

What's wrong with cinema in the gallery.

Abstract. Through a review of recent solo shows by Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon, I argue that the difficulties of exhibiting time based work in galleries persist, and furthermore are compounded by the artists' efforts to devise forms of presentation that attempt to disguise or mitigate those difficulties. The problems arise because the work has not been conceived at the outset to function effectively as installation, in this case because it is not installation: it is cinema. Insofar as the films are singular or short, and contained in solo shows, some of the awkwardnesses and distractions associated with time-based work in large, multi-roomed shows are inadvertently avoided. However, on a conceptual level there is a problematic mismatch between the films in themselves and their form of presentation.

Two recent exhibitions in London demonstrate the ongoing problems in exhibiting time-based work in the gallery. Coincidentally (?) Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon, who collaborated on the much-feted feature-length film *Zidane* (2006), had overlapping solo shows (1). According to the Serpentine's account of Parreno's show: "The visitor is guided through the galleries by the orchestration of sound and image...Taking the exhibition as a medium, Parreno has sought to redefine the exhibition experience by exploring its possibilities as a coherent 'object' rather than a collection of individual works" (2). Yet the exhibition is precisely a collection of individual films, which are apparently unrelated not only to each other but also to their form of presentation, in that there is no reciprocal relationship between the orchestration process and the films, all of which are single screen, fixed duration works. At best Parreno has fudged the issue by wrapping a group of disparate films in a set of uniformly decorated, black-carpeted rooms. In this sense the environment is closer, conceptually and physically, to a conventional cinema, which is where the films really belong: they are not installations. The surrounding installational paraphernalia, insofar as it is misleading and unrelated to the films, serves only to compound the error.

Each film had its own room. Parreno's orchestration process involved the audience being herded from one room to another by a combination of prompts from the attendants and sounds from loudspeakers, while immediately before a projection commenced the window blinds in the room in question would close automatically. The entire gallery was carpeted in black, with exposed cabling for loudspeakers etc routed through holes in the walls. Additionally, there were simulations of weather conditions in the windows and sounds from outside the gallery also were piped in, complicating an already incoherent presentation strategy. The electrical sockets housed another, not obviously separate, work called *AC/DC Snakes* (1995-2010), which consists of columns of multiple conjoined electric plug adaptors that project a few inches out of the floor. Much was made of Parreno's creation of a total environment at the Serpentine, within which the four films that constitute the show were placed (3). The films take the spectator out of the gallery space and into the absorbingly illusionistic one of the film, in that nothing in the latter causes the spectator to reflect on the relationships between the space in the film and that in which it was being shown, and, concomitantly, their own bodily relationship with the space of the gallery. All the work is frontal and designed to be seen in a conventionally cinematic manner, notwithstanding the absence of seating, variations in the size and elevation of the screens, or indeed the spurious variety of video formats deployed.

For all Parreno has been described as a "post medium" artist (and an exponent of Relational Aesthetics) there is a kind of medium specificity in the work, in that it is in thrall to the cinematic. Although this is a tricky and in some ways vague concept, one kind of definition could include the use of high-end equipment with matching production values, and 35mm film or 4K digital projection and large-scale hi-fi surround sound, in short all the qualities that are absent from low end production and presentation technologies. *June 8th 1968* (2009), which reconstructs the journey by train from New York to Washington D.C. of Robert Kennedy's body, fits the bill. The film, which is modelled on Paul Fusco's photographs of the original event, was shot on 70mm and was shown previously on a 70mm projector housed in a vented

glass cube in a red-carpeted room in the Pompidou Centre. Parreno created a doubly cinematic experience by combining the aspirational scale and oomph of a commercial movie with a fetishistic fascination with a projection format that is rarely used, even in commercial cinemas (4). It is unclear what the motivation for making this film could have been beyond the fact that, like *Zidane*, it reworks a paradigmatic precursor. It might, generously, be thought of as a form of collaboration across time, given Parreno's fondness for collaborating (5). However, although others have remarked on the fact that both *Zidane* and *June 8th 1968* have direct precursors, I have not been able to find any references to them by the artists themselves (6).

Parreno consistently withholds the contextualising information that would allow the viewer to understand the relationship he is taking up with his material: all but one of the titles of the films is allusive, rather than informational, so one consistently has the sense that Parreno wants us to somehow suspend our tendency to read a politics within the work, even though all the films gesture towards political issues. (Perhaps the suspension of politics, or the inability of art to engage with it on any level, is the theme that may indeed unite the films). *June 8th 1968* is shot from the observation car of a train, unavoidably evoking the Phantom Rides of early cinema. Equally though, with its slow shifts of angle, it emulates the Steadicam shot. *Invisibleboy* (2010) follows a Chinese boy's day and depicts his environment as he gets up and goes about, in a series of mid shots. Some of the frames contain oversized animals that are scratched onto the celluloid, thereby making another reference to a kind of "primitive" filmmaking with a long history. To my eye, though, these images lacked the crudeness of directly scratched forms, raising the suspicion that they may have been digitally superimposed or otherwise created. This would be consistent with other elements of trickery in the show, such as the visible presence of loudspeakers that do not emit sound. *The Boy from Mars* (2003), shot in rural Thailand, offers a sequence of shots, also in a documentary-poetic mode, of a large, dilapidated, wind-blown, shed and its surrounding landscape, shot in crepuscular light. The film lacks, however, the contextualising information to be a documentary.

