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## **Metamorphoses: The Place of Moving Images**

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# Metamorphoses: The Place of Moving Images\*

Margherita Foresti

The migration of film from cinemas to art institutions engendered a series of metamorphoses. A metamorphosis of the medium, through the convergence of film and installation, produced the moving image. A metamorphosis of the space within the screen itself transformed the spectators' reception of this new language of the moving image. A metamorphosis of the exhibition space resulted

from its relation to the new medium. These metamorphoses require museums to redefine the ways in which they can empower their audiences through effective curatorship. This research article analyzes these transformations through cases of contemporary uses of moving images to propose a theory on how to curate moving images in the museum of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** curating, exhibition, experimental film, Forensic Architecture, moving image, spectatorship

When film migrates into the exhibition space, something about either the container or its content clearly must change. Films displayed in theaters generally tell stories of a different kind than those one finds within museums or galleries. This difference is harbored in the parallel development of the medium since its launch at the end of the nineteenth century, as a means of expression for artists, as an autonomous art form in its own right, and as the entertainment industry of cinema. The shift of film towards the museum has been conceptualized in various manners: as artists' film or artists' cinema, the other or the *othered* cinema, and finally, as the moving image.<sup>1</sup> The desire to define it belies a need to reinforce its alterity. Yet, film escapes categorization by the same effort by which it permeates different platforms. The notion of the moving image refers to the medium resulting from the relationship between film and the space that contains it, which film constantly reinvents.

This research article investigates the interdependency of exhibition space and moving image in defining both terms anew. Its four-part structure analyzes the nature and outcome of the relationship between the museum and the moving image. The first question concerns the *medium* emerging through the blending of installation art and film; the second and third relate to *space*,

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meaning both the space engendered by the artist within the screen and the physical space of the exhibition that concerns the curator. Lastly, there is the issue of the *power* inherent in the museum and the way curatorship does or does not *empower* its spectators depending on its strategies of communication. All these questions correspond to an equal number of metamorphoses informing both the exhibition space and the moving image as the outcome of their interaction. These transformations will be analyzed based on concrete cases of contemporary artists and exhibitions in which the moving image features as the primary, but not exclusive, medium of expression. These include the work of Ammar al-Beik as well as the artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Particular mention will be given to the exhibition *Enter the Void*, which took place at the Kunsthalle Mainz (from the 10th of July to the 1st of November 2020), and to the works presented there by Forensic Architecture (Figure 1) and Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares.

Ammar al-Beik's work spans different media, from film to painting and installations of found objects. Because of its experimental approach, his work suits a diversity of institutions, from film festivals and film museums to contemporary art museums and galleries. His work intertwines with the role of the digital image in online social networks in two ways: on the one hand, he increasingly adopts Instagram as a documentation and exhibition platform; on the other one, his filmic works draw most of their material from found footage, often acquired from YouTube. In this sense, al-Beik's practice proves the moving image's versatility and its potential to transcend both institutional and medium-specific conventions.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige work mainly with photography and film to blur the subtle line between reality and fiction. Their works featured in this article belong to the series *I Stared at Beauty So Much* (2013–20), based on videos and photographs in which the beauty of poetry conflates with troublesome images of the reality of post-war Beirut. Hadjithomas and Joreige's oeuvre includes installations of objects and documents, digital prints, photography, video, and feature-length films. The moving image thus features either as a standalone work or as part of an installation.

The work of these artists reflects contemporary art's tendency towards multimediality, which allows it to transcend the boundaries between different exhibition platforms such as the film theater, the film festival, and the museum.

A unique case of a multimedial and interdisciplinary approach is the collective Forensic Architecture (FA), whose work was at the heart of the exhibition *Enter the Void* at Kunsthalle Mainz in 2020. Born in and based at the Goldsmith University of London, FA is an independent research group conducting investigations of environmental, social, and political issues. The moving image features in its work among other media as visual evidence of their cases, and it has a very different function than in the works mentioned up until now. The visual material used by FA often stems from various sources. These moving images are not always conceived *ex novo* as original artworks: they can also be already existing evidence material. FA's material includes

recordings of testimonies, juridical processes, surveillance footage, interviews, and animated graphics. This practice is emblematic of a research-based strand of contemporary art that endeavors to investigate relevant topics from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Another kind of moving image presented in the exhibition is Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares's *Forest Law* (2014), a double-channel video installation filmed in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Like in the work by FA, the moving image represents only part of the artwork, being part of a larger installation including other media as well. Here, the artists' ingenuity merges with a use of the moving image as a document.

All these cases allow us to trace the present transformations of the moving image and curatorship as *metamorphoses* resulting from the encounter between the medium and the exhibition space. The latter emerges as a place of trial and error, a field under construction by the constant interaction between technology and art. Understanding this encounter as metamorphosis allows us to highlight its unfolding nature and yet draw some methodological foundations for curating the moving image.

Scholarship has mapped and reflected extensively on the transformation of film into a medium for the gallery and the museum. Among these studies are A. L. Rees's (1999) *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, which traced a genealogy of artists' use of film from modernism to the end of the 1990s, focusing especially on Britain. Raymond Bellour's (2002) reflections on the new media's impact on the redefinition of film as a medium for the museum are condensed in the title of his essay collection *Entre-Images*. 'Between images' is where meaning is created when film migrates to the art museum, where it is placed in relation to other visuals (Radner 2018: 40). The emergence of the moving image and the so-called 'black box versus white cube' antithesis have been the subject matter of later edited collections like *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, edited by Tanya Leighton (2008), and *Exhibiting the Moving Image: History Revisited*, edited by François Bovier and Adeena Mey (2015). In *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Maeve Connolly (2009) explored the circulation of artists' films within different platforms and art institutions, as well as the artists' concern with site and space. More recent studies include Erika Balsom's (2013) *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* and Catherine Elwes' (2015) *Installation and the Moving Image*, which further explore the emergence of film as a medium for artistic practice.

Building on these studies, the present research focuses on some cases of moving images' presentation in museums to propose a practical approach to curating. By means of a formal analysis, two different kinds of moving images are detected based on the space and time engendered within their frame. A centripetal space is one in which the viewer's focus is catalyzed towards the center of representation, like in painting; a centrifugal space instead proceeds outwards, like in film, where the diegesis alludes to a reality exceeding the material limits of the frame of the displaying device.<sup>2</sup> The distinction of two kinds of moving images expands our understanding

of spectator reception in relation to the space of the artwork, while allowing to sketch a theory on how to exhibit moving images based on the reciprocal interferences between its inner space and the exhibition space surrounding it.



