

# THICK CINEMA

**Thick Cinema** presents five moving image works by Kim Pieters, Fiona Amundsen, Sam Hamilton Joyce Campbell, and John Di Stefano.

Commissioned in 2017 by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand with support from Creative New Zealand, these films and videos examine forms of cinematic experience that engage with film's sensorial capabilities and notions of embodiment and affective experience, placing emphasis on the body and the senses, the visceral and the haptic. Their phenomenological approaches can be seen as an expression of culture and identity, as addressing ethical, social and political narratives, or as challenging film's anthropomorphic perspective in representing the animate or inanimate world.

Lucian Castaing-Taylor, founder of Sensorial Ethnographic Lab (SEL) at Harvard University, proposes: "What if film not only constitutes *discourse about* the world but also (re)presents *experience* of it? What if film does not *say* but *show*? What if a film does not just *describe* but *depict*? What, then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions'?"<sup>1</sup> Thickness, notes Christopher Pavsek, lies "in the voluminous depiction, in the sheer layering and sequencing of ...visual and auditory and rhythmic sensory input as the films devote their attention to the 'affective and embodied' aspects of 'social existence and subjectivity'."<sup>2</sup>

Kim Pieters' *Philosophy* is a single, static, wide shot of the Dunedin Botanic Gardens at dusk, characterized by an eerie unnatural darkness (it was shot purposefully underexposed and altered in post-production). Shot from an elevated position in the walkways above the garden, Pieters' continuous long shot provides an unfolding visualization of the park, letting life happen within it. As a painter, Pieters experiments with the materiality of light, which is a thing in itself: dusk offers her deep shadows, 'to capture the strength in the light or deepen colour'. In her video work, the stressed darkness and stasis of the shot conveys a stillness to the image within which the senses become ever more aware of everything being in constant flux, the same way a whisper can expand our aural sensitivity. Pure presence, the immensity of the moving whole, an almost excess of movement; the prominent trees stand still but their leaves shimmer, fluttering in the wind.

The basic elements of time, space and movement are conveyed in this 'plain' image which is presented as continuous, in a Bergsonian sense of *durée*, representing the constantly changing 'whole' that is the 'open' universe. For Deleuze also, the universe is always in movement and cinema gives us moving images that reflect this constant moving universe/whole. It is in this sense, William Brown argues, that cinema for Deleuze — as possibly for Pieters— is a

philosophical tool because it visualizes the open universe. Light is movement too, and in *Philosophy* everything is perceptually altered by the effects of the subtle changing light caused by the movement of clouds (off the frame but present in the continuous space) or by the almost imperceptible dimming sunset.

*Philosophy's* observational approach is reductive, which, according to Pieters, induces a 'generative state of being', rather than 'falling into an act of recognition'; film is thus aimed at being experiential and apprehended by the senses rather than purely intelligible as thought. She seems to share with Bergson the belief that everything is an image, including ourselves, and that every image acts and reacts to other images—in her own words, 'the humming of relation between things in the world'—whereby we are not voyeurs as we too are part of the changing whole. While *Philosophy* engages with the world represented in the image, one senses an equal awareness to the film's materiality, our attention shifting between what is happening 'in' the film and the film itself. The sudden jolt in the camera movement (a chance accident) is a Brechtian disruption of this 'state of being' that introduces reflexivity, redirecting our attention towards the film itself. We actively switch between the world in movement captured by the film and the film itself, which, not unlike the world it captures, is also subject to the law of movement.

This is partially stressed also by the soundtrack, composed by experimental musician William Henry Meung, which sits in disjunction with the visuals. Meung composed the sound piece after seeing some of Pieters' raw footage, and she edited the video over the sound. Extracting from the captured reality its external natural sounds and placing over it a soundtrack with its particular mood and tonality draws us to an internal state. Pieters stresses the importance of this disjunctive 'humming' effect between two autonomous elements brought together. To her, this 'humming' can be generative to the viewer, becoming aware of oneself discovering a new sense to it and triggering 'a personal reverie'.

