

THE THOUSAND CANDLES*
Lisa Baldissera

One day back there in the good old days when I was nine and the world was full of every imaginable kind of magnificence, and life was still a delightful and mysterious dream, my cousin Mourad, who was considered crazy by everybody who knew him except me, came to my house at four in the morning and woke me up by tapping on the window of my room.

"Aram," he said.

I jumped out of bed and looked out the window.

I couldn't believe what I saw.¹

In 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière presented *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* in a Parisian café. Terrified audience members fled the building, fearing the train's collision was imminent; the diagonal framing of the train's entrance had provided one of the first touches of realism to the cinema. At the time of their initial projects, the brothers predicted that film would be a short-lived form, questioning why anyone would want to sit inside and watch pictures when they could go out onto the street and witness the same thing. At its inception, cinema was located within the realm of "low culture," entertainment and pure spectacle. The seduction of cinema as a dream space, or as the subject of psychoanalysis, had not yet been imagined or theorized, nor had the complex perceptual apparatus internalized by every cinephile—the suspension of disbelief—that would transform the encounter to a place of intimacy, interiority and reflection.

Silver: dreams, screens and theories presents drawings, sculpture, photographs and installations that reflect on cinematic systems within visual arts practice by focusing on the way a contemporary spectator's internalized knowledge of cinema is enlisted by visual artists in order to execute the meaning and content of their work. The projects in this exhibition respond to cinema's overall visual structure and include investigations of scale, three-dimensional space, still image, scripting, staging and choreography. They respond as well to the sculptural and architectural dimensions of cinema, the material qualities of celluloid and the gestures inherent in cinematic narrative.

* "All that we called art seems to have become paralytic, while the film-maker lights up the thousand candles of his projectors."

-Tristan Tzara (1896 - 1963)

¹ William Saroyan, "The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse," in *Thirty-one Stories*, Eds. Michael R. Booth and Clinton S. Burhans, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 240.

The previous century's legacy of moving picture literacy marks the birth of a perceptual model that may be understood as parallel to a reader's leap of imagination, hinted at by writers of narrative fiction: C.S. Lewis' famed wardrobe, doubling as a portal to a parallel universe;² Coleridge's suspended dream state prompting the writing of *Kubla Khan*; the formulation of multiple subjects and points of view, as explored by Gertrude Stein.

The paradigm of the moving picture in turn has informed theories of visual perception. Philosopher and media theorist Paul Virilio employs the language of filmmaking when he writes:

Sight comes from a long way off. It is a kind of dolly in, a perceptual activity that starts in the past to illuminate the present, to focus on the object of our immediate perception. The weak light that allows us to apprehend the real, to see and understand our present environment, itself comes from a distant visual memory, without which there would be no act of looking.³

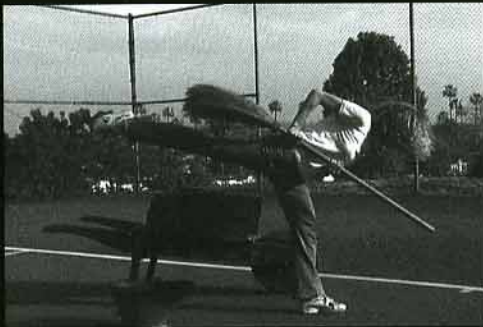
By the end of the twentieth century, the mystique of cinema had given way to an experience of increased access to cinema's underlying structures. With the advent of video and digital technologies, behind-the-scenes film processes entered into the vernacular of the spectator. While the making of home movies became commonplace with the Super 8 camera, video technology that followed allowed for moving images to be made inexpensively, prompting even more users to experiment with filmmaking that extended outside of domestic applications. With newer software such as Final Cut Pro and Adobe Premiere, and screenwriting programs such as Final Draft and Sophocles that help format scripts in the making, the scene behind the screens has never been so widely available to consumers and viewers. Productions such as *The Last Broadcast* (Stefan Avalos & Lance Weiler, 1998)—shot for \$900 US, the first feature film to be released digitally via satellite and edited entirely on a desktop PC—and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) made an aesthetic of the low-budget film. Contemporary movements, such as Dogme 95, whose manifesto insists on minimal narrative and technological intervention, are tailor-made for the low-budget director,⁴ and their influence can now be detected in popular mainstream movies.

