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# Cooking the Cosmic Soup: Vincent Moon's Altered States of Live Cinema

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## Abstract

The films and live cinema of Vincent Moon are considered in this chapter as 'psychedelic': a form of filmmaking and film performances that can open the doors of perception to invisible realms of percepts, affects and durations that are beyond or below ordinary human perception. According to Paul Schrader, films can evoke such spiritual dimensions, in particular through what he called the transcendental style of film, and what Gilles Deleuze termed the time-image. As an audio-visual ethnographer of world religions who is distinctly influenced by shamanic and animistic traditions, Moon brings the transcendental style back to its plane of immanence. His live cinema performances have a ritualistic and ecstatic aspect that recalls the esoteric history of haunted media. Moon's enthralling film performances induce altered states of mind, tap into spiritual realities and immerse the audience in magic.

**Keywords:** Vincent Moon, psychedelics, Deleuze and Guattari, transcendental style in film, time-image, haunted media

## I. Introduction

Vincent Moon and his work can be described in several ways. He is known as a multimedia artist, an independent filmmaker and a sound designer who made mainstream and indie rock video clips. Moon was the principal director of the Blogothèque's Take Away Shows, a Web-based project that recorded field works of musicians related to indie rock, as well as some prominent mainstream artists such as Tom Jones,

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R.E.M. and Arcade Fire. During this time, Moon realised that what he was actually drawn to was the energy that animated rock events. He then embarked upon a journey that still continues, travelling around the world and documenting sacred music and religious rituals for his label Collection Petites Planètes. Upon taking this vocation, Moon could also be described as an audio-visual ethnographer of world religions, diligently documenting spiritual and religious rites all over the globe, resulting in an astounding collection of short films and music recordings of enchanting ritual dance, sacred music, devotional offerings, and prayers, which he shares for free online.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Moon made many full-length documentary films, among them (and most recently) *Hibridos: Spirits of Brazil* (made with Priscilla Telmon, released in 2017), which is accompanied by a website archive of its own.<sup>2</sup>

For fifteen years, Moon has been travelling around the world with a camera in his backpack, taking the role of a pilgrim, a nomadic spiritual seeker who keeps documenting and performing with his ever growing collection, following the universal spirit in its eclectic manifestations wherever it may be. As of late, Moon is experimenting with live cinema performances where he improvises with his films. These performances are intended to induce altered states of mind, echoing the ecstatic ceremonies projected on the screen. Whistling and chanting as he improvises with his films in real time, Moon himself sometimes enters a trance, appearing as a modern-day shaman that uses film as a medium for transmitting the energies and spirits he captured in his travels. Mixing and manipulating his materials live on the stage, ‘adding spice here and there, tasting and letting others taste, constantly adding ingredients’, Moon regards himself as a cook (Figure 1). It is like brewing psychedelic potions, or an alchemical process in which Moon is mixing together all these ingredients: an assemblage of performances, rituals, elements, energies and spirits in which he adds himself and the audience to the pot, to make what he calls his ‘cosmic soup’.<sup>3</sup>

Moon’s live cinema is situated on the seamlines between art and ritual, technology and magic. In the context of this special issue, Moon’s work will be considered as ‘psychedelic’, a mind-altering form of filmmaking and live cinema performance that can potentially open the doors of perception to invisible realms.<sup>4</sup> These spiritual dimensions can be evoked by film, in particular through what Paul Schrader (2018) recognised as the transcendental style of film, and what Gilles Deleuze (1997b) termed the time-image. Moon’s unique film language, I argue, brings the transcendental style back to its plane of immanence. His live cinema is



Figure 1. Vincent Moon during performance. Courtesy Vincent Moon and Theo Civitello (photography).

an intoxicating film performance that taps into spiritual realities, induces altered states of mind, and immerses the audience in magic.

## II. Into the Flow

Moon's films take the viewer on a trip in the psychedelic sense of the word. His film *Hibridos* explores Brazilian religions and spiritual traditions, including the Santo Daime, Barquinha and native Amazonian tribes such as Yawanawa and Huni Kuin, which are all centred around the consumption of the entheogenic brew ayahuasca (Labate and MacRae 2006; Labate 2012). Moon was not observing the rituals of these religions merely as a bystander, but took the sacrament they offered, 'holding the camera in one hand, and the glass of ayahuasca in the other'.<sup>5</sup> By actively participating in these intense rituals, Moon could share the sensation experienced by the filmed participants, and through his 'intoxicated' camera, invite the viewer to get into contact high. As he described it, *Hibridos* is 'a cinema-trance experience', a film that:

breaks down the distance between viewer and subject, from Indigenous rituals to Afro-Brazilian traditions, from north to south, from the jungle to the ocean; revealing the fraternal bonds between healers, shamans, mystics,

adepts and devotees. An adventure in meditation, a musical journey in its purest form [...] as well as a trip through cinema as pure poetic language. Without any commentary, an inner voyage, only with the voices and songs performed in the rituals. (Araújo de Siqueira 2018)

It is common knowledge among psychonauts that the psychedelic experience cannot be entirely described, but must be experienced to be truly grasped. By extension, psychedelic filmmaking cannot inform the viewer about the psychedelic experience from the outside, but should let the viewer experience (something of) it 'from within'. It is not about the content (watching people taking drugs and tripping) so much as it's about the cinematic language, the form of cinema and its relation to human modes of perception and the proximity between the brain and the screen (Flaxman 2000). It's more about *how* we perceive than *what* we perceive.