Figure 1. Exhibition view of *Enter the Void*, Kunststhal Mainz (Hall II), with works by Forensic Architecture (from right to left): *Ape Law* (2016), *CCN* (2019), *Ecocide in Indonesia* (2016–17) (photo by Norbert Miguletz, courtesy of Forensic Architecture).

## 1. First Metamorphosis: The Moving Image

Artists' experimentations with film punctuate the history of the medium as it evolved as an autonomous art form and into the industry of cinema. At the closing of the nineteenth century, the Lumière brothers' new technology was not conceived explicitly as art. About a decade later, increased attention toward the new medium surfaced among avant-garde artists. Cubists' call for a 'pure' (i.e., non-mimetic), autonomous art beginning at their first exhibition in 1907 was extended to film as well (Rees 1999: 15–21). Above all, Futurism was the first avant-garde movement to theorize the need to free cinema as an art form in its own right. The first Cubist and Futurist films were hand-painted, created by directly painting on the filmstrip (Rees 1999: 27–29). Film-as-art was initially abstract or focused on form, in opposition to the concomitant development of commercial film, based on realism and narrative logic.

From its inception, film's place in art history has been an unsettled matter. As A. L. Rees (1999) writes, 'the impersonal technology of film and its lack of direct authorship seem to run against the grain of traditional art' (p. 25), especially against modern art, which was informed by what Rosalind Krauss has named 'the avant-garde myth' of the artist's originality (Krauss 1981: 47–66).

But while for the avant-garde, film was one of many media of expression at artists' disposal, another strand developed from the second decade of the twentieth century onward that pursued the autonomy of cinema

as an art form made not by artists but by filmmakers. It began with Art Cinema, a European avant-garde film movement including German Expressionism, the Soviet school of Eisenstein, and French 'Impressionists,' later reaching the United States with the post-war film avant-garde (Rees 1999: 30–31, 56). A further step in this direction was the introduction of the notion of *cinéma d'auteur* by François Truffaut and the periodical *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s, emphasizing the ingenuity and originality of the vision of the filmmaker (Elwes 2015: 91) against the leading view of film as a commodity of the industry of the spectacle.

This article focuses on the kind of metamorphoses that film has undergone and is still undergoing as an art medium. Artists' film strived for 'purity' by means of anti-realism and the absence of a narrative plot based on a linear chronology and character development. More than that, artists' film often intentionally displays its medium's specificities, exhibiting the technical apparatus behind its fiction. These films often expose intermedial substructures as the outcome of a media-combination (Rajewsky 2005: 51) of photography, music, theatrical performance, literature and even painting. In contrast to those early filmmakers who sought to assert film as an art of its own right, artists' films are perhaps unique in their tendency to expose their blending of diverse media. An early example is Man Ray's *Le retour à la raison* (1923), where the artist's cameraless *rayographies* appear as the natural filmic outcome of his own photographic oeuvre.

Though the origins of artists' film can be traced back to the beginnings of film history, scholarship tends to draw a line between those early contributions by avant-garde artists, the experiments by conceptual artists between the 1960s and 1970s, and the proliferation of video technology within the museum from the 1990s onwards (Balsom 2014: 34–35). Video art, with protagonists such as Wolf Vostells or Nam June Paik, first brought the TV screen to the exhibition space in the 1960s. The difference from later practices is that video art still emphasized the plastic nature of the TV apparatus over the moving image itself. These artists treated the *dispositif* as a sculptural, three-dimensional object, occupying a traceable space within the exhibition room. On the other hand, the content of these moving images defied the coherence given by its materiality, not only by rejecting a univocal narration, as previous modernist films did, but also by multiplying the number of screens scattered across the exhibition room, showing images on a loop and in asynchronous rhythms. Writing about the work of Nam June Paik, the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson (1992) notes: 'The postmodernist viewer, however, is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference' (p. 31). Significantly, video art set the stage for the metamorphosis of the moving image into a medium for installation. As Balsom (2014) points out, the real turning point for the 'institutional endorsement of the moving image' was the diffusion of video projections in contemporary art practices from the 1990s onward, a key event being *documenta 9* (1992), curated by Jan Hoet, which was dominated by video and art installation (p. 35).

From the first Cubist and Futurist films to contemporary engagements with the medium, what has changed is the new technology available to artists as well as their sources of reference within film history and the modes of production drawn from the cinema industry. But except for video art, which both nominally and practically circumscribed its practice to its technology, most artists working with the moving image do not see it as their exclusive medium of expression: film and video may stand alone or complement other materials within larger installations. In this sense, the notion of 'moving image' seems adequate to describe artists' experimentations with film, as it encompasses disparate artworks from different movements and artistic tendencies, diachronically stretching from early modernism to the present. It also allows us to bypass the issue of discerning between the often conflated terms of 'film' and 'videotape.' While technically the term 'artists' film' is better suited to refer to the early artistic experimentations with film cameras, to limit its use to these works might risk stripping art history of its sense of continuity. Language evolves alongside technology, as today 'film' refers to everything that is filmed. However, the moving image framework might be useful for including all digital media, that is, not only what is filmed, but also what is set in motion.

The notion of 'moving image' has been adopted by Catherine Elwes (2015) to refer to artists' film. To her, the concept stresses the element of motion and the flow of visuals, in opposition to the stasis typical of the art objects within the museum. The term "moving image" implies a lack of discrimination between artist and technician, often one and the same individual, and between analogue mediums' (Elwes 2015: 5). Further, this notion refers to an expanded practice through which artists and filmmakers have reached beyond the traditions of their respective fields, that is, art and cinema as well as broadcast television. Doubtless, the term 'moving image' has contributed to defining this artistic trend by identifying its constitutive features, while others have tended to theorize it based on its departure from either art or the film establishment. Among these theorizations is Erika Balsom's expression 'the othered cinema,' coined in response to a review of the 2001 Venice Biennale by Raymond Bellour (2003), who had reported a proliferation of moving images within its exhibition spaces. Witnessing a difficulty in defining this new kind of works that exceeded the margins of both plastic arts and cinema, Bellour referred to them as *other cinema* (2003, as cited in Balsom 2014: 15). In response to this formulation, Balsom's (2014:) notion of an *othered cinema* is maintained as a rejection of the 'strict alterity' implied by the earlier term, whereby 'understanding these gallery-based practices as an othered cinema is to suggest that they represent a site at which the cinema has become other to itself' (p. 16). Yet, despite the reversal of the active-passive relation inherent in the past participle 'othered,' the expression does not change the status ascribed to this cinema. Artists' film is simply defined on the base of its non-alignment with conventional cinema. Even more insufficient is the term 'othered cinema': it ignores the history of artists' experimentations with the medium, which, as seen before, goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Maeve Connolly (2009) points to the recurring use of the expression 'artists' cinema' in contemporary exhibitions and publications. Her adoption of the term, especially with reference to art practices of the 1990s, stresses the aspect of ownership implicit in the label. The emphasis on the possessive *artists'* means that a specific way of practicing filmmaking is deduced from the claims artists make on cinema (p. 9). This expression, however, might be problematic because of the shift from 'film' to 'cinema' to refer to contemporary art uses of the medium in an allegedly 'cinematic' way. As Connolly (2009) admits, 'Any attempt to define an artwork as cinematic necessarily invokes pre-existing notions and expectations about cinema' (p. 9). To assimilate contemporary artists' films to cinema is problematic because it evokes a kind of filmmaking privileging illusionism and aestheticization while excluding the realism of amateur-like aesthetic, for instance, in works using smartphone video technology. To Connolly (2009), 'cinematic' points to artists' practice of referencing cinema history, but also to the idea of cinematic experience as collective, associated with an 'ideal public sphere' (pp. 9–10). While this view mystifies the role of cinema as a democratic platform, it also seems to imply a 'corrective' impact that cinematic works could have in making the museum an ideal collective space.

