

## Cinematic Rearticulations

I was in Philadelphia last week installing a double-screen film and video installation called *Frantz Fanon S. A.*, which was first shown at the Johannesburg Biennial in 1997. In the installation I abstracted a series of images from my feature film documentary *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* (1996) that corresponded to a lyrical register in psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon's writing. The vibrancy and sensuality of the images abstracted from my earlier film are represented in a condensed form – presenting a spin or ironic quotation on Fanon's piece "There is no colour prejudice here", as the Fanon character in the film waves a South African ANC flag. The exhibition, curated by Mark Nash (my partner), is called "Experiments with Truth", a display of contemporary moving images intended to reassess the influence of cinema and documentary practice within contemporary visual art. In an increasingly troubled time of emergencies, war and dis-information, the work represents an alternative view – one in which images can play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world rather than merely being used as a tool for propaganda.

The gallery, rather than the cinema, is becoming an important space for making interventions to re-view the differing cultural and political perspectives that make up 'moving image' culture from around the world. This shift brings with it a growing set of questions, including: how are we to consider the phenomena of contemporary artists working with film and video? How did a version of cinema become an increasingly common presence within the art gallery context?

This growing trend is marked in my own career as an artist and filmmaker who, after Derek Jarman's death, witnessed the end of an Independent (queer) film culture in the U.K. Regrettably, what Ruby Rich once rightly crowned "New Queer Cinema", was lost. It can be argued that elements from the genre have reappeared, here and there, in advertising, in mainstream television, and in galleries. Through experimentations with film and video, the distinctions between narrative avant-garde and documentary practice have become blurred, along with shifts in viewer's experiences – whose viewing habits and subjectivities are influenced by new digital technologies. Distinctive experimental approaches to visual imagery, once the aesthetic hallmarks of the New Queer Cinema, have transcended into the space of the contemporary gallery.

The documentary turn into video art was perhaps hinted at a decade ago in Derek Jarman "imageless" feature film *Blue* (1994). With an anti-

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representational strategy, Jarman presented a blank screen of Yves Klein blue, which stood as a testament to a time now lost, by creating a blue frame where the spectator loses her or his sight into a sea of blue haze. The non-representational image retained poetic and factual information which Jarman sonically produced with precision - documenting his eventual blindness during his battle against AIDS. *Blue* premiered at the Venice Art biennial as a video installation portraying the truth of his condition and indeed a part of our queer history.

## Looking for Langston

Thinking about the representation of truth in the space of the city and notions of spatial temporality brings to mind my early research for *Looking for Langston*, which also led me to Philadelphia, the very place of the “Experiments with Truth” exhibition. A connection between the past and the present is clearly evident, haunting my every step. This city was home to two of the perhaps most important voices which created an impetus and interpolated my own art practice. I am, of course, referring to Joseph Beam, an activist and writer of the black gay anthologies *Brother to Brother*, and to the poet Essex Hemphill. Indeed, Hemphill’s poetic truth struck me again, as it did when I first read his poem in homage to Joseph Beam after his death, 20 years ago:

When I stand in the front lines now  
Cussing the lack of truth,  
the absence of willful change  
and strategic coalitions,  
I realise sewing quilts  
Will not bring you back  
Nor save us.  
It’s too soon  
To make monuments  
For all we are losing,  
For the lack of truth...<sup>1</sup>

It was for the “lack of truth” that Bush recently won the American election – as millions of voters lined up to vote against queer marriages it seems. But it was only 10 years ago that I first lived in New York to work on a four part television series titled *Question of Equality*, a history of the Lesbian and Gay movement in the States, which chronicled the rise of the religious-right fundamentalism. This project was commissioned by Channel Four and ITVS for a program *Culture Wars* and in 2004 we are still deep in it.

In 1985 I first visited Joseph Beam in Philadelphia and it was in the same city where, in 1994, I last saw Essex Hemphill alive. Next year will

<sup>1</sup> Essex Hemphill, “When My Brother Fell (For Joseph Beam)”, in *Ceremonies* (San Francisco, Ca: Cleis Press, 2001).