Fiona Amundsen's *A Body that Lives* presents testimony from one of 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war who participated in the 1944 breakout from a camp in Cowra, Australia. Structurally composed in three sections, the work opens with silent archival footage from an American produced WWII propaganda film employed to justify US military actions within the Asia Pacific. Amundsen has cropped the image to emphasize the violence of bodies at war and to decontextualize its location. This is followed by a black frame, over which we hear the a sample of the modern day tourist audio guide to the Cowra campsite, introducing the official story and providing historical context. The central section is Amundsen's interview with 96-year-old POW Teruo Murakami. The closing shots are still-like images of the bonsai trees and outdoor grounds of 'Cowra Japanese Gardens', built in commemoration of the Japanese soldiers who lost their lives in the breakout.

<sup>1</sup> Lucian Taylor, 'Iconophobia', *Transition*, no. 69 (1996), 64-88, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Pavsek, 'Leviathan and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography', *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, pp. 4-11 (p.5).

A Body that Lives captures Murakami's inability to speak about his traumatic experience, unable to remember because of his age, but also unwilling to encounter his memories, still torn by ambiguity about his choice - *not to die* - during the breakout. What the testimony lacks in verbal articulation, so revealing in its incompleteness, is countered by the expressiveness of a body that is unable to stay still. Murakami bows the head, his gaze remaining inaccessible to us, and many times bends his body, exiting Amundsen's frame. His body is a surrogate for the absence of memories, and externalizes what his mind conceals from him, giving away visual signs of his internal struggles, the ambiguity and the traumatic forces that are trapped within his body (an entrapment that is stressed by the extreme closeness of the camera). Seeing Murakami reminds us of Laura Marks's claim about 'how meaning occurs in the body, and not only at the level of signs'<sup>3</sup>. What this film visually offers is not an image of what happened, but the lasting embodiment of a trauma carried across 72 years of the life of an individual.

The opening film images of war and the campsite voiceover clash against the dramatic force of Murakami's presence, making patent their visual and textual inadequacy and the impossibility to represent (and stand for) personal suffering. It questions the function of memorials representing the state official history, suggesting instead a more ethical act of 'memorialising', the gathering of personal testimonies that are individually subjective and that might have been silenced due to ideological or political reasons. Amundsen's portrayal painfully fails (and recognizes the failure) of representing the subjective past of Murakami. Sensibly, the artist respects this void. The struggles of this intercultural, interlinguistic, intergenerational, inter-gender exchange between Amundsen and Murakami suggest the complex politics of representation and the ethics of speaking for the other. The film succeeds in capturing an embodied experience and the mediation between two human beings whose different cultures, life experiences and generations have informed different forms and regimes of knowledge.

Undoubtedly the most tactile film of this programme is Joyce Campbell's Company Stream, a work whose content is not revealed to us until halfway into the film. The fragmented, abstracted, mutilated subject escapes us; all what the camera captures are flashes of light refracted in water, glared and bleached surfaces, movement and light.

The film's disorienting effect is enhanced by the fast paced montage as well as by its experimental soundtrack composed by the artist with Jon Behar and Colleen Brennan. Instead of the use of natural sound (that would reinforce the logical connection between visual and audio), this ambient and textural soundtrack serves to intensify the immersive experience of the film and retains an autonomous distance to the image. Losing our visual and audio bearings, sense and meaning is not consciously constructed but materially embodied. The visual saturation allows no thought, no mental recognition, seeping instead into bodily and other sensual registers.

