

PERFORMING MOVING IMAGES



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FRAMING FILM is a book series dedicated to theoretical and analytical studies in restoration, collection, archival, and exhibition practices in line with the existing archive of EYE Filmmuseum. With this series, Amsterdam University Press and EYE aim to support the academic research community, as well as practitioners in archive and restoration.

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SENTA SIEWERT

# PERFORMING MOVING IMAGES

Access, Archive and Affects

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# Introduction: Experimental Cinema, Expanded Cinema, and Artists' Film

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The beauty and intensity of experimental film and the Expanded Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s can be an enthralling experience for audiences. However, an engaged viewer who wishes to discover more of these films or to repeat the experience would be presented with quite a challenge. With most of these films being held in archives in their original 16mm film cans, public access to these works tends to be limited to screenings at film festivals and art venues. Hence, usually only specialized festivals and art institutions offer viewing opportunities for an interested audience.

*Performing Moving Images. Access, Archive and Affects* presents some of the institutions, engaged individuals and networks that in recent years have worked to ensure that these art forms continue to be screened rather than be consigned to oblivion. Selected case studies of experimental films, Expanded Cinema, installations and music videos engage with the wider issues of aesthetic experience, perception, reception, history, and memory. What are the processes by which moving images are performed, how is access to images and sounds granted, and what are the dynamics in archival setups? Exploring these questions, I will study film programmes, exhibitions, and festivals as well as contemporary artworks that utilize the aesthetics of experimental film and Expanded Cinema, including, for example, *found footage* and the remake.

My initial impetus for this research originated in the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) in 2011, where I attended programmes by the Los Angeles-based curator and archivist Mark Toscano, who screened 16mm short



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films that had not yet been digitized. These programmes included artists' films from the 1960s and 1970s that were both visually and aurally stimulating. They were shipped over from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive (Academy Archive) in Los Angeles. One of the most captivating films was --- ----- (*aka The Rock 'n' Roll Film*) (1966-1967), made by Thom Andersen and Malcolm Brodwick. The collage of sound and images felt like a symphony of audio-visual impulses. While I felt elated by this experience, I also found myself laughing at the hilarious beauty of its jump cut audio-visual assemblage. It was an unusual aesthetic experience, with no obvious fades or music overlaps. The hard edits of the visuals and sounds were, nevertheless, highly controlled and fascinating to watch. Perhaps in that moment I realized the impact of the subjective visceral experience in viewing these films and became fascinated with the complexities of these artistic compositions.

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The short films in the programme seemed to relate to each other and together to tell a broader story, the story of a specific era, which showcased exciting visuals, sounds and narratives. Moreover, the whole programme of experimental films was arranged in an order and followed a specific rhythm which gave me a heightened, uplifting experience. After the screening, I was gripped by the memory of this experience, which would later compel me to travel to Los Angeles and watch the film again on an editing table in the Academy Archive, where they are stored. Aware of the surveillance cameras and the ban on taking pictures, travelling to the archive was like finding your way to the centre of a labyrinth, where these images and sounds resided.

Here, I was met by Mark Toscano, who showed me through their incredible vault storage areas. Before we reached the visitor viewing rooms with editing tables for 16mm films, we passed by an installation of digitized loops of bits and pieces of experimental films by Gary Beydler (*Hand Held Day*, 1975; *Venice Pier*, 1976) – a wonderful coincidence, as I had seen these exact films in Rotterdam at the festival. This installation showcased new restoration and digitization programmes from the Academy Archive. As we entered the viewing area, a close-up of Beydler, rubbing his face on a window screen, served as a visceral welcome to the archive (*Glass Face*, 1975). In archives such as this I would soon conduct parts of my research for the present study, interested precisely in what happens to experimental and artists' films from the 1960s and 1970s when they are preserved and accessed anew, when reconstructed and re-performed in the cinema, museum and beyond.

In this book I intend to not only study and analyse, but also to celebrate the experiences and fascination with these films. It appears I am not the only one fascinated – Los Angeles based film scholar David E. James uses 'minor cinema' as an umbrella term for 'experimental, poetic, underground, ethnic, amateur, counter, non-commodity, working-class, critical artists' film-making'



films that to him are a very specific aesthetic experience that should be more widely appreciated (James 2005, 13). Other scholars classify these films as experimental film, underground film, avant-garde film, Expanded Cinema or artists' cinema (Renan 1967; Youngblood 1970; Vogel 1974; James 2006). In what follows, I will utilize the term 'experimental film' to refer to films made by artists with a film background, whereas 'Expanded Cinema' refers to art forms that can be described as performative experimental film and 'artists' film', works which are mostly shown in museums and made by visual artists.