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mark a decade since his death and it will also be the year *Looking for Langston* is re-released on DVD. The updated DVD will contain many surprises to celebrate Hemphill's work. Looking back on the making of *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *The Attendant* (1993), I can see the creation of a discursive space for re-articulating the politics of queer difference. This was a response to early developments in furthering what has now become known as 'Queer Studies' in the States, and in Britain 'Cultural Studies' (an already named and established discipline). I saw myself as a 'cultural worker' who made visual imagery that translated theoretical concerns – either through the language of the cinema, or via progressive television programming, where the cultural and media revolution was taking place through Channel Four Television. Indeed it was Channel Four's lesbian and gay series *Out on Tuesday*, in 1989, that commissioned and broadcast *Looking for Langston*. The legacy of that intervention is a British version of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy!* – although I think that the American original is much better, but that's where queer innovation has left us.

It is now left to artists and filmmakers to make utopic interventions into spaces that seem to be more open and receptive to thematic and visual experimentation. Contemporary museums and galleries are certainly creative spaces where a queer legacy of innovation continues and aesthetics interventions are not only possible, but also recognised. I don't want to claim it is a triumph, but it is a site where 'moving images' can explore 'queer aesthetics' receptively. Several projects, which have successfully used the space of the gallery, come to mind, including *The Orange and Blue Feelings* (2003), a double-screen video piece by Glenn Ligon who grapples with artistic creativity, growing up black and queer. The work invites the



Rewriting the museum space in Isaac Julien's *Baltimore*. Courtesy of I. Julien.

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audience to explore the multiple significances of a 'lost queer painting' of Malcolm X. Francesco Vezzoli's *The End of the Human Voice* is haunted by cinephilia, re-enacting key moments in art cinema through the camp performances of Bianca Jagger. The piece references Cocteau as Vezzoli casts himself, with iconic paper 'eye-lids', on one side of a bed and Bianca Jagger on the other. Both pieces can be seen in the "Experiments of Truth" exhibition at the Fabric workshop museum in Philly not in cinema proper.

The politics of the Museum were ambivalently signalled in *Looking for Langston* and *The Attendant*. Both films explored spatial temporalities, queering history, transgressing racial boundaries and the space of the Museum. In *Looking for Langston*, for example, sections of the black and white film show an art opening in New York from the 1930's. We see African American artists and their white patrons, while Stuart Hall reads a verse from Chaucer: "History, the smiler with the knife hidden under the cloak" (*The Knight's Tale*). Here I was alluding to my suspicion of the art world and the possible dangers of patronage for black and for queer artists. In *The Attendant* a story of (imagined) interracial transgression occurs between a 'closeted' middle aged black guard, who works in a museum and after closing hours, and a younger white visitor.

Indeed the museum or gallery has become the site for my own re-articulations – an ironic relocation, I admit. Essex Hemphill was well aware of the contradictory nature of high cultural spaces, seeing them as sites for class and race wars ("Visiting Hours"):

The government pays me  
Nine thousand dollars a year  
To protect the East Wing  
So I haunt it.  
Visiting hours are over.  
The silent sentry is on duty  
An electric eye patrols the premises  
I'm just here  
Putting  
mouth on the place.  
Modigliani whispers to Matisse  
Matisse whispers to Picasso.  
I kiss the Rose in my pocket  
And tip through this tomb of thieves.  
I'm weighted down with keys,  
Flashlight, walkie-talkie, a gun  
I'm expected to die, if necessary,  
Protecting European artwork  
That robbed color and movement  
From my life  
I'm a ghost in the Capitol.  
I did Vietnam.  
My head is rigged with land mines

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But I keep my cool,  
Waiting every other Friday,  
Kissing the rose  
Catching some trim.  
I'm not protecting any more Europeans  
With my life.  
I'll give this shit in here away  
before I die for it  
Fuck a Remb-randt!  
And if I go off,  
you'd better look out, Mona Lisa  
I'll run through this gallery  
with a can of red enamel paint  
and spray everything in sight  
like a cat on heat.

This notion of treason and revenge of the multitude, hinted at by Hemphill, is a theme at work in *Paradise Omeros* (made for Documenta 11, 2002) and *Baltimore* (2003). The latter was a multi-screen video installation that developed from a documentary called *Baadasssss Cinema* (made in 2002). *Baltimore* deals with the cinematization of video art, on the one hand, and a 'queering' and 'racing' of the museum, on the other. I saw these video installations as interventions that attempted to address the 'creolising vision' in the space of the gallery.