Although Moon's filmmaking can be ascribed to the tradition of ethnographic documentaries, he is not taking the classic 'objective' ethnographical or anthropological approach. Rather than observing the rituals as an uninvolved outsider, he is partaking, sharing the experience and getting very close to the subjects of his films. In ethnography this is known as participatory observation or 'going native', a rejection of the traditional role of the ethnographer as a distant analytical researcher (Brennen 2017: 165).

Among Bill Nichols's classification of the documentary film to six modes of storytelling—expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative and poetic—Moon's films are clearly not of the expository and observational kind (Nichols 2017). While the expository mode is typically accompanied by a non-diegetic third-person narrator who didactically leads the viewers and shapes their understanding of the image, there is no narration in Moon's films, and no basic orientation is provided. His films are not of the observational kind either, which strives to record reality without getting involved, typically with 'fly on the wall' camerawork. In contrast, Moon's camera is handheld, fluid and dynamic. Almost without any long shots that would traditionally function as establishing shots that orientate viewers to the basic parameters of the scene, Moon directly plunges the audience *in medias res*, with medium, close-up and extreme close-up shots. This is a very conscious choice. Moon is adamant about his films not being 'about sharing information', but rather about transmitting flows, capturing and transforming energies into film, without fixing them in a certain mould. 'I work with the hypothesis that the close-up links

us with the unconscious, the hidden memories of not only those that will eventually appear on the screen, but also of the audience.' Moon's approach to the close-up echoes early film theoretician and director Jean Epstein, who proclaimed that 'the close-up is the soul of the cinema', providing access to what lies beyond (or below) our conscious perception (Epstein and Liebman 1977: 9). The frequent use of close-ups is one of Moon's cinematic devices to open the doors of perception and reveal 'the soul of the world', the subtle micro- and cosmic movements that are hidden from the naked, corporeal eye (Turvey 1998).

Moon's documentary film style could be fitted within the participatory or interactive documentary mode, as he tends to actively participate in the rituals he documents. There is, however, one significant difference. According to Nichols, this mode is self-reflexive, often calling attention to the filmmaking process. Yet in Moon's films, there's no meta-level, no external vantage point. On an aesthetic level, Moon's style is closer to the poetic documentary mode and avant-garde filmmaking techniques that are purely visual and often dispense with narrative. This style, as Frances Bonner explains, is not concerned with telling a story, but rather seeks 'to *evoke* how the world, or a section of it under consideration, is' (Bonner, in Hall, Evans and Nixon 2013: 70). In Deleuzian terms, Moon's documentary filmmaking style does not look from the outside, but, emulating the psychedelic experience, emmeshes perception 'in the midst of things' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 280).<sup>6</sup>

Moon's live cinema performances often follow the trajectory of a trip, gradually building up towards a climax, going through some rough moments of transition, leading to ecstasy and eventual catharsis. Quite tellingly, the crescendo of gushing images and sounds during Moon's performances of live cinema often climax into the trippy 'stargate' effect from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), superimposed on Moon's original footage.<sup>7</sup> Moon's poetic documentary mode conjures psychedelic aesthetics that transcend the typical role of a visual ethnographer or documentarist who is not supposed to alter too much what has been in front of their lens.

Mapping the common aesthetic characteristics of psychedelic videos, media and psychedelics scholar Ido Hartogsohn marked the lavish colourful qualities, kaleidoscopic fragmentation of the image, fluidity and shifting contours and shapes, multi-dimensionality and multi-perspectivism, and the synesthetic qualities (the mixing of senses, as in the seeing of sounds or the hearing of colours) that often feature in psychedelic videos. These are all effects that simulate the alteration of perception common to the psychedelic experience, and as Hartogsohn



Figure 2. Image by Vincent Moon, courtesy Vincent Moon and Alex Schroeder (photography).

argues, ‘their significance transcends the purely aesthetic’, as they can potentially transform the mind of the viewer and inspire deep states of joy and healing (Hartogsohn 2018).

Moon is using an array of techniques to ‘psychedelically’ alter and modify his recordings live on stage. VDMX, a software-based, media-processing environment, allows him to navigate between his numerous film recordings on the spot, and to edit, mix them and add effects in real time. This software system works with a few layers of controls that Moon pre-designed to manipulate the images with certain psychedelic visual effects such as intensification of colour and light, sonification of images to create a synesthesia effect, fractalisation of perception and multi-perspective superimposition of images. One of the keys, for example, enhances colours and pulsates the image, which then throbs and vibrates, transformed into sonorous waves. An image of a Japanese sword master performing a ritual on the background of Mount Fuji starts to throb, gradually losing its defined contours, until it’s transformed from a distinct figure to a purely abstract vibrational element that can be felt as much as perceived – a conversion of image into sound waves, of matter into energy (Figure 2). Another button allows Moon to create kaleidoscopic vision. Any image that he brings on screen can be broken and refracted in multiple ways on a scale that can be

intensified to total fractalisation of the image, or what Moon describes as 'collapsing the image into the substrata matrix of reality'.