In order to acknowledge the complete environment of experimental films and Expanded Cinema, I will explore some of the dominant discourses on the discursive, cultural, social, and political contexts of film production, projection, reception, archiving, and reuse by the various agents including the film industry and art markets. Cultural practices such as programming, curating, and reconstruction, are analyzed here as elements of a 'performative practice of film historiography'. Methodologically speaking, the book seeks to close the traditional and outdated gap between analysis and theoretical modelling in film theory on the one hand and the reconstruction of the reception experience on the other. This will be done by drawing on historical reconstruction combined with an accompanying participatory analysis of programming and curatorial work.

Many of the screenings of experimental films and the Expanded Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s covered here were either part of festivals or re-enactment events staged in the period 2007-2016. These events took place (amongst others) at the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art in Berlin; at the Berlin Film Festival; at Kunstwerke gallery in Berlin; at the Eye Film Museum and the Sonic Act Festival in Amsterdam; at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam, at the Bozar in Brussels; at the Tate Gallery in London; at the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, at REDCAT, Filmforum and Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; at the New York Film Festival, the Anthology Film Archives and Light Industry in New York. Such events will serve as illustrative case studies of interesting and sometimes innovative strategies of presenting and preserving experimental films and Expanded Cinema in recent years.

This book will read in parts as a history of events. Particularly so in view of the power of events and artworks to arouse or elicit emotions that facilitate an immediate experience of these films from a bygone era and, thus, provides access to the past. I have discussed these topics with a number of people involved in the field, whose voices and views have greatly contributed to my study. Therefore, this study is guided by and adopts a variety of perspectives drawn from interviews I conducted with film makers, artists, programmers, curators, festival directors, archivists, and academics. I perceive my interviewees as cultural agents. Their interviews can be understood as an *oral history*,

contributing subjective insights to the academic discourse.<sup>1</sup> The interview approach is complemented by comparative, transnational, analytical perspectives on concrete curatorial concepts, restoration, digitization strategies of selected film and video art institutions, and the respective preservation and reconstruction practices for their archives and collections. The research will help to outline how film images circulate. Accordingly, the study adopts a mixed approach, in which this ethnographic research is in dialogue with film aesthetics and economics.

10 | Since film material is fragile and the viewing experience a fleeting one, the preservation of film heritage and the protection of film knowledge is vitally important. This raises the pertinent questions concerning the safeguarding of the cultural heritage of film. Who or what guides decisions about what should be preserved and curated considering the vast amount of digitized films already available on DVDs and the internet? What is the role of curators in the process of re-showing, re-contextualizing, re-enacting and remembering? What are their conservation and restoration strategies? What are their thoughts about obsolescence? These questions will be discussed throughout the book. I believe that programmers, curators, scholars and archivists play important roles in this process, because they select films or Expanded Cinema works for cinemas, *cinematheques*, and festivals. In the act of selecting and presenting they support the continuing existence of films, artworks and archives. Moreover, they underline the necessity of funding for presenting, exhibiting, documentation and restoration of film as cultural heritage.

In today's fast-moving field of film and media, technological and economic changes have had far-reaching consequences, ranging from the removal of analogue projectors from cinemas and a partial end to the distribution of film prints to the closure of some film laboratories. A common approach to preserving such films is to migrate them to a digital format before transferring them to other film stock. However, during my research, film makers, artists and archivists repeatedly told me that digital formats are not always the most satisfactory archival medium, nor are they always an adequate projection medium, especially for experimental films and Expanded Cinema works. Preserving digital works presents its own set of problems, for example the constant necessity to convert digital films into new formats and purchase new hardware. The threat of the disintegration of the carrier material of film and video and the quick succession of technical systems for generating, saving and replaying pictures have triggered diverse academic discussions on questions about digitization, reproducibility, versions, distribution, and copyright (Cherchi Usai 2008; Fossati 2009; Frick 2011).

As the boundaries demarcating film and art are becoming less rigid, my book presents not only a history of film, or a history of artists' film, but instead

an ‘expanded history of the moving image’. I use the term ‘expanded history’ here to reference both Expanded Cinema and the expanded nature of image and sound in the different experimental films. I will focus on the developments in the historiography of film known as ‘revisionist film historiography’, ‘historical poetics’, and ‘new film history’ (Elsaesser 2016). Additionally, concepts from art history are brought into play (Dubois 2013), namely in the ‘cinema effect in museums’ and the more general ‘cinematographic turn’ in the arts that describe the relationship between the institutions ‘black box’ of the cinema and the ‘white cube’ of the museum.

