Rethinking the Expanded Cinema

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REFERENCES

Thierry Davila, *Shadow Pieces (David Claerbout)*, Genève : Mamco, 2015

Gloria Sutton, *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek's Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015, (Leonardo)

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

Cinéma exposé = Exhibited Cinema, Lausanne : Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne, 2014.

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Antonioni, Paris : Flammarion : La Cinémathèque française, 2015

- 1 If we stick to a restricted definition, the notion of *Expanded Cinema* was first mentioned in the American press to describe Robert Whitman's *Cinema Pieces* (1965).¹By hewing out a space between structural cinema and independent cinema, between modernism and neo-avant-garde, and between Minimalism and Conceptual Art, the Expanded Cinema is in fact crucial for understanding the American art scene of the 1960s, on the West coast and the East coast alike. Retracing its history, however, is not easy, because, first and foremost, ever since its earliest manifestations, we realize that neither a movement nor an aesthetic were involved—a flexibility which risks creating uncertainties about its role in the history of the visual arts and in the ecology of the media. The second difficulty has

to do with the sources of the Expanded Cinema, because its analysis and its interpretation are based on static images, as is here emphasized by Gloria Sutton.²

- 2 Based on an historically and aesthetically broader definition, the Expanded Cinema raises a central question—stemming from a challenge—at the heart of postwar art practices: that of the exhibition of moving images. This is true if we consider the forms and the types of discourse which the Expanded Cinema has taken up and maintained outside the United States. A wider vision, making it possible to bring forth general trends, may still be lacking but case studies (Great Britain, Switzerland, Austria, France, Italy, the East European countries) are increasingly numerous. What comes to the fore is a less structured situation than the trans-Atlantic one, due to the absence of corporations like IBM and Bell, which played a significant part in the tangible production of this type of cinema. In the United States, in fact, there is no Expanded Cinema that is independent of the culture industry: Stan VanDerBeek's (1927-1984) *Movie-Drome*, for example, was made with the help of the New York State Council for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation.
- 3 The most comprehensive recent studies waver between a restricted and an open definition, somewhere between the specific and the general with regard to the Expanded Cinema. They are able to include the post-cinematographic turning point of the mid-1990s, whereas art galleries, biennials and art fairs have become special venues for presenting the cinematographic experience, within a wider history of moving images. Based on a genealogical and archaeological approach, this history of images takes pre-cinematographic and extra-filmic models into account as well as where they overlap with the visual arts, as is specified by the anthology *Jeux sérieux : cinéma et art contemporains transforment l'essai*. In this respect, François Bovier and Adeena Mey talk about “exhibited cinema” and not “exhibition cinema”, the former “includes the moving image as it unfolds through multiple modalities and heterogeneous spaces (the art space or the museum being just one kind of site amongst others, such as universal exhibitions, industrial fairs, festivals, artists’ studios, streets and their frontages)”.³
- 4 For their part, artists make a presentation of perceptive thresholds and an exhibition of time-frame for the period between static image and moving image. By projecting animated photographs like films and sequences with neither beginning nor end, following the example of *Shadow Pieces* (2005), an artist like David Claerbout produces “nothing less than temporal objects”, Thierry Davila explains to us, “because shadows are the representation of time passing, even if this latter is sometimes frozen, even if everything seems to happen, as in *Shadow Pieces*, within an immobile time-frame”.⁴ This capacity to show the time span or a “phenomenal, qualitatively experienced time-frame”⁵ well removed from the *chronos*, might help us to reconsider current museum and curatorial issues to do with time-based and durational media. In this respect let us mention the exhibition about Michelangelo Antonioni, presenting attempts to “re-use” his films by video-makers (Doug Aitken, Eric Baudelaire, Luidgi Beltrame, Pierre Bismuth, Julien Crépieux, Christian Marclay, Peter Welz, and the threesome Philippe Parreno, Carsten Höller, and Rirkrit Tiravanija).
- 5 It is possibly due to the wavering between the specific and overall nature of the Expanded Cinema that several recent exhibitions (from the New Museum in New York to the 2013 Venice Biennale) have shown Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie Murals* (1965), alongside contemporary installations of multiple-screen digital videos. The gap is less perceptible than one might think. Well removed from any fetishism about the original material

medium, VanDerBeek's multi-projections are shown without the technical arrangement which made them conceivable, with 35 mm slide projectors and digital transfers of 16mm film loops. Similarly, his films on VHS, transferred to a digital medium, can today be seen on a host website like YouTube,⁶ based on an aesthetic of the poor image, "downloaded, shared, reformatted and re-edited" (Hito Steyerl).⁷