While these manipulations evoke the psychedelic experience on perceptual and affective levels, what is more difficult to transmit is the spiritual aspect of taking psychedelics, which is challenging to convey, especially in the context of our materialist, secular culture. Among the main features of the psychedelic spiritual experience, such as the feeling of timelessness or ineffable joy, the underlining characteristic may be the stepping out of the self-enclosed 'I' and having the experience of being interconnected (with others, nature, the universe, spirits, gods). The common psychedelic sensation of melting boundaries between the I and the surroundings, between me and other, inside and outside, is much more than just a visual display of colourful fractals, but a fractalisation of the self, a crackdown of the molar identity structure into a state of becoming (molecular). As Hartogsohn (2018) reports:

The blurring and the shifting of boundaries has also been long noted as one of the primary effects of psychedelics, both in the visual realm and beyond it. Psychedelics have the capacity to challenge habitual views of the everyday world by undermining its solidity, inducing its disintegration and often rehashing it altogether. They have also been noted as boundary dissolvers and enhancers of fluidity. These characteristics of psychedelics are the root of their reputation as dissolvers of opinions, ideologies and world-views, and as deconstructors of the self, a trait conceptualized under the rubrics of ego-dissolution and ego-death.

Early on, Moon was influenced by anarchist and Marxist thinkers such as Guy Debord, from whom he took the inspiration to break hierarchies, which he implements as a rhizomatic filmmaking politics. Moon describes it as 'putting everything on the same plane, connecting every dot with every other without making one more important than the other'. In his early career as director of indie rock music videos, he used to bring musicians to play in the streets, 'where they should be – back among the people, and not on a higher level'. The camera would go back and forth between the musicians and the people gathered around, exchanging the positions of background and foreground:

I would now call it a cosmic dance, where you go into a flow where everything connects like magic, and you are there just collecting dots at the center of this experiment, because you trigger the experience. It's happening everywhere around you, and you start dancing with reality.

Performing these experiments, Moon discovered a plane of inter-connectivity that linked all these occurrences. Deleuze and Guattari



offered many names to describe such a plane: ‘a pure plane of immanence, univocality, composition, upon which everything is given [...] A fixed plane of life upon which everything stirs [...]’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 255). Moon rediscovered this plane in ritualistic context and realised its spiritual potential when he drank ayahuasca for the first time in Colombia,

and that was like, ‘eureka, oh, halleluiah!’ Then I understood why I was making those street music videos, because I was trying to play with a pattern of reality – that everything is interconnected. In a funny way I went to interconnectivity through anarchist political ideas, and suddenly the spiritual realm responded, ‘yes!, way to go! Go with the flow!’

Going with the flow became Moon’s *modus operandi*, his filmmaking style, his aesthetical approach (which is political as well) and the way his work is distributed and presented. As a filmmaking technique, going with the flow means bridging the habitual distance that is created in audio-visual ethnographic research between the observer/director and the filmed subjects. Moon lets himself – and the camera – to be carried away with the *corrente*, as the Santo Daime initiates call (in Portuguese) the non-personal energetic current that runs through everybody in the ceremony and unites them, sometimes to the point of drowning individual egos (Hartogsohn 2021). This energetic flow of connectivity is evident in a cinematography that takes you very close, and the fluid movement of a camera that seems to be itself intoxicated.

Moon’s live cinema performances are further bridging the gap between film/performance and the audience. Every live cinema event is site specific and has its own unique features. It can take place indoors, in movie theatres, clubs, living rooms, or it can be out in the open. It can have multiple screens or just one, but the images might also be projected on walls, even plants. Whatever the conditions are, Moon prefers that the public do not sit at a distance. Whenever possible, the audience is encouraged to sit around him, fostering a collective atmosphere that Moon will enhance by talking and engaging with the audience, while responding to their cues with sounds and images he spontaneously displays on the screen. Playing with conventional protocols of spectatorship, Moon encourages the audience to take part in the experience. Shifting the audience from the ordinary state of individual, separated position to a more collective and immersive experience, an altered state of mind potentially emerges.

### III. Spiritual Cinema

Moon's live cinema acts are often formed as rituals that echo the rituals seen on the screen, aiming to channel the spiritual dimension from the original rituals to their cinematic modifications.<sup>8</sup> But how can spirit be captured and transmitted with film? How can a visual medium relate to an invisible realm? According to Paul Schrader, 'the convergence of spirituality and cinema would occur in style, not content' (Schrader 2018: 2). What he defined as the 'transcendental style' in film included directors such as Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer and Tarkovski, that took part in a larger movement away from the narrative; directors that frequently used distancing devices to create an alternate film reality. By using techniques such as delayed edits, irrational cuts, static camera and very long takes, these directors could open 'a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality' (Schrader 2018: 3). The spectator's psyche, 'squeezed by untenable disparity, would break free to another plane' (Schrader 2018: 3). Schrader related his understanding of this transcendental plane to Deleuze's film philosophy, which he neatly summarised as follows:

Film history falls into two perceptual periods: (1) movement-image and (2) time-image. Movement-image began with the origins of cinema and was the dominant perceptual principle until after World War II. It's the action of a projected image. Such movement perceived on screen continues in our minds. We're hardwired for it. Even after the image of the running man is cut on screen, the viewer still imagines the runner completing his task. [...] World War II dates the rough demarcation of a shift [...] Screen movement still occurred, of course, but it was increasingly 'subordinated to time'. What does that mean? It means that a film edit is determined not by action on screen but by the creative desire to associate images over time. (Schrader 2018: 3)<sup>9</sup>

Deleuze, then, identified two perceptual principles of cinema. The movement-image relates time to the Newtonian rules of motion, corresponding with the sensory-motor process which is expressed as an action image. The time-image, conversely, subordinates physical movement to time. It is similar to the distinction made by Bergson between 'real duration' (*durée réelle*) or real time as lived, experienced duration, and the false time of the mechanical clock as a spatial construct, a time translated to space (Bergson 2001). The spiritual dimension, in this sense, is the dimension of time that is not subordinated to matter and the rules of cause-and-effect that govern it. According to Schrader, filmmakers of the transcendental style could access this dimension by employing distancing devices such as the irrational cut or the very long take, which is not about covering space ('getting there')

but experiencing time ('being there') (Schrader 2018: 8). The long take embeds the image in time, giving duration precedence over space. The irrational cut does not serve the logic of physical motion in space, but the logic of time as a dimension unbound by material causation. As Schrader illustrates:

Man exits one room, enters another—that's movement-image editing. Man exits one room, shot of trees in the wind, shot of train passing—that's time-image editing [...] Deleuze called this the 'non-rational cut.' The non-rational cut breaks from sensorimotor logic. [...] Movement-image is informed by Aristotelian logic: 'A' can never equal 'not A'. Time-image rejects the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, posits a world where something and its opposite can coexist: 'A' can be 'not A'. (Schrader 2018: 4)

Transcendental-style filmmakers are not primarily concerned with telling stories to our conscious selves, relating to the logic of material reality and the sensory-motor process, but communicate directly with the unconscious and the spiritual reality of memories, fantasies, dreams and—in Moon's case—hallucinations (Figure 3).

Moon doesn't provide any coverage or context to the images he shows. As he argues, the establishing shot is not only fixing the image, but the audience as well: 'not sharing too much context gives more room for the spectators to tap into their unconscious'. The transcendental style evokes introspection. While the moving-image relies on our brain's tendency to complete the movement on screen, the time-image creates a gap. Rather than anticipating the next move, spectators are called to go within and look inside themselves. With the time-image, as Schrader describes it, 'we not only fill in the blanks, but we create new blanks' (Schrader 2018: 6).

According to Deleuze, with the time-image 'the question is no longer that of association or attraction of images. What counts is on the contrary the interstice between images [...] a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it' (Deleuze 1997b: 179). As Moon sees it:

Cinema is heavily normalized nowadays in the sense that we do not let the unconscious of the viewer go around freely. It's not about freeing the unconscious but about captivating and telling a storyline from which you can't escape. I'm trying to create an escape, escaping moments, a cinema full of holes is what I'm trying to do. People can go into these holes and complete the picture and understand what they need to understand, not what I want them to understand. The idea is not that they should complete my story, but theirs.