Moving images, artists' films, other or othered cinema, and artists' cinema—all these terms describe film's metamorphoses following its migration to a space traditionally reserved for the fine arts. They build the conceptual framework for artists and filmmakers to rearrange—or rather transcend—the boundaries delimiting their reciprocal practices.

There are a number of filmmakers whose work has been displayed in both cinema and the museum, with Jean-Luc Godard, who exhibited experimental works at the Centre Pompidou, MoMA, and documenta 10 (1997), most prominent (Balsom 2014: 46–47). Godard's work for the museum radically differs from that for the black box, not only because of the former's lack of narrative or dramaturgical coherence, but also in terms of its duration: either very short or far exceeding the norm of a feature-length film. A filmmaker might choose to enter the space of the museum to enjoy the freedom inherent in artistic license, thus neglecting the rules of the industry. At the same time, contemporary artists experimenting with the moving image often resort to the modes of production of professional cinema by adopting its same division of labor: the artist, acting out the role of director, collaborates with cinematographers, editors, and sound, music, and color technicians, just to name a few professionals. In other cases, artists' films might rely on small-scale production because of more exiguous financial means. This kind of moving image often plays with this quality of a self-made production, exposing the technical specificities of the medium.

This brings us to the meta-filmic dimension of some moving images. Reflections on the medium populate this cinema like the subliminal text of an advertisement spot. These might result in an emphasis on the linguistic tools of cinema—first and foremost, montage. This is the case with Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988–98), made of a montage of film excerpts,

photographs of artworks, graphics, and on-screen texts, in addition to Godard's own footage starring the artist himself. This postmodern pastiche of film classics and canonic artworks allows Godard not only to retrace the history of film as integral to the history of art, but also to stress its medium-specific idiom based on montage. Further, the visual overlapping of the moving image with graphics and texts recalls a Cubist collage in which high art merges with visuals commonly associated with popular culture. *Histoire(s) du cinema* is truly a film about the history of cinema as history of art.



Figure 2. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Remember the Light* (2016). Exhibition view at *Home Beirut: Sounding the Neighbours*, Maxxi, Rome, Italy (courtesy of Galerie In Situ/Fabienne Leclerc).

## 2. Second Metamorphosis: The Space of Moving Images

Writing about the difference between painting and film, Bazin (2005) touches upon the question of space within both the pictorial frame and the filmic screen: 'The essential role of the frame is, if not to create at least to emphasize the difference between the microcosm of the picture and the macrocosm of the natural world' (p. 165). In other words, the frame ensures that the discontinuity between reality and fiction is kept alive, in the same way as the curtains of the stage in a theater remind the viewer about the imaginary nature of the piece. According to Bazin (2005), the frame of a painting is centripetal, meaning it engenders a space that gravitates towards the core of the representation. In

film, what is referred to as a 'frame'—the shortest possible temporal unit of the moving image—does not correspond to the material frame of the painting. What happens within the screen perceptively exceeds the physical boundaries of a frame, in apparent prolongation of reality. The diegetic space of film also moves according to its own temporality. This movement is perceived by the viewers as a centrifugal one going from their point of view towards all the directions of the reality represented (Bazin 2005: 166).

Bazin's (2005) reflections on film date back to the mid-twentieth century, a time when new media had not yet swarmed into the museum. His essay 'Painting and cinema' reproduces a strict binarism, unaware of the later development of film as a medium for the museum, yet his distinction between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' framings, if stripped of the painting/cinema binary, is helpful in reviewing cases of moving images' exhibitions. An example of this distinction are the video installations by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in which the moving image takes on a kind of centripetal frame system; Ammar al-Beik's film *La Dolce Siria* (2014), on the other hand, is an example of centrifugal frame system.

Hadjithomas and Joreige's use of film in their series *I Stared at Beauty So Much* (2013–20) results in an emphasis on the pictorial quality of the moving image. The eight-minute film *Remember the Light* (2016–20, Figure 2) was filmed underwater to explore the transformation of color perception below the surface of the sea. A colorful cloth fluctuates in the sea, while on another screen a man dives in deep waters: in both cases the thick texture of the sea almost eliminates the feeling of three-dimensionality, instead drawing attention to the foreground where objects and people, enveloped by the light, produce different shades of color. The video installation appears in the form of two acrylic glass recto-verso screens on which the images are projected, like frameless pictures seemingly suspended in the exhibition room (2021, personal communication with Diane Mehanna<sup>3</sup>). Film here assumes the quality of painting, not only for its closeness to two-dimensionality, but also for its emphasis on light's effect on color reminiscent of French Impressionism. While the darkness of the exhibition room alludes to cinema's mode of presentation, the artists' use of film draws nearer to the abstraction of early modernist works, especially in their avoidance of dynamic montage and narrative logic.