Jennifer M. Barker proposes that cinema offers us an *intimate* connection, rather than the 'distance' experience of observation; we are 'touched' by cinema, '*we share* things with it: texture, spatial orientation, comportment, rhythm and vitality'<sup>4</sup>. In Company Stream, we are engaged intimately (claustrophobically) with the work's haptic visuality, with the perceptual disorienting experience of a water world cinematically reflected. Touch, according to Barker, is not strictly reduced to skin but enacted and felt through the whole body, so 'tension, balance, energy, inertia, languor, velocity, rhythm' can be experienced as 'tactile'. There is a bodily sense of relief when we finally come to recognize the 'revealing' shots; the movement of an eel. Recognition anchors the image intelligibly and the embodiment of our sensorial encounter to the film abates.

The inspiring source for this film was the 1972 experimental photo-essay *La prosa del observatorio (From the Observatory)* by Julio Cortazar. In Cortazar's equally disorienting prose (a meditation on the life cycle of the eel among other things), the reader is faced with constant poetic shifts that challenge the lethargic conventional logic of our mind. Rather than the camera depicting the world of the eel as we see it, Company Stream embodies the brisk physical experience of the artist being with the eel in the water. It represents an experience of contact, wherein the eel might have as much 'control' over the camera movements (if not more) caused by the unpredictable interaction, than the artist's wilful framing. The result is kinaesthetically rich and fickle. One could argue that the images represent the environment of the eel, and as such, an experience that is viscerally animalistic rather than human. Perhaps Campbell's aim is not to provide a 'fleshed out' experience, but rather, in acknowledging cinema's anthropocentric vision, to redress this by capturing a 'mutual' encounter between the artist and the eel, by which she surrenders control over the camera to the eel's kinetic behaviour. This does not claim that Company Stream reproduces the eel's 'point of view', which itself would be an anthropocentric thought.

John Di Stefano's essayistic and lyrical video Murmurations (Rome) is a meditation on fascism through Di Stefano's encounter with two historical sites in Rome: Foro Italico (formerly Foro Mussolini), an sports complex, example of the Italian fascist architecture instituted by Mussolini and built between 1928 and 1938; and Fosse Ardeatine, a cave where a mass killing of innocent Italian civilians was carried on 24 March 1944 by the German occupation troops as a reprisal for a partisan attack conducted against the SS Police.

Di Stefano's work interweaves three elements with poetic subjectivity and affective perception. It opens with footage of flocks of starlings flying in the sky —which gives the film's title, Murmurations —the name given to the congregation of these birds flying in patterns. This true wonder of wild-life populates the sky of Rome during the birds migrating season in the fall and winter months. We hear the evocative voice of Pier Paolo Pasolini reading fragments of his poem

<sup>3</sup> Laura Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xviii

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 2.

“Le ceneri di Gramsci” (‘The Ashes of Gramsci’). This epic revolutionary poem, written in 1954, is an homage to Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and co-founder of Italy’s Communist party who died in 1937 after ten years in fascist jails. His reading is interwoven with footage of Di Stefano’s bodily encounter of the two historical sites in Rome. The sites are shot as Di Stefano walks through them, creating an action-image that is also strongly tactile and within which the trace of the filmmaker is portrayed by his shadow.

The film’s allegorical references are multiple: murmurations evoke the notion of collective power, both vital and generative, but also potentially fatal and destructive; the sky (a recurrent theme in Di Stefano’s work) symbolizes a lifting freedom and hope against the backdrop of massacre and death, and so on. Once Pasolini denounced the vanishing of fireflies from the Italian countryside as genocide. Di Stefano might also be pointing to the vanishing of the murmurations from the Roman skies due to climate change, suggesting that the destiny of life’s diversity, of birds and people, is at the mercy of mankind, and ultimately our responsibility.

Pasolini’s voice reading in Italian resonates intellectually, emotionally and viscerally, even for the non-Italian viewer who silently reads the English subtitles; the co-existence of languages is a reminder of the filmmaker’s intercultural condition. As a ‘civic poet’ who embraced art and activism, Pasolini reiteratively condemns silence and indifference in these verses; indeed, his poem ends with his struggle to live with a conscious heart (*cuore cosciente*). Perhaps Di Stefano aims to create an image that has the power to revive memory; in Deleuzian terms, a ‘fossil’ image. Recognising that memory works multi-sensorially, Di Stefano recreates a cinematic embodied experience. His insistent walking (walking, which in turn stimulates thinking) urges the awakening of the memories of Italy’s fascist past, ever more resonant and pressing today under the rise of fascist ideologies in Europe and the world.