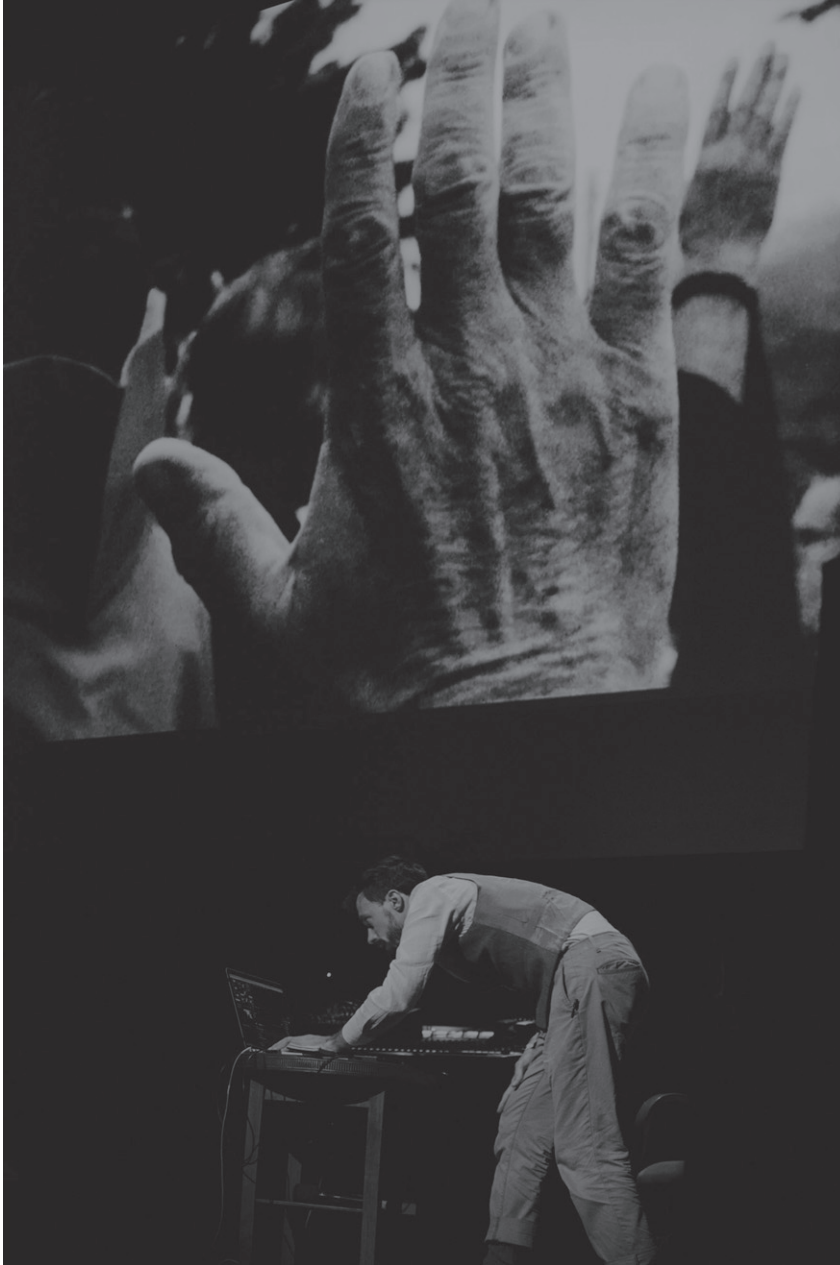


Figure 3. Vincent Moon live at Berlin CTM, 2016. Courtesy Vincent Moon.

while the movement-image typically follows a linear progression of images, Moon's guerrilla style of filmmaking is carried by circular time, unregimented by Aristotelian narrative chains of commercial cinema:

I'm experimenting more and more with creating a constant flow where you don't have a beginning or end. I think we are getting trapped in our own narratives of storytelling with beginning and ending. This is a very wrong way to approach reality. And I was guilty of that too. There's nothing more narration based, and in a sense normalizing linearity than cinema. So the question was how to keep on using the medium of cinema and trying to convert it so it becomes loops again, turns back to circles.

Fernanda Abreu, who collaborated with Moon on *Híbridos*, tracks this circularity in the film's 'spiraling edit' that 'aims to convey the circular perception of time that is particular to nature-based beliefs' (Abreu 2021). In contrast to the mechanical tick of industrial production guided by modernity's myth of progress, Moon's editing style evokes a shamanic and Indigenous time and rhizomatic connections that are closer to nature and natural cycles.

Each piece of magic captured in one of Moon's journeys is connected to all the others through pure movement that traverses, connects and transforms them all. A montage of hands in diverse devotional practices, circular ritual dance moves, and the camera itself—everything is in constant vortex motion, like whirling Dervishes. As if growing a crystal image from a rhizomatic web, Moon's camera is following the current rather than particular subjects that are carried by it. Shooting musicians performing in a house in Berlin, the camera suddenly drifts away from them and is carried outside to follow a passer-by in the street that has entered the flow. The background becomes the foreground and all the points are connected on this plane of pure movement that gathers it all. Yet it is a purity that has nothing to do with the habitual meaning ascribed to the term, as some untouched essence, unspoiled by the other. The plane of immanence is a plane of consistency, consistently adding up, a plane of connectivity that is 'pure' only as pure difference can be, and that has

nothing to do with a ground buried deep within things, nor with an end or a project in the mind of God. Instead, it is a plane upon which everything is laid out, and which is like the intersection of all forms, the machine of all functions. [...] The One is said with a single meaning of all the multiple. Being expresses in a single meaning all the differs. What we are talking about

is not the unity of substance but the infinity of the modifications that are part of one another on this unique plane of life. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 254)

Following the rhizomatic logic of connectivity and heterogeneity, the plane of immanence constructs a hybrid that connects any point to anything other (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7). *Hibridos*, the title of Moon's film, is based on the syncretic, hybrid lines of Brazilian religions, which resonate with Moon's own eclectic practice: 'I don't believe in the idea of purity. I think we are creating hybrids from hybrids, impures from impures. I believe that in this way, something is carried along, and transforms.' The spirit that Moon captures in his travels is at once universal and heterogeneous, and it comes in many shapes: of devotees in a Buddhist temple in Jakarta, of two women chanting and tapping their bodies under a waterfall in Slovenia, of Shia Muslims praying in a procession in the streets of south Teheran, or a meditating monk, alone in a cabin in the Alps. Every live show traces a line of flight, constructs a plane of immanence, a bricolage that collects it all and transforms it all, every time anew, a unique assemblage of the time and place in which it happens.

Paradoxically for a film style that uses images so extensively, Moon's live cinema goes against the image – or more precisely, it aims to subvert the image's tendency to reterritorialise, to turn into a representation of something separate and distinct, to become indexical and fix identities. The cinematic image constitutes an observer – already, immediately and firstly on a material and spatial dimension, establishing the viewing subject, the one who looks-at. As Jean-Louis Baudry claimed, the material conditions of the cinematic apparatus reassert (or regress) the spectator in the early formation of subjectivity within the womb-like, Platonic cave of cinema (Baudry 1986). In a way, Moon is trying to reshape the cinematic experience to get a glimpse beyond the shadows projected in the cinematic cave. Yet it is not some Platonic Idea or eternal forms that are revealed behind the veil, but a shimmer of the invisible current of energy and vibration that animates the visual matrix of reality. Plato's allegory of the cave is guided by sight (Plato 2007). The prisoner-philosopher breaks free and discovers true reality in the light of the sun. But what he fails to realise is that this great projector in heaven is the prototype (and the archetype) of the cave's fire which also projects light and forms a reality on earth. The pure forms are still forms, and the realm of ideas, another screen. As long as the spectators are subjectified as the ones who 'look-at', they will remain imprisoned within their own selves.