In another film by the artists, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2013, Figure 3), animated photographs of the city of Beirut taken at different times of day succeed each other in a frantic rhythm to the score of a reading of Constantin Cavafy's 1909 poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

In the forefront is the aesthetic quality of pictures caught in broken motion, which turns the image of Beirut into striations of the natural colors of the sky and artificial lights of the metropolis, somewhat resembling the brush strokes of an abstract expressionist canvas. This effect is achieved by superimposing 50 to 70 photographs shot at a shutter speed between one and ten seconds and setting them in motion through video (Eye Filmmuseum 2021). Beyond the beauty of this vision, the moving image acquires significance through the recital of Cavafy's poem in the background. *Waiting for the*

*Barbarians* reflects a situation of impasse in which the life of the state has stopped, conscious of the imminent arrival of 'barbarians.' Signification is obtained here by the kind of 'horizontal montage' that Bazin (1958a) identified in the film essays of filmmakers such as Chris Marker. Horizontal because it proceeds 'from the ear to the eye,' from intellectual to visual cognition, as a result of the combination of poetry and film (Bazin 1958a : 22, cited in Stob 2012: 36). By means of the contrast between image and spoken word, the beauty of almost impressionistic images in *Waiting for the Barbarians* unlocks the reality of a city in the perpetual state of change due to which it cannot hold still in front of a camera. 'Barbarians' become vague referents standing either for threat—to be associated with Israel or with Islamist groups—or, in Cavafy's sense, an impatience for a positive turnaround.

The subjects of representation in *Remember the Light* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* remain quite static because the works focus the study of light and color on an almost two-dimensional surface. As a result, the viewer's attention is catalyzed towards a focal point within the fields of representation. Because of these formal qualities of the pictures and of the lack of a plot-oriented narrative, they manifest a centripetal type of framing. The space and time of the artwork remain separated from those of the spectator. On the one hand, the centripetal framing creates a discontinuity between the physical space occupied by the viewer and the space of the artwork; on the other, the absence of a plot means that viewers' reception process need not adapt to the duration of the moving image. These kinds of moving images are suited for conventional presentation on a museum's wall. This was the case with *Waiting for the Barbarians'* presentation at documenta 14 (2017), where the digital video appeared on a screen on a wall. *Remember the Light* usually features on screens hung in the middle of a semi-dark room, where viewers' ability to walk past them meant that the cinematic illusion of the black box was blended with the multi-screen installation's nature as an artistic environment.

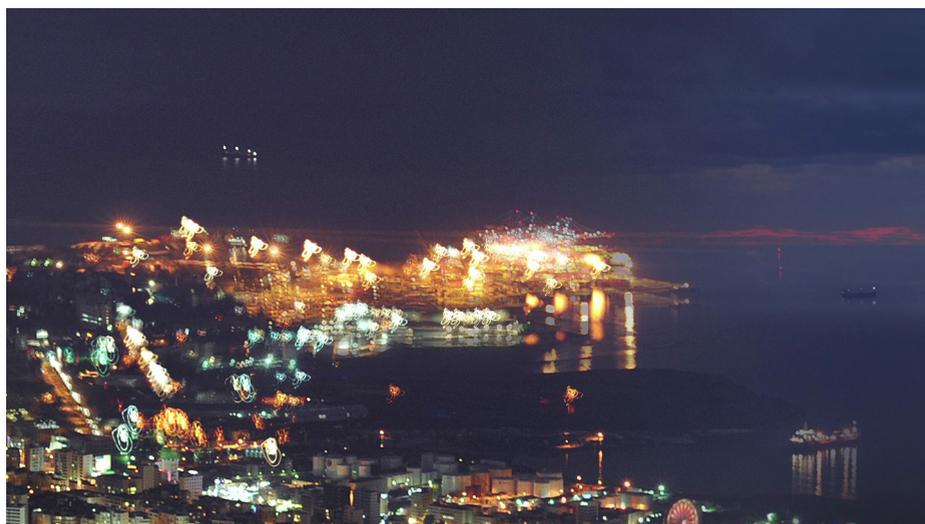


Figure 3. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2013) (courtesy of the artists).

A rather different case is Ammar al-Beik's *La Dolce Siria* (2014), part of his trilogy<sup>4</sup> about the 2011 Arab Uprising and the Syrian war. It is an assemblage of heterogeneous footage that makes it impossible to recognize a single centripetal core of representation. Adopting the widespread practice of Syrian civilian protesters recording human rights violations committed by the Syrian army from 2011 onwards, the filmmaker collected largely anonymous video material uploaded on social media and assembled it into a film. Al-Beik defies the notion of a single author in order to voice a collective Syrian narrative about the war that undermines that of the regime. For the duration of 24 minutes, *La Dolce Siria* breaks with many of cinema's conventions by merging amateurish, pixelated smartphone videos filmed by unknown video makers with professional footage extracted from Federico Fellini's *The Clowns* (1970), leading the spectator in and out of fiction. This use of film reflects contemporary art's concern with its time in a way that goes beyond mere documentation but also eschews voicing clear political statements. The short film showcases a multiperspectival narrative in which videos shot by Syrian protesters alternate with those shot by the opposite side. Although the notion of authorship is not discarded en bloc, the artwork is not understood as the expression of the original point of view of the artist-genius. Al-Beik builds his film with ready-made footage, exhibiting references to other films and artworks. It reflects contemporary developments in art following the postmodern turn, thus demonstrating the importance of conceptualizing artists' use of film in the art historical context.

Because of the complex montage, the film articulates a narrative that the viewer must 'read' from beginning to end. This is a kind of work that requires a higher degree of concentration and engagement compared to the two works previously mentioned. Noteworthy is the format adopted to present al-Beik's Syrian trilogy, of which *La Dolce Siria* is part, at the exhibition *Away from Home* at Kunstverein Graftschaff Bentheim in 2016 (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> On a long white table, three tablets were placed next to each other, all equipped with headphones and a chair. The viewer was invited to sit and watch the short films individually, in the kind of solitary concentrated mood typical of private reading. Al-Beik describes cinema and its reception as a kind of ritual in which the spectator must break with the surrounding environment to enter the space and narrative of the film (2021, personal communication<sup>6</sup>). The exhibition format of al-Beik's films at Kunstverein Graftschaff Bentheim attempted to secure the viewer's immersion in the films' dimensions beyond the physical margins of the screen.

Bazin's (2005) distinction of film and painting based on the analysis of their inner space may have lost its relevance because of his unawareness of film's later development. However, this text suggests that a reinterpretation of the centrifugal-centripetal framework can be used to distinguish between contemporary approaches to the moving image and to develop strategies for their exhibiting. Seen from today's perspective, Bazin's theory underlines a fundamental issue for the presentation of film in the museum, a place traditionally reserved for framed or plastic works, both characterized

by a centripetal mode of reception. While Bazin sought to define cinema on the basis of a binary distinction, this article views the theory of centripetal and centrifugal framing as a positive dialectic of coexisting practices within artists' use of the moving image. The two modes engender different perceptions of space not only within the image, but also when it comes to the latter's relation to the exhibition room. Thus, the metamorphosis of film into contemporary moving images throws light on a second metamorphosis in the space of the museum. The identification of centrifugal and centripetal space allows us to establish the first cornerstone of a theory on how to exhibit moving images. The following section delves deeper into this theory of centripetal versus centrifugal image as applied to selected works exhibited as part of *Enter the Void* at the Kunsthalle Mainz in 2020.