Sam Hamilton’s FOR THIRTY YEARS NANCY WOULD SIT OUT ON THE STREET CORNER AND WATCH THE SUNSET pays homage to the artist’s former next-door neighbour in Portland, Oregon, for her laureate daily ritual. The film re-enacts this scenario in the very same spot but instead of Nancy, Hamilton asked four adolescents to watch the sunset (coincidentally on the June summer solstice).

The single long take of 11:25mins (equivalent to the 400 feet length of the 16mm anamorphic film reel), using a static camera, natural light and sound, and shot without rehearsals, affords the scene a sense of presentness. The frontal middle shot captures these adolescents staring at the sunset, mostly engaged in their own musings: one girl seems romantically drawn to the moment, the boy pleasantly engaged, another girl clearly uneasy at being on camera, and one bored and eagerly distracted, exchanging glances with the camera, a passerby or whatever little happens outside the frame. Hamilton banned the participants from using cell phones. He gave them no directions, although just before the camera started rolling he spoke about meditation and

listening practices to set the mood.

Pasolini believed that the substance of cinema is “an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends with the end of our lives)”<sup>5</sup>. Nancy’s solitary practice, contemplative at the end of her life, is proposed to these young adults almost as a rite of passage or as a group observational inward exercise. For many of this generation daily life is mediated by mobile phones and social media, where screen images are as prevalent as the experience of the natural world. Hamilton’s proposal might be a counter to digitally-affected sensation, restoring a capacity for sensory affect via ‘real’ experience. For us as viewers, the film’s observational long take allows us to see into and linger on the scene. The adolescents seated pose mirror’s us sitting in the cinema, and their time is ours too. We are brought alongside to this experience, in communion, they while looking at the sunset, us while looking at them. They/us surrender to the slowness of the scene and become immersed in the surrounding sounds (birds singing, a train whistle, the wind blowing through the trees or rustling leaves, etc): the continuous sounds of an in-flux real universe out of their view/outside the frame. Their/our senses become magnified; their/our patient spectatorship rewarded, sensitive to subtle changes in the light and sounds of an environment where we all are ever more present. Hamilton’s film does not disrupt the flow of time and as such it captures the substance of time — cosmic time, individual time, film material time—beautifully transversal.

- Dr. Mercedes Vicente, Curator, Thick Cinema

<sup>5</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Observations on the Long Take” [1967], October 13 (Summer, 1980), 3-6, p. 5.

## List of Works

Kim Pieters, Philosophy (2017)

8 minutes 38 seconds

Digital Video, Sound

Fiona Amundsen, A Body that Lives (2017)

13 minutes 54 seconds

Digital Video, Sound

Joyce Campbell, Company Stream (2017)

10 minutes 23 seconds

Digital Video, Sound

John Di Stefano, Murmurations (Rome) (2017)

10 minutes 51 seconds

Digital Video, Sound

Sam Hamilton, FOR THIRTY YEARS, NANCY WOULD SIT OUT ON THE STREET CORNER AND WATCH THE SUNSET (2017)

11 minutes 25 seconds

16mm anamorphic film transferred to Digital Video, Sound

Dr. Mercedes Vicente is an independent curator and writer and has recently completed an AHRC-funded PhD at the Royal College of Art, London, on the work of New Zealand pioneer video artist Darcy Lange. She is CIRCUIT's 2017 Curator-at-large, and convenor of the The Thickness of Cinema, a symposium presented by CIRCUIT at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu on 26 August 2017.

Commissioned by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand with the assistance of Creative New Zealand 2017.

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