Moon is experimenting with different media and media protocols to create immersive spheres that can potentially drown individual egos. The settings of Moon's performances often support a decentralisation of the cinematic apparatus, where instead of a process of individuation, audience members are motivated to submerge themselves in a vibrational field and to lose themselves in a current that overrides the habitual hierarchies of spectatorship. In one of his latest experiments, for example, Moon created an 'immersive field meditative cinema', in which he reversed the regular direction of projection. The images were projected directly onto the heads of the spectators, reversing and subverting the relation between the screen and the spectators.<sup>10</sup> As the show's flyer stated: 'Screening location: Everywhere. Screen: Your Eyes'. In another recent experiment, Moon disposed of the screen altogether. Performing in Monom, an artist-run cultural centre and sound laboratory based in Berlin, Moon played his recordings of sacred music through 4-D sound technology to immerse the audience in dynamic, shifting sound environments.<sup>11</sup>

As Matheus Araújo de Siqueira keenly observed, at the core of Moon's work 'is a shift from an optical to an aural approach in filmmaking' (Araújo de Siqueira 2020: 101). In his live cinema performances, Moon is sonorifying the image, pulsating and reverberating it to establish what he describes as 'a vibratory relationship with the invisible'. Araújo de Siqueira posits this method as 'an otocentric perspective (an anti-ocular or ear-centered approach)' (Araújo de Siqueira 2020: 104). Released from its anchor to the image, sound becomes 'image instead of being a component of the image' (Deleuze 1997b: 285). Moon's sound-image is a strategy to decentralise or deterritorialise the image. The sound-image modifies the image to become vibratory and formless. No longer a referential representation of a distinct material object, it is 'spiritualised', transported on a plane of time or pure movement.

The spiritualisation of the cinematic experience aligns Moon with other transcendental-style filmmakers, yet a significant distinction has to be made. Like other transcendental-style filmmakers, Moon breaks away from narrative constraints and movement-image conventions, yet the techniques he employs are not precisely 'distancing', and his live cinema is anything but slow, alienating or boring (if anything, it is quite fast and engaging). Moon's style is not static like Ozu, or austere like Dreyer, but ecstatic. And its otocentric approach differs from the ocularcentric accent of the transcendental-style film directors. The differences between Moon's work and the stricter transcendental style can be related to different conceptions of the spiritual. It's almost a theological dispute,

or a division that can be described as the difference between theology and theurgy, between a transcendental discourse that remains within the confines of the human, and the work of transforming human reality by direct contact with the transcendental realm.

Moon's transcendental style should not be conflated with transcendence. The transcendental is a relation to a spiritual realm, yet from a Deleuzian perspective it should not be understood as a kingdom beyond life, a heaven above, but as a realm that is immanent to life, the immanent spirit(s) of nature, or what Bergson called the 'elan vital', the vital impetus of life itself.<sup>12</sup> According to Deleuze, the rift between the movement-image and time-image emerged after the Second World War. The modern rupture with the world ('which looks to us like a bad film') required a new form of cinema that can restore our 'belief in the world':

Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world—this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world. (Deleuze 1997b: 172)

Cinema (when it's good) can restore belief in the world by opening up to the spiritual dimension embedded in film. It is not a phantasmal faith in some world outside of this world, a plane of transcendence that gives some vantage point 'beyond', but a belief in *this* world as a plane of immanence where the outside is nothing but the folds of the inside.<sup>13</sup>

In our increasingly schizophrenic zeitgeist, we indeed need reasons to believe in this world, yet perhaps the spiritual tradition that establishes such a belief matters. After all, Schrader and Moon draw from different spiritual sources. Schrader is known as a devout Christian, and so are some of the prominent filmmakers he traces in the transcendental style, while Moon is a nomadic spiritual seeker, an eclectic gatherer of traditions, distinctly influenced by shamanic and animistic lines (that are prevalent in Brazil).<sup>14</sup> Unlike the traditional (Western) Christian tendency to aspire towards the otherworldly while rejecting nature and the body, the animistic and shamanic way is realising spirit precisely *through* the body and nature. Similar to Laura Marks's Deleuzian-inspired haptic visuality, in Moon's films and live cinema the body and embodied experience is central (Marks 2000). As Schrader describes it, the transcendental style of film implies a transition from one world to another, yet Moon's live cinema is not about breaking to another



world, but manifesting (spirit) on this very plane (of immanence). The transcendental style is ascetic. It refers to the spiritual dimension as a rupture. Schrader describes the emergence of the transcendental dimension in film as a ‘crack’ in the surface of everyday reality that pushes the spectator’s psyche to ‘break free’ to ‘another plane’ (Schrader 2018: 3). Moon’s live cinema offers an experience of the spiritual akin to traditions that find the spirit *in* nature and magic *in* life. Moreover, in Moon’s work there’s an ontological dimension of the spiritual that exceeds the merely epistemological claims of the transcendental style. Inspired by mediumistic traditions he encountered in Brazil, Moon is not only interested in inducing altered states of mind, but in actually channelling the spirit, asking not just to open the doors of perception, but to let the spirits seep in.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. Ghosts in the Machine