Figure 4. Exhibition view of *Away from Home* at Kunstverein Grafschaft Bentheim (2016) with Ammar al-Beik (courtesy of Gudrun Thiessen-Schneider).

## 2.1. Moving Images *Enter the Void*

In 2020, the Kunsthalle Mainz hosted an exhibition entitled *Enter the Void*, which included works by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, the research group Forensic Architecture, Paulo Tavares, and Ursula Biemann. The exhibition featured pioneering works in the field of research-based art engaged in investigations of political and environmental relevance and their documentation. The title *Enter the Void* referred to the spaces left blank, silenced from history, that these artists endeavor to bring to the surface (Kunsthalle Mainz 2020: 2). This is the objective of Forensic Architecture, a collective of architects, photographers, filmmakers, programmers, journalists, and lawyers founded in 2010 at Goldsmiths University London. As the label 'forensic' explains, the

group conducts investigations with a journalistic approach, aiming to uncover 'human rights violations including violence committed by states, police forces, militaries, and corporations' (Forensic Architecture n.d.). Eyal Weizman, director of FA, explains that the term stems from the Latin *forensis*, meaning 'belonging to the forum,' that is, the space where public matters are discussed. 'Architecture' refers to the 'architectural dimension of the works'<sup>7</sup> (Weizman 2017) which set off to reconstruct 'architectural evidence,' that is, 'relating to buildings [and] urban environments' (Forensic Architecture n.d.). The fact that more than half of the members of the group are architects (Weizman 2017) is reflected in the presentation design of the works, which take the shape of apparatuses of evidence material ranging from model reconstructions of buildings and crime scenes to videos of material witnesses, documentary films, animated graphics, 3D prints, and written documents. As Lisa Stuckey (2017) points out, these works are 'reconstruction acts' with narrative potential (p. 31, cited in Engelskirchen 2019: 121). They tell of not just any story, but untold, urgent matters, often of political relevance. Above all, FA recognizes itself as a new field of academic research that has found in the museum one of its ideal display platforms.<sup>8</sup> The present analysis focuses on the group's use of moving images in the exhibition *Enter the Void* at Kunsthalle Mainz as well as on another work in the exhibition, *Forest Law* (2014), by Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, a former member of FA. The heterogeneity of these works illuminates the necessity of articulating different modes of exhibiting moving images within the museum's space.

Hall II (Figure 1) presented works by the research group Centre for Contemporary Nature (CCN), a department of FA dealing with environmental issues. The work consists mainly of videos, digital prints, and 3D models, exposing lesions to the environment in conflict areas. Upon entering the room, the viewer is confronted with *CCN* (2019), a video projected onto a disc leaned upright against the wall featuring a two-dimensional representation of the earth. The five-minute, 34-second video, shown on a loop, visually reproduces areas whose recent conflicts affected the environment. It thus evokes a cartography of the ongoing environmental crises by simple but effective chromatic demarcations and detailed captions. Though the animated graphic is indeed a digital moving image, the representation remains two-dimensional. Its circular shape alludes to a planisphere, a schematic depiction of reality like all cartographical representations. The round projection surface is detached from the wall, emphasizing its discontinuity with reality. The work thus appears as a hybrid of plastic artwork and moving image dominated by a centripetal inward movement.

At the opposite corner of the hall, the work *Ecocide in Indonesia* (2016–17, Figure 4), made of a large projection, a video shown on a monitor, and digital prints, begins. It documents fires in the Indonesian areas of Kalimantan and Sumatra that led to the destruction of considerable portions of forests and peat lands (Kunsthalle Mainz 2020: 6). The main projection traces the lethal clouds generated by the fires as the clouds move across Southeast Asia. As *CCN* does, the video bears the aesthetics of a digital cartographical

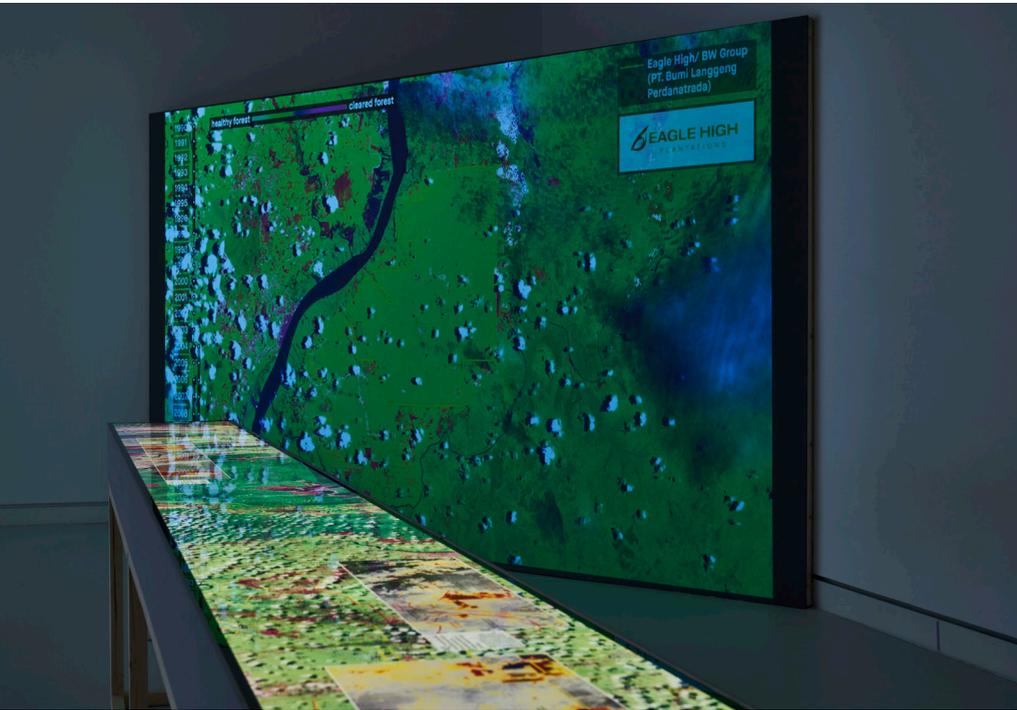


Figure 5. Exhibition view of *Enter the Void* at Kunsthalle Mainz (Hall II). Forensic Architecture's *Ecocide in Indonesia* (2016–17) (photo by Norbert Miguletz, courtesy of Forensic Architecture).

reconstruction. Again, the projection panel does not adhere perfectly flat to the wall but cuts diagonally across one of the room's corners. Interestingly, this visual interruption of continuity with the wall highlights the representational nature of the work, in contrast to those frequent cases in which a moving image is projected directly on the wall to uphold its illusionism. Next, a monitor displays *The Forest Fires* (2017), a video recording helicopters' attempts to extinguish the fires in the forests of Pangkalanbun in Central Kalimantan in 2015. Though it is not an animated cartography like the previous works, the elevated and mostly perpendicular perspective of the camera filming from a helicopter flattens the objects of representation. The absence of a voice-over narration points to the use of film as a tool for direct documentation. Overall, as the aesthetic of the works also suggests, these images are evidence material of forensic investigations. They do not tell a story of their own, but rather function as figures of a collage of disparate types of documents which are combined to form meaning. In opposition to the predominance of the word, written or spoken, in legal and forensic matters, FA reproduces its evidence visually by assembling it physically in space. Moving images are indispensable to this strategy, as they allow the collective to either supply the proof that testifies to the original event or reconstruct the latter through design and drafting software programs.