Instead of eliminating the "magic" of film, filmmaking as a process has taken on the layer of seduction formerly limited to the viewing of the moving image. Lavish home theatres with surround sound and cinema-style seating, complete with armrests and cup holders and, more recently, DVDs that provide behind-the-scenes interviews are now available to consumers. Like Buster Keaton's character in the 1921 film *The Playhouse*, where, through multiple exposures, Keaton plays everyone in a theatre simultaneously—band and band-leader, dancers on the stage and members of the audience—the contemporary viewer willfully assembles the cinematic experience.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (England: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

³ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 62.

⁴ Dogme 95 is characterized by shooting on location without imported props or sets, the joint production of sound and image, use of a handheld camera and natural light, as well as the avoidance of optical work, filters, genre studies or signatures. Source: Shari Roman, *Digital Babylon: Hollywood, Indiewood and Dogme* (Hollywood, CA: IFILM, 2001).



Catherine Sullivan, American
Five Economies: Little Hunt, 1999
 35 mm colour film transferred to DVD
 Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures,
 New York
 Photography: Courtesy of the Artist and
 Metro Pictures



Damian Moppett, Canadian
Peasant Dance (After Rubens), 2001
 Oil, graphite on paper, C-prints
 (detail)
 one of 10 panels
 Private Collection
 Courtesy of the Artist and Catriona Jeffries
 Gallery, Vancouver

emotive and expressive content of the scene, ultimately undermining its aura of spontaneity by the odd juxtapositions of action, historical era and location to reveal its constructed nature.

XIII

Damian Moppett utilizes film and painting conventions in *Peasant Dance (After Rubens)* (2001). The piece is comprised of a suite of ten framed panels, beginning with Moppett's watercolour copy of Rubens' own painting, *The Kermis* (1635), which depicts a circle of dancing peasants celebrating All Saint's Day. The festival, like the medieval carnival, operated as an ideological safety valve to assuage the tensions between the poor and the ruling classes. Moppett's watercolour is a beautifully rendered ochre-toned copy of the original painting, and functions as a kind of bookplate for a narrative explored through text and photography.

The panels also include Moppett's handwritten "screenplay," which emphasizes blocking and gesture, rather than dialogue, to create a contemporary equivalent of Rubens' painting. A moment of celebration by the four teenage characters is described: a series of actions culminate in a spontaneous dance, parallel to the peasants' revelry in the Rubens painting. The dialogue is a kind of monosyllabic Beckett-meets-rapper rhyme sequence, while the location shots resemble crime scene photos as much as contemporary film locations. The characters referred to in the text are notably absent from the photographs, which depict abandoned walkways, overpasses and highway ramps located on the periphery of Chinatown in East Los Angeles and allude to Rubens' peasants by referencing a site of modern-day poverty.

Moppett has effectively created a directorial storyboard to contemporarize Rubens' earlier painting, framing it both within a new media (film) and a new population of characters conventionally stereotyped by their social placement.

XIV

In *The Pitch* (1998), Mark Lewis proposes a film entirely about extras, in which there are no main characters. In a four-minute monologue—roughly corresponding to the length of a 35mm film reel—Lewis discusses the contributions of the extra in film culture, by pitching a film to a potential producer.

Lewis describes the canny gestures of the extra that support the structure of the story, while in the real time of his pitch, the camera slowly pulls away from his face to reveal his location: in a busy public train station, he is surrounded by throngs of moving people. The "extras"—it is never apparent if they are actors or unscripted



Baldissera, Lisa. "The Ten Thousand Candles." *Silver*. Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2005. p 9,10,20,28,29.



Damian Moppett, Canadian. **Peasant Dance (After Rubens)**, (details), 2001