Moon’s live cinema performances are largely influenced by his experiences with various ayahuasca ceremonies in Brazil. Documenting and participating in rituals that could open the doors of perception for the spirits to come in and transform reality inspired him to channel the spirits with the medium of film. For Moon, live cinema is a magic ritual, a continuation of the alchemical process that, at its core, is the communication or transformation of matter to spirit, and vice versa. Cinema as light incarnated:

An image of a ritual is more than an image. I believe it carries some of the original energy in a modified state. Everything is a modified state of something else. In that sense, the films are documenting people who are themselves experimenting with the modified states of the spirits. That is, they embody spirits. In this sense, the cinema I’m trying to make accepts the idea that this is an embodiment of another spirit. It’s a transformed way. There’s an alchemical process. There’s a modification, a manipulation of reality. If we accept the idea that reality is a manipulation of other levels of reality, there’s no problem believing that cinema is carrying a modified state of reality. In that reality there can be a continuous transmission of spirits.

Moon’s ritual cinema can be traced as part of a long tradition of spirit communication through media. Nineteenth-century Spiritualists believed in the possibility of media such as telegraphy, photography, typewriting and sound technologies to communicate with spirits (Sconce 2000; Davis 2015). María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue that ‘inventions in the nineteenth century and beyond, while based

on the most specific of mechanical processes, became entangled in the webs of the supernatural, and often returned to questions of life and what came after it' (Blanco and Peeren 2013). As the success of the movie *Poltergeist* (Hooper 1982) and its depiction of haunted television showed, interest in the magical powers of media to communicate with the dead did not entirely fade away in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Anthony Enns traced central concepts of spiritualism that resurfaced in the late twentieth century, 'following the rise of information theory, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence research, which made no distinction between human and machine communication' (Enns 2020: 51).

Cinema, of course, was not excluded. According to Tom Gunning, 'the transparent nature of film itself, its status as a filter of light, a caster of shadows, a weaver of phantoms' signalled it as the epitome of the 'uncanny dialectic between the visible and the invisible' (Gunning 2007: 98). Besides various occult encounters with media spirits, and regardless of whether a film's content is spiritual or not, according to S. Brent Plate 'the viewing of film itself is similar to participation in religious ceremonies' (Plate 2017: xvi). Not only that (even regular) film viewing 'operates like a ritual', but 'both religion and film are engaged in the practice of *worldmaking*' (Plate 2017: 4). 'Cinema has always been interested in God', claimed Andre Bazin (Bazin and Cardullo 1997: 61). And Jean Epstein 'would even go as far as to say that the cinema is polytheistic and theogonic' (Epstein and Liebman 1977; Jolyon Mitchell and Plate 2007: 52; Plate 2017: xv).

In a Deleuzian context, Michael Goddard found resonances between mysticism and cinema, especially of the time-image, as processes of disordering of conventional subjectivity, alongside 'drug use, especially of hallucinogens, and the paranormal' (Goddard 2001: 54). As he argues, 'these are all modes of experience that Deleuze and Guattari have associated with becomings or creative breakdowns of conventional structures of subjectivity and of which to some extent they have been understood as advocates' (Goddard 2001: 54). Relating to Deleuze and altered states of cinema, Anna Powell wrote that 'the affective onset of the drug begins in the camera itself. Deleuze asserts that the camera is able to act "like a consciousness"' (Powell 2007: 71). Yet the technological properties of the camera make it an 'inhuman or superhuman' consciousness (Deleuze 1997a: 20). As a non-human eye, the camera has the potential to capture non-human entities that can be understood as percepts, affects and durations that are above or below the threshold of normal human perception. As Michael Goddard puts it, the spiritual or spirits 'can be conceived of as virtually inhering in the

material world in the form of temporalities, or conversely the material world can be conceived of as existing in the spiritual or in God in the same way that it exists in time' (Goddard 2001: 62).

Diverse modes of spirit communication appear throughout Moon's documented rituals: ecstatic dance, sacred songs, mediumship, consumption of entheogens, and divination practices in various cultural forms. Moon's improvisational approach echoes these divination practices and their supposed contact with cosmic forces through a play with chance. Alluding to Jung's research of synchronicities, Moon believes that 'improvisation is a key factor to form a relation with magic'.<sup>17</sup> As he claims, 'It's a very simple experiment that anybody can do, if you let improvisation take you into a magical relationship with reality, it's like Terence McKenna said, "nature loves courage"':

Nature loves courage. You make the commitment and nature will respond to that commitment by removing impossible obstacles. Dream the impossible dream and the world will not grind you under, it will lift you up. This is the trick. This is what all these teachers and philosophers who really counted, who really touched the alchemical gold, this is what they understood. This is the shamanic dance in the waterfall. This is how magic is done. By hurling yourself into the abyss and discovering it's a feather bed. (McKenna 1991)