According to the gallery's documentation, there is a recursive structure, in that the buffalo in harness we see inside the polythene-covered shed is generating the electricity that powers the filming equipment. Yet this key generative (sic) principle is neither apparent nor strictly applied, since not all the light in the film is so generated. The work sacrifices its own structuring principles for the sake of prettiness by including other light sources unrelated to the buffalo's labours, such as sunlight, street lamps and Chinese lanterns floating across the sky. Equally the relationships between shots lack any apparent organising principle -the time of day shifts abruptly from shot to shot for no apparent reason- which has the effect of further entrenching the film's incoherence.

There's always the risk, when writing about work in this way, that one will end up criticising it for not being something it was never intended to be. This may well be the case here: perhaps Parreno simply intended a poetic film about different kinds of lights in the landscape. However, one then has to ask: what does he want the work to do, what's his point about these light sources? In his masterful film *The Riddle of Lumen* (14 minutes, colour, silent, 1972), Stan Brakhage makes a study of the myriad ways light is mediated; reflected, refracted, squeezed, animated. The whole film, composed of disparate shots, is, however, strongly underpinned by the idea that light is overlooked because it is never experienced directly, but almost always indirectly via reflections etc. No such underlying concept appears to consolidate Parreno's film, which, by comparison to Brakhage's, appears emptily decorative. While the film may allude to various topical issues; green energy, under-development theories, pollution, it develops no arguments around these issues, insofar as there is no supplementary material in the work with which an argument could be framed, in the way, for example, a photomontage by John Heartfield or Peter Kennard does, by juxtaposing carefully chosen images that rub together to generate specific new meanings. On the contrary, like *Invisibleboy*, the work sits unproblematically within the art world, where its politics, if it has any, are vitiated. In avoiding the taking up of a position on its subject matter, Parreno reduces the work to spectacle. In an oblique way, perhaps, the films ask the viewer to think

about what they know or don't know about what's depicted therein. However, this is a tall order, given the weakly formalist strategies of the works' construction and contextualisation: the spectator arguably can do no more than draw on their existing knowledge of the issues to which the work at best gestures.

I have taken as my starting point the claim, quoted above in the Serpentine's notice, that: "Parreno has sought to redefine the exhibition experience by exploring its possibilities as a coherent 'object' rather than a collection of individual works". As such the exhibition fails. All that one is left with is the films themselves, some of whose problems I have outlined above. If one wanted to understand the extent to which Parreno's exhibition strategy is both incoherent and misleading, one has only to compare it to William Raban's *Take Measure* (1973), Tony Hill's *Floor Film* (1975), or any of Bruce McLure's projection performances, to give a recent example, works whose structure and form are bound up with their means of presentation, producing a coherent whole that constitutes an exploration of the conditions of their presentation. In fact these examples of Expanded Cinema fit neatly into neither the cinema nor the gallery, but are more suited to what would now be called the Project Space, or in their day, the flexible spaces of the London Filmmakers' Co-op. Needless to say these works address this anomaly, at least implicitly.

Douglas Gordon's *K364* is a single screen travelogue cum concert film masquerading as a two-screen installation. It was shown at Gagosian Gallery in Kings Cross, where it was also received ecstatically by at least one critic (7). On entering the gallery one passed through a darkened, double-mirrored doorway into the projection space itself, also very dark, so that it took a good minute or two to orientate oneself. The work is shown on two very large translucent screens that stand in the middle of the space, effectively dividing it half. The screens are placed at roughly 45° to each other, and each screen image is doubled by a mirror, which is placed against the two end walls of the room.

The film focuses on two Israeli musicians, Avri Levitan and Roi Shiloah, travelling by train from Berlin to Warsaw via Poznan, to play a concert. We see close-up

reflections of the musicians' faces and shots of trees passing in a blur from the window are followed by extremely foreshortened views down railway tracks, with trains crawling towards the camera, negotiating bends that appear as near-right angle turns. On the soundtrack one of the two musicians talks about trees and invocations of the holocaust, musings that are crudely reinforced by Gordon's railway track shots. There is a brief swimming sequence, including underwater scenes, of swimmers in the Poznan swimming pool, housed in what was previously the synagogue. There are also shots of out of focus headlights, similarly framed, inching their way across the screen. After a few minutes we dissolve abruptly to a concert hall, where the two soloists –violin and viola- and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra play one of Mozart's most perfectly achieved compositions, the Sinfonia Concertante, K364, a work that is symphonic in style but in which the solo parts are closely integrated into the orchestral textures, as opposed to the orchestra's providing a straightforward accompaniment to the solo voices.