In Chapter 1 ‘Access: Agents, Archives’ the question of locating and accessing experimental films from the 1960s and 1970s is central in conjunction with questions of identifying who is responsible for showing them today. The chapter will introduce selected institutions and their presentation and preservation strategies and relevant media and cultural policies as well as the work of different stakeholders, archivists and curators. The chapter is a response to the frequently voiced opinion that cinema is in danger of disappearing altogether. Rather, the chapter will demonstrate that cinematic experiences still maintain special qualities in comparison to other ways of watching moving images. Therefore, discussions on the ‘death of cinema’ and the understanding of the medium’s specificity will be addressed. To elucidate practices in the circulation of moving images as well as their position within the field of film studies, this chapter engages with relevant discourses about the archive and various concepts of programming and curating (Baron 2014, Brunow 2017; Cherchi Usai 2008; Derrida 1995; Ebeling and Günzel 2009; Foucault 1972; Fossati 2009; Foster 2004; Graham and Cook 2010; Marks 2004; Russell 2018).

Chapter 2 ‘Affect: Performance, Audience’ explores the specific aesthetic experiences of viewing experimental films and Expanded Cinema in the movie theatre and in the museum. Particular attention is paid to concepts of perception, participation, experience, phenomenology, and affect (Bruno 2007; Casetti 2015; Shaviro 1993; Zryd 2002), the societal, economic, architectural, and technical contexts of cinema as a space of perception (Balsom 2013; Gass 2013), and the role of performativity (Taylor 2003; Hanstein 2017). The analysis includes experimental films, the forerunners of the music video clip, describing their influence on recent music video clips. The chapter makes a special point of highlighting the significance of music for the film experience in general, since it is often treated as a secondary consideration in film studies.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 3 ‘Reconstruction: Memory, Audio-Visual Heritage’ is concerned with how to actually analyze the activity of re-screening, re-enacting and reconstructing film. Given that film archives have grown in relevance in recent years, one may ask, what the relationship between aesthetic experience and memory at the intersection of film archives, cinema, and exhibition practices may be. It

was in a similar vein that Miriam Hansen (2012) addressed the desirability of integrating digital transformations into a wider cultural memory, while at the same time rediscovering and reinventing cinema. A key part of the process of rediscovery is the artistic practice of reconstruction. The focus will be on the concept of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1998; Brunow 2015) while analyzing artistic practices dealing with the past, using *found footage*, re-enactment, and sampling (Baron 2014; Blümlinger 2009). Furthermore, questions relating to audio-visual cultural heritage and cultural memory are addressed with recourse to general concepts of memory (Assmann 2008; Bohn 2012; Klippel 1997; Landsberg 2004) and transnationality of memory (Erl 2011). It will be necessary to add to Assman's and Erl's concepts an understanding of experimental films, Expanded Cinema, and film and video installation art as important constituents of the culture of memory.

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The method of 'pragmatic poetics', which I have developed in my previous work (Siewert 2013), links economic (pragmatic) issues with aesthetic (poetic) questions. This method helps to frame processes of remembering as intellectual work in which perception, memory and recognition are permanently woven together in continual motion. My approach is informed by Gilles Deleuze's writing on memory and on remembering (1989/1990), in which he connects past experiences with current perceptions. I will provide my own definition of memory, redirecting the focus to the affective power of experimental films, artistic works, and live events, which enable an intensive access to films from earlier eras and, therefore, have the potential to carry an audience back in time. A special focus lies on both the visual and aural power that these events have on their audience.

Furthermore, I describe the special aesthetic experience of some experimental films, Expanded Cinema, installations and music videos, which often emerges from the combination of visual and sonic sensations and can be described as 'sensual pleasure'. This aesthetic experience, in connection the 'historical sensations' (Benshop 2009) and 'joyful memory' (Fevry 2015) is the reason for my interest for these selected artforms. On the whole, my own concept of 'expanded heritage' can be understood as an expansion of both research and practice beyond a nationally bounded audio-visual heritage.

Aside from presenting my research and analysis, I do hope that I may also be able to communicate my fascination with experimental film and archives to the reader. Experience plays an integral role both in viewing and in analyzing of artistic and experimental films and, hence, also in the archives' call to preserve not only the material but the many dimensions of film in the darkness of vaults and in the limelight of projections. Inherent in the experiential dimension of film is the subjectivity of the experience, be it by the individual or a collective audience. This subjectivity requires space for telling its story

as part of the viewing and reviewing processes. This storytelling requires, if you will, an exhibition space to be explored for the purpose of meta-reflection and analysis. In this book, I seek to create such a space and use it for suggesting some of the sentences that may comprise, in time, such a dynamically and collectively evolving meta-narrative, or rather, meta-discourse. Hence, my approach to writing this book follows in part traditional academic standards and has in part been inspired by the method of montage in films and by technique of sampling in music performances. You as reader are invited to explore with me the archival and projection spaces and to debate my attempts at an explanatory meta-narrative.

## NOTES

- 1 More on oral history: Sandrino and Partington 2013.
- 2 I refer to my previous work on affect and music (Siewert 2010; 2013f).

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