- 6 The technical apparatus of the *Movie-Drome* (1963-65) was relatively simple: overhead projectors for the drawings produced by the artist on sheets of acetate, slide carrousels and a dozen 16mm projectors handled by VanDerBeek from a central panel, just like sound and light. This calls to mind the pre-cinematographic device of the zoetrope, where the images are broadcast from a central axis. The hemispherical screen on the aluminium ceiling distorted the images, while exploding the quadrangular film screen and the mono-focal perspective. This fresco of simultaneous and disparate images combined willy-nilly found footage, filmed sequences of topical things and art historical slides, based on an aesthetics of assemblage with postwar art practices which challenged the modernist paradigm.
- 7 Stan VanDerBeek used the technology available at the time, in particular the satellite and fibre-optic cable telecommunications system that was developed by the American military system against a possible nuclear threat. It was during that period, in 1972, that the first colour images of the earth seen from orbiting satellites started to circulate in the iconosphere: "The introduction of satellite imagery of the earth's sphere – the bird's-eye view of the globe – ushered in a new type of subjectivity, a planetary being with a technological real-time connection regardless of geographic location".⁸ The emergence of an audio visual environment, of a real-time network, with no extensions or distances, and of the global village (Marshall McLuhan) went hand in glove with a multimedia subjectivity, which we are still in the process of defining.
- 8 Over and above a simple dialectic between art and technology, the Expanded Cinema thus offers us a chance to look at the relations between media art and industrial culture, and between the formal and political radicalism of the avant-garde and its institutionalization. The techno-utopian enthusiasm peculiar to cybernetics, at a time when the shift was being made from the mechanical age to the computer age, was accompanied by a counter-cultural discourse (we have VanDerBeek to thank for the expression 'underground film') and the construction of a collective experience.
- 9 The issue at the heart of the *movie-drome*, and, in general, of the multimedia shows of the Expanded Cinema, is less the technological apparatus than the collective dimension, the establishment of an interface (to use a notion introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1962). The Stony Point *movie-drome* was just the prototype for a network of domes in the world, each one linked to an orbiting satellite for image storage and transmission. This cultural intercommunication (the term is VanDerBeek's) can be compared rather to a communication network (Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, McLuhan) than to a relational aesthetic, as we might interpret it today. And this to a point where, for Gloria Sutton, the *Expanded Cinema* anticipated the aesthetics of the network, the net.art of the 1990s, rather than the tendency to show film in museums and art galleries.
- 10 This aspect made the *movie-drome* distinct from other forms of Expanded Cinema of the 1960s, like the *Pavillon* project produced by EAT (Experiments Art Technology) for Expo '70 in Osaka, and *Glimpses of the U.S.A.* by Charles and Ray Eames for the 1959 Moscow World Fair. With this work, all reactions were premeditated. The visual complexity was

regulated and subjected to a didactic, not to say propagandist message, referring to the surplus of goods in the American capitalist system.

