proposed by screen media art as a whole. Indeed, the aim of this study has been to enquire into what kind of spectatorship these specific artworks propose, in their specific individual and artistic context. The goal has not been of developing a single model that works and can be applied to any piece in any context. In this feature lies both the strength and the limitation of the analysis brought forward. As much as the results have implications for the field at large, the findings cannot be generalized, or better this model is strictly tied to the context the artworks were presented in. Transcending the particular of the cases themselves would mean apply the theories to screen media artworks, taking into consideration the cultural environment, the period, and the location they are set in. Of course, this line of research can be pursued, and in doing so the validity of the model would be assessed further.

However, expanding research on the topic of spectatorship in screen media art, especially about attention and distraction, could yield different results. The review of these case studies has been guided by the theories, hence interpreting the lack of attention as a focal point in shaping the experience. A different interpretation might see this intermittent attention as a simple lack of interest. While this interpretation is surely tempting, I find it to be an oversimplification of a very complex phenomenon. The human brain reacts to instincts and inputs that are not necessarily something other than automatic reactions: equating distraction to a conscious, calculated and definite loss of interest is not representative of how

spectatorship works. The mechanism of attention is a very delicate one, and its shifting is very much dependent on several factors. Incorporating behavioural and cognitive studies about the orientation of the viewer into the model proposed would be a compelling direction for further research, moving outside the strict art spectatorship field, but providing an interesting and perhaps necessary interdisciplinary outlook on the phenomenon.

Finally, among the limitations it is worth to acknowledge that the theories used, while relatively recent (more or less from 10 years ago), may become quickly outdated. This is not to say that they are not valid, but more to underline the speed at which technologies as well as cultural practices move, both inside and outside the museum. For instance, the 2019 Covid pandemic has jumpstarted the possibility of doing virtual tours. While the health emergency has stopped, many museums still include this offer, changing the way viewers interacts with art pieces and thus requiring the scholarly reflection to reshuffle many categories around new forms of art consumption. Another wider cultural phenomenon is the rise of video as the most popular internet content: analysis declare that for 2022 eighty-two per cent of internet traffic was forecasted to be video content¹⁸⁶. While both of these instances are not significant per se, I believe they should be taken into account when reviewing spectatorship in screen media art, and incorporating them in research can provide once again stimulating insights.

This being said, the analysis proposed in my work hopes to provide insights to determine the intensity and depth of attention proposed by the selected artworks, their quality, not to determine what psychoanalytical consequence is to be drawn from witnessing these pieces, nor to look at the state of museums and video content as a whole, but to offer a new reading of current cultural practices. To advance the understanding of screen media art, however, it would be beneficial to carry on these proposed lines of research, focusing less on their implication for spectatorship. Further research would then be beneficial to expand the proposed theories and foster more in-depth understanding on how this new model of spectatorship could be applied to this kind of art.

¹⁸⁶<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2020/02/05/looking-deep-into-the-state-of-online-video-for-2020/?sh=7c4562f82eac>, accessed 31/01/2023.

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