On the other side of the room is a work of a slightly different type: *Ape Law* (2016, Figure 1) is an inquiry into the rights of apes, documenting the 2014 trial in defense of orangutans in Buenos Aires. The core of the work

consists of two short videos projected on the wall: one shows the orangutan Sandra during scientific tests, the other is a documentation of the trial that recognized Sandra's legal status as a 'non-human person' (Kunsthalle Mainz 2020: 8). These moving images differ from the videos and graphics described before. While the latter consisted of images presented as material evidence which, taken together, built a case, the videos of the Sandra Trial speak on their own. To do so, they make use of basic tropes of film, first and foremost, the construction of a narrative through montage. The videos show excerpts from experiments conducted with Sandra at the Buenos Aires Zoo, each explained by a voiceover commentary. What follows is a reconstruction of the Sandra Trial through interviews with veterinarians and lawyers.

*CCN*, *Ecocide in Indonesia*, and *The Forest Fires* evidence the moving image's quality as a 'perfect' yet silent witness, as their images, if singled out, cannot speak by themselves, but rather need other images and text to complement their meaning. *Ape Law*, however, articulates its visual evidence in a story of its own. The image is projected directly onto the wall, emphasizing the work's immateriality, which, together with its narrative base, generates a centrifugal perception of its inner space. Moreover, unlike the previous works, *Ape Law* has characters that speak, and their words are translated in the subtitles. This kind of moving image requires the full immersion that is missing from Hall II, where centrifugal and centripetal types of work threaten to obscure each other.

FA's use of the moving image, reflecting the diverse background of its members, seems to be rooted in science rather than art history. However, the assemblage of the visuals—indeed the architectural quality of the forensic investigations—is an original and intriguing feature of the collective's work. The same kind of montage that shapes a film's narrative at the level of the image here unfolds outside of it, reified in a physical space.

Viewers encounter a different atmosphere in Hall III. The vast room is submerged into semi-darkness, dominated by two large projection panels on one side and a long table on the other. The only light is that emanating from the projections and the reading lights over the table. This environment forms Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares' *Forest Law* (2014, Figure 5), a research project about the rights of nature in the context of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The double-channel video installation shows recordings of the forest and testimonials of the indigenous Sarayaku people who won a trial in defense of this ecosystem against the large-scale extraction works conducted in the region. While the Amazonian forest is renowned for its positive impact on climate regulation for the whole planet, its soil houses great reserves of natural resources that make it especially attractive for private corporations. The main part of the work is a double-channel projection following Biemann and Tavares along their journey through the forest. These moving images drastically differ from those in Hall II—except for *Ape Law*—because of their likeness to a documentary film. The atmosphere of darkness, the dimensions of the projections, as well as the bench in front of them, all signal to the viewers that a quasi-cinematic experience awaits them. The duration of the videos increases

compared to that of the videos in Hall II, reaching 38 minutes. Doubtless, the projected images produce centrifugal movement as the camera follows the artists' route through the Amazon.

*Forest Law* exemplifies another use of film by artists, one that approaches and at the same time departs from traditional documentary film. The adoption of two screens with two parallel images, like points of view, also complicates the centrifugal nature of the space projected on the canvases. While traditional documentaries are built on a single narration, these artists' work uses temporal shifts in the representations within both screens to create a discontinuous diegesis. Spatial and temporal discontinuity is added to the centrifugality of the image when the same event is displayed simultaneously on both screens but filmed from two different perspectives and at slightly different times. *Forest Law* also departs from conventional documentary film in that the moving image does not represent the sole element of the work. On the other side of the room is a table on which documents, books, and soil samples are assembled to portray the research process behind the documentary film. In line with the display format of *FA*, Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares not only display the final result of their investigation—the 38-minute-long film—but also provide evidence of their sources, in the same logic as forensic research. Therefore, their work reflects both a scientific attitude and a journalistic posture valuing transparency, all filtered through an artistic strategy of enacting their narrative.

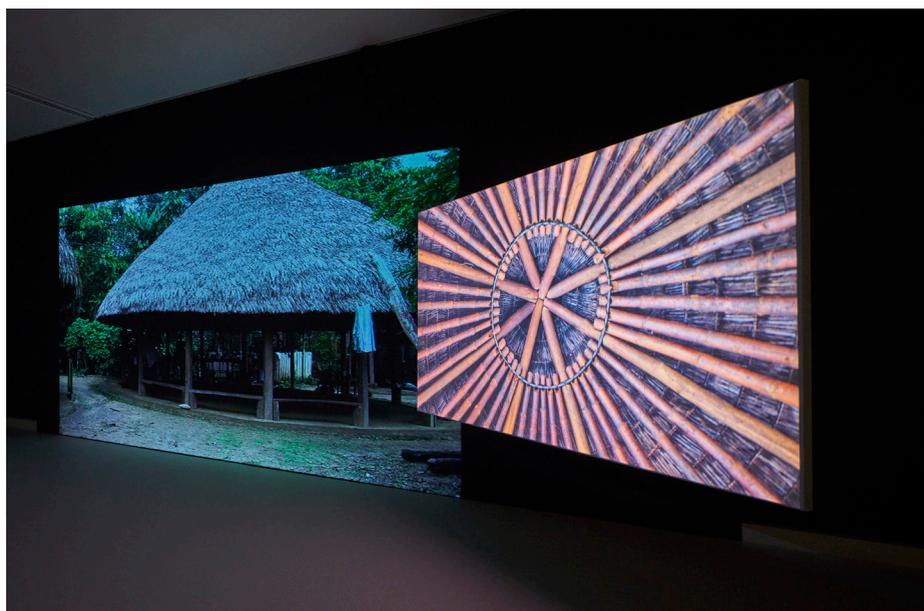


Figure 6. Exhibition view of *Enter the Void* at Kunsthalle Mainz (Hall III). Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, *Forest Law* (2014) (photo by Norbert Miguletz, courtesy of Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares).