Moon's improvisational film practice is reminiscent of what avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren described as 'controlled accident', the 'delicate balance between what is there spontaneously and naturally as evidence of the independent life of actuality, and the persons and activities which are deliberately introduced into the scene' (Deren 1960: 156). The cinematographer, she claimed, must refrain from over-controlling the scene. Although the final product is itself a constructed and controlled artifice, it should 'borrow' the reality of elements 'from the natural blowing of the hair, the irregularity of the waves, the very texture of the stones and sand—in short, from all the uncontrolled, spontaneous elements which are the property of actuality itself' (Deren 1960: 156). Similarly, Moon's method of filming musicians 'relies on his insistence to reframe his role as director by teetering between devising the situation and losing control of it. The borders are blurred between the filmmaker and one who plays to the camera' (Araújo de Siqueira 2020: 104). It is the production of what Deleuze conceptualised as 'chaosmos': 'a self-organizing system that creatively advances through the immanent construction of its own generative principles' (Clark 2009: 23). As Tim Clark explained, 'the distinction in play here is that between a cosmos in which order is imposed upon a primordial chaos "from outside" [...]

and a chaosmos in which order is generated “from within,” by a wholly immanent process of self-organization’ (Clark 2009: 181).

Sometimes there’s a ghost in the machine. When Moon is very attuned to the vibration of the moment, lost in the flow of improvisation, ‘the machine takes over’: a moment of *deus ex machina*, both in the sense of the unexpected, self-emerging order, and the realisation of spirit through film technology. Moon feels that in these moments he is no longer an agent, but experiencing a sort of trance; he becomes a channel for spirits that communicate through the machine.

Moon’s live cinema is a machine of many functions: It is a machine that modifies and retrofits Indigenous techniques, extending the shamanic work with nature elements, energies and spirits into film and modern-day cinema practices. It’s a spirit-channelling machine that recalls the esoteric history of modern technology. A trance inducing, psychedelic machine, it opens the doors of perception to percepts, affects and durations that are beyond or below ordinary human perception. A divination machine, it’s a conduit of synchronicities or a gateway between chaos and cosmos. Through all these functions, it is bringing the transcendental back to a plane of immanence. Ultimately, it’s a cooking machine, cooking a cosmic soup that invites magic back into our lives.

## Notes

1. vincentmoon.com.
2. <https://hibridos.cc>.
3. This article is based on conversations I had with Moon before and after two particular performances, on 11 March and 12 November 2022, at theatre De Nieuwe Regentes in The Hague, which I had the pleasure of hosting. Although this text is based on our exchange of ideas and inspiration, it is my own interpretation of his work. The quotes from Moon in this text are all from this interview.
4. The *Doors of Perception* is the title of Aldous Huxley’s book detailing his experiences with mescaline (Huxley 2009). It also relates here to psychedelic cinema as a potential doorway to realms of altered perception and altered states of mind.
5. Moon is paraphrasing here Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who in their manifesto ‘Towards a Third Cinema’ called to create films of decolonisation, ‘made with the camera in one hand and a rock in the other’ (Solanas and Getino 1970: 6).
6. Patricia Pisters elaborates on this notion in her contribution to this edition.
7. *2001* gained a cult reputation as a film to watch on LSD. Taking commercial advantage of its acid qualities, the film was advertised as ‘The Ultimate Trip’ (Kolker 2006: 3).
8. In his performances in The Hague, a circle of candles surrounded the audience, and incense was burnt before the start of the show, accompanied by Santo Daimé/Umbanda hymns that consecrate the sacred smoke.

9. This excerpt is from Schrader's new introduction to his book, titled 'Rethinking Transcendental Style', in which he reflects on what has happened to the transcendental style since his book was first published in 1971. As Schrader suggests, 'What happened? Gilles Deleuze happened' (Schrader 2018: 1).
10. The immersive field of meditative cinema is based on the Ganzfeld effect, a technique experimented with in parapsychological research to explore extrasensory perception and altered states of consciousness (Bem and Honorton 1994; Schmidt and Prein 2019).
11. <https://www.monomsound.com>.
12. This difference can be otherwise described as Deleuze's transcendental empiricism, as opposed to Kantian transcendental idealism (Bryant 2008).
13. The folded-in outside is one of the images Deleuze gives to the plane of immanence. As Marco Abel describes it, it 'is like a folded piece of paper, the inside that ensues from the folding process is nothing but the folded-in outside, the surface area' (Abel 2007: 246).
14. 'I am a Christian', Schrader stated in a 2018 interview. 'I go to church on Sundays; I've chosen to be a believer. I have been a believer most of my life [...]' (Strpko and Schrader: 2019).
15. Mediumship entered Brazilian ayahuasca religions such as the Santo Daime through the substantial influence of Allan Kardec and Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda (Krippner 2008).
16. Jeffrey Sconce found many accounts of early television spectators who believed they encountered ghosts on the screens of their TVs (Blanco and Peeren 2013: 245).
17. Jung's concept of synchronicity was influenced by his work with the divinatory techniques of astrology and the I Ching. He defined synchronicity as 'the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not casually connected events [...] a coincidence in time of two or more unrelated events which have the same or a similar meaning' (Jung 2012: 25). It is 'an unexpected content which is directly or indirectly connected with some objective external state' (Jung 2012: 29).

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