- 11 “Expanded consciousness is being confused with the ability to see more color images, with the expanded eye, with the quickness of the eye”,⁹ wrote Jonas Mekas in 1965 with regard to the multimedia shows at the World Fair. And VanDerBeek did not fail to note the ‘visual velocity’ towards which culture was headed. Once lying down on the floor of the dome, their eyes looking upwards, the public was bombarded, rather than merely solicited, by an overload of visual and acoustic stimuli, by hundreds of images, and quadraphonic sound. This uninterrupted, random, constantly changing flow of visual and acoustic information, not governed by any logic, or any thematic link unless it was the circularity of the spectators’ eyes, called for a plural and diffuse attention.
- 12 In 1967, John Cage described how far this sensory experience was from the immersive dimension of cinema and fairs: “a renunciation of intention, which is effected through the multiplication of images. In this multiplicity, intention becomes lost and becomes silent, as it were, in the eyes of the observer”.¹⁰
- 13 Stan VanDerBeek was not the only person to conceive of a synaesthesia. On the one hand, the Expanded Cinema was a multimedia show, a happening whose theatricality could take on a paroxysmal dimension. This visual kaleidoscopy, not to say cacophony, was a form of assemblage not far removed from Robert Rauschenberg’s *Combine Paintings*. In this sense, film is a live performance, where moving images are manipulated live, with the experience of the film being part and parcel of the work: what is shown is the image, just as much as the projection itself.
- 14 On the other hand, the Expanded Cinema explores the cinematographic device in its material components in an analytical way. This cinema is “expanded” not in the sense that it produces elements absent from the classical experience of cinema, but, on the contrary, in the sense that it does without its constituent elements, and its filmic specificity. Jonas Mekas defined this well in November 1965, in *The Village Voice*: “Not all that’s happening at the Filmmakers’ Cinematheque this month [*Expanded Cinema Survey*, 1965] is or can be called cinema. Light is there, motion is there, the screen is there; and the film image, very often, is there; but it cannot be described or experienced in terms you would use to describe or experience the Griffith cinema, the Godard cinema, or even the Brakhage cinema.”¹¹
- 15 In his *Introduction to the American Underground Film* (1967) Sheldon Renan is even more radical: “This is not a particular style of filmmaking. [...] It is cinema expanded to the point at which the effect of film may be produced without the use of film at all.”¹² Andrew Uroskie described this degree zero of cinema when looking at Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Film*, Andy Warhol’s *Sleep*, and Claes Oldenburg’s *Moveyhouse*. What was involved was a conceptual aesthetic akin to John Cage, tantamount to the actual idea of the moving image. This direction has been recently explored, from Pavle Levi’s *Cinema by Other Means*, to Jonathan Walley’s¹³ “paracinema”, to the remake of Sergei Eisenstein’s *cinématisme* and the filmic essay, from its origins (Hans Richter) to the present day (Harun Farocki, Allan Sekula, Tariq Teguia, Alexander Kluge, James Benning, Hito Steyerl). In addition, in both instances, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it will not be a matter of wondering in what sense the Expanded Cinema is an art, but rather of considering the way in which its manifestations have transformed the nature of art, visual practices, and their display.

NOTES

1. Cf. Uroskie, Andrew V. *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 112
2. “To a large degree, the history of Expanded Cinema has therefore [,] been based on the interpretations of static images that have come to stand in for more intentionally itinerant and flexible events”, Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 2015, (Leonardo), p. 10
3. *Cinéma exposé = Exhibited Cinema*, Lausanne : Ecole cantonale d’art de Lausanne, 2014. Edited by François Bovier, Adeena Mey, p. 33, note 4
4. Davila, Thierry. *Shadow Pieces (David Claerbout)*, Geneva : Mamco, 2015, p. 10
5. Pugnet, Natacha. *Temps exposés*, Nîmes : Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts de Nîmes, 2015, p. 7
6. Pantenburg, Volker. “Between Expansion and Contraction. Transatlantic Discontents of Expanded Cinema”, *Cinéma exposé = Exhibited Cinema*, op. cit., p. 108-116
7. Steyerl, Hito. “En défense de l’image pauvre”, *Jeux sérieux: cinéma et art contemporains transforment l’essai*, Geneva : Mamco : Haute école d’art et de design-Genève, 2015, p. 321
8. Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*, op. cit., p. 90
9. Quotation taken from: Uroskie, Andrew V. *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*, op. cit., p. 25
10. John Cage quoted in: Bovier, François. “Le Movie-Drome de Stan VanDerBeek : l’exposition du cinéma à l’ère électronique”, *Exposition et médias. Photographie, Cinéma, Télévision* (edited by Olivier Lugon), Lausanne : L’Age d’homme, 2012, p. 231-251, cit. p. 238 [quoted in Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*, op. cit., p. 153.]
11. The passage is quoted by G. Sutton, *The Experience Machine*, op. cit., p. 43, and A. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube*, p. 27
12. Quoted. in Sutton, Gloria. *The Experience Machine*, op. cit., p. 38
13. Pavle Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford University Press, 2012 ; Jonathan Walley, “The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema. Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film”, in *October*, 103, Winter 2003, p. 15-30.