Medium-Specificity and Sociality in Expanded Cinema Re-enactment

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Abstract

In this short paper, I introduce the work of the artist group Teaching and Learning Cinema, which re-enacts Expanded Cinema artworks from the 1960s and 70s. I make a connection between sociality (which binds together artists in collectives and screening "clubs") and the issue of medium-specificity. Re-enacting Expanded Cinema, I suggest, gently probes at the intersection of medium-specificity and sociality. This practice asks questions about the material qualities of film, video and performance, and the particular relations these media carry across time and culture.

Keywords: expanded cinema, re-enactment, medium-specificity, sociality, performance art, experimental cinema, pedagogy

Introduction

This paper uses the re-enactment practice of the artist group Teaching and Learning Cinema (Louise Curham and Lucas Ihlein) to consider some broad issues about medium-specificity. By re-creating performative works from the past, questions of materiality and social context are tangibly activated in situated experience. I begin by giving a brief genealogy of Teaching and Learning Cinema, before touching on some of the problems which emerge through re-enactment.

Historical Background of Teaching and Learning Cinema

Teaching and Learning Cinema (Louise Curham and Lucas Ihlein) evolved from another collective called SMIC – Sydney Moving Image Coalition, formed in 2003. SMIC, for its part, was inspired by MIC – the Moving Image Coalition – based in Melbourne, which had evolved from the Melbourne Super 8 Group.

SMIC was a "film-lovers and film-makers" group, which held convivial sporadic screenings in inner-city warehouses, and encouraged its members to bring along and show things they had made. SMIC had a very DIY ethic, and during the early 2000s many of its activities involved Super 8 film, encouraging members to make and show work using this small-gauge celluloid medium.

SMIC's focus on Super 8 could arguably be seen as a return to territory staked out by the Sydney Super 8 Group in the 1980s – a group which (in 1990) evolved into the less medium-specific Sydney Intermedia Network (SIN) – which itself evolved, in 2000, into dLUX Media Arts (the "d" presumably standing for "digital") [1].

Thus it could be offered somewhat wryly, that SMIC's focus on the pre-digital Super 8 format represented something of a *devolution*. But I don't believe that our interest in "old-media" was in any way anti-progress – nor was it a nostalgic technology-fetishists club.

However, SMIC *was* in practice a sort of social club (defined as an "association of two or more people united by a common interest or goal") - one whose members were, on the whole, quite young. One of the binding tenets of this club was the belief that it was important, in a moment when digital video had just begun to gain ubiquity, to spend some time with a medium which was well and truly on its way to becoming commercially redundant (and possibly extinct). Our screenings were peppered with discussions around notions of medium-specificity: the image grain, colour-cast, and archival issues of Super 8 film stocks – and these material, chemical and physical qualities were compared, not just with video, but also with other celluloid media, especially 16mm film.

Time was also of the essence in these discussions: not just in the obvious sense – that a cartridge of Super 8 afforded only three precious minutes of footage – but also in that it would take at least a month to have it processed. Such a slow turn-around (in a world that in the early 2000s was on the cusp of YouTube!) necessarily expanded our discussions of medium-specificity to encompass how cycles of creation and distribution in moving image making intersect with our social experience of time in everyday life.

SMIC screenings usually incorporated a segment we called "Primary Sources" – in which an Australian film-maker or artist was invited along to show and speak about a work they had made (either recently or in the distant past). These Primary Sources segments were an attempt to turn our self-made cinema into an ad-hoc classroom. Artists we worked with included David Perry, Joan Grounds, Mike Leggett, John Gillies, Manny Gasparinatos, Mike Cooper and Anne Walton [2]. It was the richness of this pedagogical aspect which led Louise Curham and I to shift our focus away from the convening of collective screening events, and towards a slower process of historical practice-based research in moving image performance. This shift also coincided with a change of name, to Teaching and Learning Cinema.

Expanded Cinema Re-enactment

What we have focused on, since mid 2005, is the re-enactment of works of Expanded Cinema from the 1970s (the decade, incidentally, in which Louise and I were both born). Our focus to date has been on works produced by artists associated with the London Film-Makers' Co-op, such as Guy Sherwin, Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban, and Anthony McCall [3]. Our impetus – as it was in the SMIC Primary Sources events – is to learn something by trying to connect with the work of our forebears. In some cases, this has involved us becoming "custodians" of works of experimental film which involve a live or "performed" element – works which might (without our intervention) cease to exist once the originating artist dies. To be precise – the works *would* continue to exist, in the same way that their deceased creators will continue to exist – as memories, stories, and as documentation in archives – but their embodied enactment would no longer be able to be directly experienced by others [4].