The works exhibited in *Enter the Void* are a poignant case of how the use of moving images in the art practice of the twenty-first century has changed and how it has not. Artists engender works that partly readopt

cinematic tropes—montage and narrative logic—while maintaining the aesthetics of a plastic, three-dimensional installation or framed image. The collage of visual proof collected by the artist-researchers fills the museum like one piece of architecture inside another. Because objects establish a relation with the space they inhabit, it is a *devoir* of the curator to think of artworks as if they had their own communicative agency. Much like Bruno Latour's (2005) understanding of Actor Network Theory, an exhibition is an apparatus of professionals, institutional laws, technical devices, and artworks—in other words, material and immaterial things as well as humans—that together form a narrative about a specific piece of knowledge. The artworks presented within the exhibition room are vehicles of knowledge and, thus, agents of communication in the absence of their makers. Yet, artworks can be given a voice or silenced depending on the efficacy of curatorial strategy. A theory on how to exhibit the moving image must take into account concrete examples of diverse configurations of the medium. In the case of the works described so far, and indeed in many contemporary usages of moving images, the medium figures as one element within what might be better described as 'environments.' In the work of FA, implicit in the subject matter is the process of research itself, as it sets out to visually reproduce how knowledge comes into being. As Boris Michel (2017: 706, as cited in Engelskirchen 2019: 124) interestingly put it, FA's work is a kind of *archaeological* reconstruction of an original event that is by definition inaccessible. The exhibition hall plays host to different kinds of 'artifacts' whose heterogeneity calls for a metamorphosis of the space, understood as a network of interacting media.

### 3. Third Metamorphosis: The Spectator of the Moving Image

From a historical perspective, the adoption of moving images as evidence material—instead of as independent products conceived by the creative mind of an auteur—is nothing new. As did photography in its early days, film, too, found application within scientific and forensic investigations because of its alleged capacity to record reality as it is. This tension between old and new defines the twenty-first century's moving image in the field of art. The question that remains is: what does this mean for curatorship and for the spectator of an institution as old as the museum? Artistic practice is receptive to technological transformations. The apparatus containing them, the museum, however, often struggles to keep pace. Curators, faced with new media and their respective modes of reception, are forced to rethink exhibition formats. Curating moving images appears to be a work-in-progress, in need of liberation from the conventions of both museum and cinema. The theory of centripetal and centrifugal space represents a starting point in the formulation of conceptual tools to exhibit moving images. From the perspective of the spectator's reception, understanding the space within the projected image prevents the inattentiveness of which scholarship warns. One of the pillars of the 'white cube vs. black box' (Balsom 2014: 39) dichotomy is the

alleged active reception of the museum's visitor opposed to the passive attitude of the cinema's audience. In response to the myth of the ideologically neutral space of the white cube which devaluates the mode of cinematic spectatorship as 'passive,' Balsom (2014) writes:

In contemporary discourses concerning the status of the spectator of the moving image installation, the notion that the cinema spectator is passive while the gallery spectator is inherently active rests on a spurious mapping of passive/active binaries onto this architectural difference, as if to conflate physical stasis with regressive mystification and physical ambulation with criticality—a claim that holds true on neither end (p. 51).

The issue is not whether spectators are allowed to move or not. Everybody who has been to a museum surely relates to the trope of the *flâneur*, the distracted viewer lost in the galleries of the museum, assailed by the flood of visuals awaiting to be seen. It reminds one of the half-scientific, half-colloquial expression 'Stendhal syndrome.'<sup>9</sup>

The moving image has changed the game of spectator reception because of one of its formal characteristics: its being time-based. While staring at a still image pertains to the sphere of subjective time, a video has a predetermined duration. *Forest Law*, *Ape Law*, and *La Dolce Siria* require the spectator's attention over an exact timespan. Not passive contemplation, but active viewing of images, listening, and even reading (for instance, the words in the subtitles). These moving images require their own space, or at least the creation of the conditions for a full immersion into their narrative. This is what we might name a 'centrifugal mode of reception.' This mode is troubled by a further aspect of artists' use of the moving image, namely the multiplication of points of view either in one image (*La Dolce Siria*), or by splitting the diegesis onto two projections, each subtending its own temporality (*Forest Law*).

On the other hand, we have the almost static images of *CCN*, *Ecocide in Indonesia*, *Remember the Light*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, all calling for a 'centripetal mode of reception,' since their representational fields gravitate inward, and their time is suspended to match that of their reception.

Stefanie Böttcher, director at the Kunsthalle Mainz, and curator Lina Louisa Krämer identify the challenges and advantages of exhibiting moving images: while video and film correspond to people's everyday habits of information reception, the frequent lack of a coherent narrative implies a need to compete for spectators' attention (2021, personal communication<sup>10</sup>). As Böttcher suggests, video and audio materials easily attract viewers, as they fill not just the room from which they emanate but adjacent rooms as well. It is, however, a challenge to articulate the relation between a given space and artworks in order to keep spectators engaged with the moving images. This consideration highlights one more factor that needs to be taken into account when exhibiting this medium: the behavior of sound. An artwork emanating sound occupies a space that goes beyond its physical margins. At last, these reflections allow us to trace some criteria and define the sketch of a theory on exhibiting moving images, a theory essentially concerned with space: firstly, the space delimited by the movement within the artwork, which is either

*centripetal* or *centrifugal*; then, the temporal space, that is, the time the image demands for its reception; and lastly, the ephemeral space occupied by the sound emitted by the artwork.

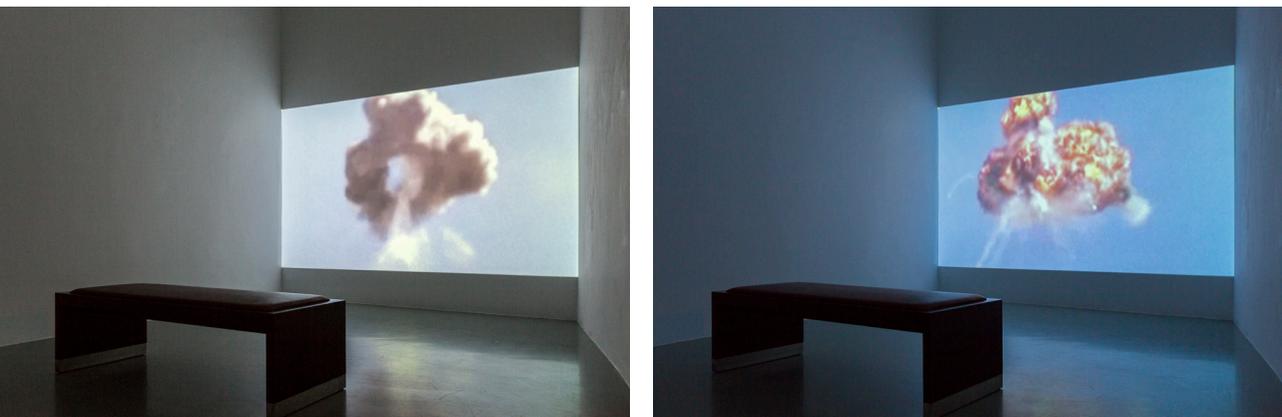


Figure 7. Exhibition views from *Jugendzimmer* at Gallery Crone, Vienna. Ammar al-Beik, *La Dolce Siria* (2014) (courtesy of Matthias Bildstein).

