

Photofilmic Art, part 2: Images, Displays, Spectators—

Introduction

Brianne Cohen and Alexander Streitberger

Abstract

General introduction to the second part of a thematic issue on the encounter of the photographic and the filmic in the modern public sphere.

Résumé

Introduction générale au second numéro spécial sur la rencontre du photographique et du cinématographique dans l'espace public moderne.

Keywords

photographic, filmic, public space, media industry, memory

The essays gathered in this issue arose in response to the project, “Photofilmic Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture,” conducted during the last three years at the University of Louvain (UCL/Louvain-la-Neuve) and the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography (LGC, UCL, and KU Leuven). Financed by the Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS), this project aims to understand photofilmic structures—generated through the crossing over of photographic and filmic forms—as both a symptom and a means of a constantly transforming media culture, where content flows across multiple platforms and where the boundaries between disciplines and media seem to dissolve. Whereas most scholarship on the relationship between the moving and the still image is concerned with cinema and/or video art in order to “offer new conceptions of the ontology of film and photography,”¹ this project wishes to displace the focus from the media (photography, film, etc.) to a question of the image as a place or an event where heterogeneous temporalities, perceptions, uses, and meanings meet and overlap. Photofilmic images are then “multi-mediating pictures,”² operating within specific contexts and institutions, and for particular purposes and audiences.

While the contributions to “Photofilmic Art, part 1: Negotiating Fraught Images in a Contemporary Public Sphere” (*Image & Narrative*, 16.1) analyzes the photofilmic quality of various charged images that dominate a contemporary mass media and public sphere, the papers within this issue are concerned with artistic problems of spectatorship and display, linked to questions of narration, memory, and history. Addressing various formats and media such as photobooks, flipbooks, wall-filling collages, documentary cinema, and video art, the essays touch on a broad spectrum of artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical issues. Additionally, they take into account historical aspects and developments of hybrid moving and still images since the end of the 19th century.

In his essay, “Living Photographs or Silent Films? The Flipbook as a Critical Object Between Tactility and Virtuality,” Alexander Streitberger shows how the flipbook evolved from an optical toy of entertainment to an artistic medium. During the 1960s and 1970s, the flipbook satisfied two major concerns of the neo-avant-garde: performativity and participation. It became a proper means for artists to contest the modernist paradigm of media specificity, as a form that crosses boundaries between media such as photography, film, and the book. In today’s age of digital networks, Streitberger argues, the flipbook has once again become attractive for artists as a physical object used to produce visual illusions. It enables a discussion of today’s conflicting spaces, between the virtual domain of the Internet and physical experience and desire.

The cinematographic potential of the book is also at the heart of Bettina Lockemann’s essay on temporality and montage in Paul Graham’s *A Shimmer of Possibility*. Lockemann suggests that the filmic and sequential character of Graham’s photobook inscribes itself in a long tradition, from Muybridge’s chronophotography to Allan Sekula’s concept of montage and the disassembled movie. Montage, narration, and temporality are the main principles that sequential photography in general, and Graham’s photobooks in particular, share with cinema and film. Yet unlike filmic narration, Graham’s books create atmospheric narratives of the everyday, which are devoid of a traditional storyline with a beginning and an end. The book, as a display of sequentially arranged photographs, becomes a photofilmic device. It conveys the unfolding of the story according to the viewer’s pace of turning the page, and his or her own capacity to mentally combine and arrange the images.

¹ Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (eds), *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 17.

² Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, “Photography and Painting in Multi-mediating Pictures,” *Visual Studies*, 24: 2, pp. 122-131.

In her case study on the allegorical character of Astrid Klein's collages, Annette Urban investigates how photo-cinematic archival materials may operate in spatialized installations. Drawing on postmodernist theoretical conceptions of allegory, Urban provides a detailed analysis of the way in which Klein appropriates and rearranges archival film images in order to explore their power as stereotypic icons that are able to trigger desires and identifications. Borrowing techniques and strategies from avant-garde film (Vertov, Godard) and literature (Arno Schmidt), Klein expands filmic, photographic, and textual materials into a transmedial spatial constellation in order to imagine a "critical mythology" of the contemporary mass media environment.

Sébastien Fevry explores the photofilmic dimension of Henri-François Imbert's cinematic oeuvre in relation to what he calls an "aesthetics of recognition." Contextualizing phenomenological approaches by Bergson, Deleuze, and Ricoeur, the author describes the dynamics of recognition as a process that reinserts past moments into the flow of present action. Juxtaposing photographic postcards of the former concentration camp at Amélie-les-Bains with contemporary images, for instance, the film *No pasarán, album souvenir* (2003) addresses issues of historical recuperation and post-memory in today's media society, where the act of remembering is no longer necessarily linked to witnessed events. Within this new context of "mediated memory," the author suggests, an aesthetics of recognition should both reflect a complex relay of images that gradates between past and present, and also allow a mirroring of the very act of recognition for present-day spectators.

In her essay on Els Opsomer's videos, concerning postcolonial Senegal, Hilde Van Gelder explores another way of coming to terms with a difficult past. Beginning with an account of the *Waarheidscommissie: Expo 1913–2013* – a provocative performance series addressing legacies of Belgian colonialism – Van Gelder counterpoises Opsomer's videos as an alternative way to approach fraught histories, beyond violent accusations. Intermingling broader historical, cultural, and political issues with her ongoing love story with a Senegalese man, Opsomer turns the backward-looking perspective and blame of "this was" into a critical, but optimistic, future perfect tense of "this will have been." In her complex account, where several "realities" overlap, the interplay of photographic and filmic images—realized, for example, by means of the editing software iMovie—becomes decisive in avoiding one-sided narratives. Instead, her videos allow and create a multi-layered ensemble of potential meanings.

What the essays in this issue all have in common, is that they discuss works that call for what Hilde Van Gelder identifies as "allied spectatorship." Indeed, these works implicate audiences in "building stories" together. Activating the cinematic potential of the flipbook or the photobook, reconstructing the spatialized allegories of Astrid Klein, participating in the act of recognition in Imbert's films and, finally, advancing Els Opsomer's idea of "critical potentiality," this allied spectator participates actively in the process of "imagining renewed forms of civil community today."

Brianne Cohen is a postdoctoral fellow for the research project "Photofilmic Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture" at the Université catholique de Louvain and Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography (2012-2015).

Email: brianne.cohen@gmail.com

Alexander Streitberger is professor of Art History at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve).

Email: alex.streitberger@uclouvain.be