Since the readily available, then-current technologies for making moving image art in the 1970s included 16mm and Super 8 film, our re-enactments necessarily have to grapple with the issues of medium-specificity and "authenticity". Does it make sense to use celluloid in 2013 to recreate a work from 1971? The answer is "yes and no". [5]

Our contemporary media context might make the choice of pre-digital technology seem like a deliberate technological "statement" (retro / nostalgic / luddite). One could argue that, in the 1970s, the use of celluloid film by artists may have seemed more transparent – a "neutral" and convenient carrier of audio-visual meaning within then-current moving image discourse. And yet the situation is not quite that simple.

Artists such as Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban and Guy Sherwin (whose works we have re-enacted to varying degrees of depth and completion) are all associated to some extent with the structuralist/materialist tradition in experimental film-making. Working in this tradition meant drawing attention to the specific qualities of the film medium, as well as the discourses that surrounded the proliferation and consumption of moving images in society. In other words, such works were *already* – in the moment of their execution and initial performances – problematising the notions of medium and mediation [6].

Please reference as: [Author(s)-of-paper] (2013) [Title-of-paper] in Cleland, K., Fisher, L. & Harley, R. (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 19th International Symposium of Electronic Art*, ISEA2013, Sydney. http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/9475
Page numbering begins at 1 at the start of the paper.

Thus – to re-enact 1970s Expanded Cinema is not, we would argue, to produce a "cover version" – a lesser imprint of an "original" which retains its authenticity even in the face of its corporeal degradation – but rather it is to engage in an ongoing chain of remediation initiated (and indeed called into being!) by the work itself.

Our research process brings us into direct contact with artists 30 or 40 years older than us. This intergenerational exchange involves learning – not only about how media artworks were made before digital technology – but about what kinds of "social clubs" were invented to serve the purposes of production, screening, and discussion [7]. Thus re-enactment creates new layers of mediation – not only technological, but also, crucially, *social* - or perhaps it reminds us of the difficulty in regarding these two things as separate domains.

References and Notes

1. This organisational evolution is briefly summed up at the SCANLINES website, <http://scanlines.net/group/sydney-intermedia-network-sin>, accessed June 25, 2013.

2. Some archived media releases from these events by Sydney Moving Image Coalition are here: <http://www.teachingandlearningcinema.org/2013/01/15/smic-primary-sources-poster-for-3-feb-2004-screening-lanfranchis/>, accessed October 8, 2013.

3. Our focus on British artists does not represent a turning away from an Australian historical context. Our ethos, while embedded in our local context, is resolutely internationalist. In fact, as we discovered recently during a performance and discussion in London (convened by Sally Golding of Unconscious Archives) it is precisely our geographical distance from the so-called "centres" of cultural production which has made our re-enactments necessary, and allowed them to evolve beyond the boundaries of the original works.

4. A similar focus on the corporeal articulation of archival documentation is described by Jonathan Walley in relation to his own experiment with re-creating Takehisa Kosugi's *Film & Film #4* (1965). Walley considers the connection between his approach and that of Teaching and Learning Cinema. Jonathan Walley, "Recreating Expanded Cinema", *Incite Journal of Experimental Media*, Issue No. 4, Fall 2013, <http://www.incite-online.net/issuefour.html>, accessed October 25, 2013.

5. The practical and philosophical issues around the choice of medium for Expanded Cinema re-enactments are discussed in more detail in an earlier paper: Lucas Ihlein, "Re-enacting Expanded Cinema: Three Case Studies", presented at *Re-Live Conference*, Melbourne 2009, <http://www.teachingandlearningcinema.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/TLC-Reenacting-expanded-cinema-three-case-studies.pdf> accessed October 25, 2013.

6. Some of the complex debates around medium-specificity in film and new media are discussed by Steven Maras and David Sutton in their essay "Medium Specificity Re-visited". Maras and Sutton (following the work of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) put forward the notion of *remediation* as a useful way of picking a path through the thorny territory of medium-specificity. This notion makes space for the complex and multiple ways in which works (of art, film, etc) travel through time and across cultures and material manifestations. Steven Maras and David Sutton, "Medium Specificity Re-visited", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Vol 6. No.2, 2000.

7. See for example "1966, 13TH OCTOBER, LONDON FILMMAKERS' CO-OPERATIVE IS FORMED", *Lux Online Website*, <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/history/1960-1969/london_film-makers_co-op.html>, accessed June 25, 2013, and Bob Percival in discussion with Kate Richards and Mark Titmarsh, "d/Lux & the super history of super 8 in Sydney", <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/77/8361>, accessed June 25, 2013.