#### 4. Fourth Metamorphosis: The Museum and the Moving Image

The moving image's migration into the museum has not been an ideologically neutral phenomenon. Although it might appear today to have been an inevitable consequence of technological developments, the reasons for this medium's integration into art institutions are heterogeneous and linked to the role of museums. These exercise a twofold power: the ritual of investing art with value and, consequently, its preservation in the form of cultural heritage. As are all things and people endowed with power, museums are not innocent, because they select and thus exclude. Film has sought a spot within the museum since the start of the twentieth century. For instance, when the MoMA inaugurated its film library, it implicitly recognized its cultural and artistic value (Balsom 2014: 17). Times were changing and so was the idea of art, because of the technical reproducibility of photography and film of which Walter Benjamin spoke. But, contrary to his prophecy, the aura given by the rarity of the artifact was now being exchanged for the aura of perfect images of reality and glowing projections. Film's presentation within art institutions might be explained by their ability to secure the medium's artistic freedom against the dictum of the market. But Balsom (2014: 31) recognizes a paradox: while the migration of cinema from the film theater into the museum was seen by many as a 'rescue' from commercial exploitation, it is also true that it was not cinema in the conventional sense that had entered the museum. Godard's work testifies to this fact: his production for the black box differs

strongly from that for the white cube. The 'no man's land,' in these terms, are film festivals like Cannes or the special sections instituted by the Venice Film Festival and the Berlinale,<sup>11</sup> which set out to include other formats than the traditional feature-length film. Their existence is a symptom of the need to readjust fixed categories to include works that set out to transcend them. Today, artists' films such as al-Beik's can be found at these venues, as well as in art museums and galleries (Figure 6).

While the moving image's migration to the museum was often seen as breaking away from the film industry, others feared for the museum's integrity (Balsom 2014: 43–46). The reality of museums struggling to compete with entertainment industries, and of artists expressing themselves through moving images—that is, the same medium as, for instance, advertising—generates anxiety about the risks of cultural 'massification.' However, legitimate as this fear may be, it does not stem from a real disengagement by museums from their tasks of education and preservation. Rather, these institutions are faced with the challenge of reaching such objectives at a time when the rules of communication are rapidly changing. For one, the inflation of broadcasted image and audio information is affecting the capacity of audiences' reception. This is no longer the time of contemplation and slow-paced reading, but of quick and impactful messages. If museums adapt to this new reality, it does not automatically mean they will turn into places of spectacle. What we see today are truly postmodern museums, not only because of the architectures of some of them, but because of their artworks merging high and low cultures in a variety of media ranging from painting to new technologies.

The museum is a powerful institution where material and immaterial forms of knowledge become 'art' in order to be preserved and transmitted to the community. This power does not merely consist of a superficial investiture of objects with a title. Museums can *empower* a community with knowledge. This is the essence of the public museum, whose genealogy goes back to the Enlightenment's opening of royal collections of the public. Finding a new methodology that would ensure the reception of moving image-based works is therefore integral to contemporary museums' educational project. In this article, I attempted to sketch the basis of a theory on how to curate moving images beginning from an analysis of the space engendered by the artists within their works. The idea of a centrifugal versus a centripetal mode of reception allows to establish a dialog between the artwork's inward space and that of the exhibition hall. The objective of such distinction is not to create a binary scheme to split moving images into two strict categories. It is, rather, a call for curatorship to think of the exhibition space as a two-fold construct, as the stage of a relation between the materiality of the given space and art objects, and the ephemerality of that other diegetic space and time of the moving image.

1. See A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (1999); Raymond Bellour, 'Of Another Cinema,' in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (2008): 406–22; Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (2014); and Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (2015).
2. The present distinction between centrifugal and centripetal framing is inspired by André Bazin's essay 'Painting and cinema' (published in *What is Cinema?*, 1958–1962). Here Bazin writes that painting is characterized by a 'centripetal framing', while film presents a 'centrifugal' one, given by film's allusion to a space and time extending beyond the limits of the frame.
3. Mehanna D (2021, 25 March) personal communication, e-mail correspondence. Mehanna is Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's studio manager.
4. Ammar al-Beik's film trilogy on Syria includes *The Sun's Incubator* (2011), *La Dolce Siria* (2014), and *Kaleidoscope* (2015).
5. The exhibition *Away from Home* took place at Kunstverein Graftschaff Bentheim in Berlin from the 21st of February to the 8th of May 2016. For details, see [archive.kunstverein-grafschaft-bentheim.de/index.php?id=195&L=1](http://archive.kunstverein-grafschaft-bentheim.de/index.php?id=195&L=1) (accessed 01/11/21).
6. Al-Beik A (2021, February 24) personal communication, face-to-face interview.
7. The author's translation.
8. Forensic Architecture (n.d.) says the following about the presentation of its cases: 'We present our investigations in international courtrooms, parliamentary inquiries, United Nations (UN) assemblies, as well as in citizens' tribunals and truth commissions. We also present our work in keynote lectures, seminars, publications and exhibitions in art and cultural institutions. We use these forums to reflect on the political and cultural context of our work.'
9. A psychosomatic condition consisting in accelerated heartbeat and dizziness supposedly occurring under extended exposure to artworks and related phenomena. It owes its name to the author Stendhal, who describes having these feelings during his visit 1817 to Florence in his book *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio*.
10. Böttcher S and Krämer L (2021, 1 March) personal communication, e-mail correspondence.
11. The Venice Film Festival inaugurated the section 'Orizzonti' at its 67th edition in 2010; in 2006, the Berlinale Film Festival opened the section 'Forum Expanded,' an appendix of the Forum, which has included films by unknown or underrepresented filmmakers since 1971.

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### **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares that there are no financial conflicts of interest to disclose nor personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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