The film's all but exclusive concentration on the soloists offends the balance Mozart achieved, at least at the visual level, but arguably sonically too, since the visual concentration on the soloists also skews the way one hears the music. The film vaguely invokes European history and the long shadow it casts –the holocaust, erasure, displacement and dispossession, as well as pronouncing on the experience of music: "there is no music until it reaches the ear", the subtitles tell us, "no past, no future". Gordon's signature style, something Parreno doesn't have in the same way at least, is particularly irksome here. If one is familiar with his Jeekyll and Hyde taste for forcing strongly contrasting elements together, for example, good and evil in *Between Darkness and Light* (1997) in which *The Song of Bernadette* (Henry King, 1943) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) are projected onto two sides of a translucent screen, one cannot help but read *K364* as a hackneyed comment on the truism that humanity is capable of the widest range of behaviours: the cliché of the concentration camp guard listening to Schubert is unavoidably evoked. In his previous films Gordon has mostly used existing movies, but here he has shot his own, with lamentable results, since it is itself a catalogue of clichés; out of focus

lights, foreshortened long shots and finally the facial expressions of the two soloists shown mostly in extreme close up.

Both Parreno and Gordon, like many other artists of their generation who have worked with film and video, appear mesmerised by mainstream, mostly Hollywood cinema, to that particular version of the cinematic. *Zidane* is the clearest evidence of this, with its augmented atmospherics and multiple camera angles that contrast markedly with Costard's unadorned version (see note 1 below). By not dressing up his subject in cinematic flummery, Costard created a film that offers an implicit critique of cinematic spectacularity, as well as refusing to aggrandise its subject in the way Parreno and Gordon do (8). In the two solo shows this was manifested most strongly at the level of installation, in *June 8th 1968* and *K634*, with the all but identical deployment of very large screens that rest on the floor, as well as dramatic hi-fi sound. The use of floor level screens connects the spectator to the image in a directly physical manner, reinforcing an immersive condition, since the spectator and the screens stand on the same level, share the same surfaces. The viewer can walk up to the image and get lost in it, yet if they stand far away enough to take in the whole they still experience a sense of scale and drama. There are some correspondences here to the experience of looking at Barnett Newman's very large paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (520cm x 229cm, 1951), but with the latter a precise experience forms around adjusting and refining one's field of view almost as an end in itself, so that questions of scale, proportion, colour stability and focus become the object of concentrated attention. In Gordon's and Parreno's films, spectacle and movement mitigate against such self-consciously evaluative dispositions: on the contrary, their films affirm an unreflective, normative cinematic experience that is utterly reactionary. As Rachel O Moore puts it: "they have taken the entertainment aspect of the cinema, in other words, manipulating our attention, in a sense collectively, but not the profundity possible in the cinema" (9).

1. Philippe Parreno's first UK public show was at the Serpentine Gallery, from 25th November 2010 to 13th of February 2011. Douglas Gordon was at Gagosian, Britannia

Street, from February 9th to 26th March, 2011. *Zidane* has an exact precursor in Hellmuth Costard's 1971 film of George Best: *Fussball wie noch nie* (Football as it has Never Been Seen Before). Costard's film is plainer and simpler, foregoing *Zidane*'s multiple camera angles, music and Foley sound effects for a relatively straightforward approach that follows Best for an entire game between Manchester United and Coventry City in September 1970. It is available as a DVD from www.11freunde.de/dvd-edition.

2.

http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2010/11/philippe_parreno_25_november_1_1.html accessed 27.03.2011.

3. Eg, Adrian Searle, *The Guardian*, 1.12.2010, Florence Waters, *The Daily Telegraph*, 30.11.2010.

4. Philippe Parreno retrospective, Pompidou Centre, Paris, June 3rd - September 7th 2009. 70mm projection, which only ever existed in the largest cinemas, declined with the advent of the multiplex, with its relatively small auditoria. At the Serpentine the work was shown as an HD video projection.

5. Eg, with Pierre Huyghe, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo, as well as Douglas Gordon and others.

6. For example, Jennifer Doyle, in *Frieze* magazine issue 116, June-August 2008: "Gordon and Parreno cite Andy Warhol's films as an inspiration, but it is hard to see the connection: *Zidane* ... is too beautiful, too controlled, too glossy. You can buy the DVD in supermarkets in France – a sign of how deeply the film co-operates with and expands Zidane's celebrity. It has much more in common with Warhol's portraits. The real Warholian moment of football cinema is Hellmuth Costard's film *Fußball wie noch nie* (Football as Never Before, 1971)".

7. Jonathan Jones: "Douglas Gordon: portrait of the evolving artist", the *Guardian*, 7th March, 2011. The film was also grumpily dismissed, in the same paper by Paul

Silverthorne, principal viola with the London Symphony Orchestra: *Guardian*, 13.03.2011.

8. At least two writers have recently noted a move by artists back into the cinema. See Sophia Phoca: *Filming the Alternative* and Maria Walsh: *Believable Fictions*, both in *Art Monthly* December 2010 – January 2011, No.342. This only serves to underscore the perversity of Parreno's and Gordon's continuing exhibition of cinema on the gallery. On a slightly different tack, Walsh is also critical of the way artists who attempt to appropriate Hollywood films in order to analyse their grammar, fail to take account of the way in which some of those films, for example Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, are already reflexive in various ways.

9. In email correspondence with the author, April 2011.