## Baltimore

The aim of *Baltimore*, a large-scale three screen video projection, was to try and create a re-reading across three distinct archives including that of Black



The Wax Museum in *Baltimore*. Courtesy of I. Julien.

action films from the 1970's. The installation aims to create a reflective 'third space' using both 'high' and 'popular' cultural motifs such as black science fiction and Afro-futurism. The triptych component explores the aesthetics of the blaxploitation cinema genre and its contemporary references through a series of light-hearted citations from a number of movies. The work was shot in Baltimore – a city with a long history of black migration and settlement. Baltimore is also the home base of the NAACP in the States.

The prime locations of *Baltimore* are the museums of Walters Art Gallery, an

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important Renaissance art museum in downtown Baltimore, and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum (the equivalent of a Madame Tussauds gone wrong or a black Thomas Hirsh installation – and one of America’s African American top ten history attractions). This is due to my own interest in archival spaces – including notions of power and memory and memorialization.

The Blaxploitation genres are profoundly imperfect, contaminated culturally, sexist yet queer. Certainly not everyone would call these films art, nor are many of them that compelling. I would argue this is irrelevant. The films are valuable and provide a rich starting point for my own imagery. They are involved with the aesthetics of the vulgar. Video projection can draw attention to visual identifiers and codes, which I rework to produce a creolised vision of the museum. I hope the piece is received as a provocative and satirical intervention within the art world, critically re-arranging and un-tidying its curatorial endeavours.

The idea behind this first part of the Baadassssss project was to place the documentary in a pedagogical relationship to the spectator. I wanted to show the archival process and the power of visual iconography in relation to the after effects of the Black power movement, to people’s lives – to their very representation. This attempt at queering Blaxploitation imagery is an acknowledgment of its ability to influence other genres such as Hip-Hop, Independent Film and so on. I also wanted to consider the misunderstandings and complexities of the genre through interviews with black queer icons, such as Pam Grier engaged in debate and dissension. *Baadassssss Cinema* will merely enable the spectator to fully appreciate the spatio-temporality of Baltimore’s multiple screens and sonic sound projections, allowing for a criticality that tackles the representational strategies inherent in blaxploitation films themselves and approximates these aesthetics for the space of video art.

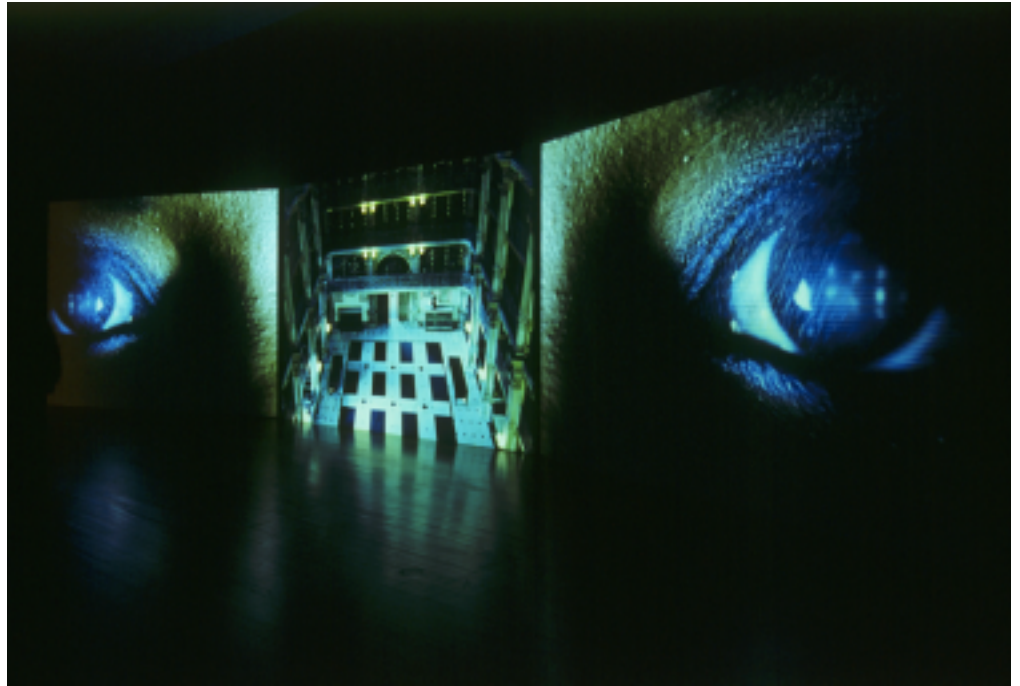
The scenes in Baltimore are shot with deliberate diegetic effects that work to disrupt the narrative telos. The camera, tracking movements within the frame, makes use of the sculptural potential of cinematic space. In the triptych format the images are not merely representations of certain people but representations of ‘the spaces of representations’. Here identities are spatialised by collocated images across all 3 screens. The highway scene, for example, mirrors the visual ideas on perspectivism from the school of Piero della Francesca’s *An Ideal City*. This is achieved through pictorial montages in order to emphasize the politics of space.

The “Sweet sweet back Baadassssss song” is unique in allowing for a black fairy queen to skip along to it. And although Melvin Van Peebles did not intend to make a queer black film, it is indeed a very queer and strange black experimental art film. It was for this element of the unexpected that he was chosen to play the protagonist, along with Vanessa Myrie who plays the black femme fatale - part Angela Davis part Foxy Brown, and



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part cyborg. Her character remains out of reach for Melvin – her sexuality is an enigma for some, but not for all. These characters are indeed haunted by the history of the spaces of the museum and their own filmic iconography.



Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*. Courtesy of I. Julien.

At the end of “Heavy Breathing”, Essex Hemphill writes:

At the end of heavy breathing  
The dream deferred  
Is in a museum  
Under glass and guard.  
It costs five dollars  
To see it on display  
We spend the day  
Viewing artifacts,  
Breathing heavy  
On glass  
To see  
The skeletal remains  
Of black panthers,  
Pictures of bushes,  
Canisters of tears.

I imagine if he might have dreamt of a few frames of *Baltimore* or prophetically dreamt of my future.

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## Paradise Omeros

In this piece, a homage to Derek Walcott, I explore an adolescent's perspective on the mixture of English and St. Lucian cultures within both countries. A young man prepares to come to terms with a loss of innocence and at the same time there is an Oedipal reading of postcolonial and intra-ethnic relations enacted between the protagonist and the tourist/rasta male character. In England, the young man and his family experience both happiness and racial tension – which is shown through scenes of enjoyment, juxtaposed to ones of anguish. Other sections of the film are set in St. Lucia, where the rasta character quotes Robert Mitchum's performance in *The Night of the Hunter* (directed by Charles Laughton in 1955) to the adolescent. Here the dynamics of love and hate are explored – Mitchum's tattoo replaced by gold rings worn by the rasta.

I wanted to consider the representation of the Caribbean as a site of mythic cultural fantasy. One of the principal scenes, for example, is the submersion of the boy in the sea, intercut with historical images of riots and immigration in the UK. On his journey through the sea and the archive, our protagonist encounters traumatic images. Memories, both personal and public, lead him to the metropolis, London. Yet he returns to St. Lucia, and then back to London again, through the visual looping of the film, which is projected on the gallery wall. The effect is one of oscillation – as though the character continually travels back and forth in time. He refuses to be located, preferring to occupy an/other space – somewhere between the sea, the city and the gallery wall. Indeed, it is within the very walls of the contemporary gallery that artists remain free to explore such themes (which often sit outside mainstream interests). And, it is in this way that galleries are becoming an increasingly important critical and cultural site.

My emerging displacement of cinema, in an art context, can be seen as a continuation of some of my earlier independent cinema concerns. It could be seen as a reconfiguration of sorts – this mutation, from one technology to another, from celluloid to digital, makes new interventions possible. Along with this are changes in the nature of spectatorship and subjectivity. Deterritorialization of the cinema into the gallery means that spectators who come to these spaces may have a different set of expectations, beyond the normative expectations of a general cinema audience. But, of course, that could be seen as a class difference as well, and that's why I like the idea of creating works that have an interdisciplinary approach. For example, *Baadasssss Cinema*, the documentary I made for the Independent Film Channel, was shown on Cable TV, but *Baltimore*, its sister project was shown at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York.

These changes can also be viewed as a sign of the displacement of political demands, which once took centre stage in the cinema proper,



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but are now relegated to a “fine art” space. It is worth noting that many voices have been made absent in the cinema. It has been over ten years since Derek Jarman’s death. His life is the subject of my next documentary – a project that is proving to be very difficult to raise funds for. To date, not one television station has agreed to support the documentary financially and I wonder, were Jarman alive, would he join me in the call for a re-articulated cinema? Or, for that matter, would the political video work of Marlon Riggs be shown in a gallery as video art?